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Will Be Special School

Windham Campus To Be Back in Business

By NORMAN RUNNION

PUTNEY — In breakthrough decision that is a major break for the town of Putney, the U.S. Department of Education has agreed to sell the former Windham College campus to the Landmark School of Beverly, Mass.

Landmark, in turn, hopes to have classes operating on the campus by the fall of 1984, according to its headmaster, Dr. Charles Drake.

It is a school for students with learning disabilities — dyslexia, which affects how a person reads — and Landmark is planning to open a three-year junior college in Vermont. This means that Putney — and the Windham campus — are back in business again — and education business at that.

Drake said Friday he was told of the Department of Education's decision in a telephone call, and said Landmark has put down a deposit on the campus buildings. Asked if all hurdles had been cleared, he said cautiously, "It looks so."

By the fall of 1984, between 40 and 50 students should be studying on the new Putney campus, accompanied by faculty. And there will be many teachers. Landmark, Drake said, operates on a 3-1 faculty ratio, with a lot of small classes and individual attention.

"We will be taking bright, capable and motivated students who, because of dyslexia, were not able to attend other colleges," he said.

It will be a three-year program. The first year will be non-credit, and will concentrate on teaching reading, language and math skills. The next

two years will be the equivalent of a junior college, with liberal arts and vocational courses, leading to an associate in arts degree, he said.

The students then should be equipped to transfer to colleges which do not have specific facilities for dyslexia, he said.

Dr. Drake himself, who is dyslexic, has a doctorate from Harvard University. He was reached for comment Friday near Los Angeles, Calif., where Landmark is in the process of opening a new campus.

Federal Funds

Windham College, which closed because of huge financial problems in 1978, was built almost entirely with federal grants and loans. The campus, designed by the architectural firm of Edward Durrell Stone, cost around \$10 million.

The federal government, which up until this week has declined to part company with the buildings, is selling what it possesses to Landmark for \$400,000, according to Putney town officials. Thus the federal government will recover at least some of its money, and at the same time will get rid of a bunch of buildings that it can not fill and which are rapidly deteriorating.

The decision was announced Friday by a group that included Putney selectmen Peter Shumlin and Beverly Ecusquet and Town Manager John Bagge.

"I am elated," Bagge said. "I am ecstatic."

Bagge, himself a Windham College graduate, is a veteran of the controversies and battles that have



Norman Rannion

THE TRAINMEN, who helped put Putney "back on the track," as one of them said, at the Windham College campus on Friday. From left, investors Edward Dodd, George Heller, Earl Stockwell and William Graham, who on Friday signed an agreement to purchase the land on which they are standing; Putney Town Manager John Bagge and selectmen Beverly Ecusquet and Peter Shumlin, who helped arrange for Landmark College to buy the Windham College buildings in background, and banker Beverly Cooke, whose bank is loaning money to the four citizens so the land can be purchased.

swirled about the campus since the college closed five years ago. He has seen offers come and go — and finally one that came and stayed.

Also present at Friday's announcement were the four Putney area residents who personally intervened to help their fellow town-people deal with the Windham

problem. The four — Edward Dodd of Westminster West and William Graham, Earl Stockwell and George Heller of Putney — arranged to buy the 123 acres of land on the campus from New York businessman Donald Wheeler.

The federally-owned buildings are clumped together on land owned by

Wheeler. The sticking point up to now has been an inability of one buyer to get together the privately owned land and the federally owned buildings in one package. The four private investors, acting in effect as a buffer zone, were able to break the impasse. They bought the land from Wheeler, enabling Landmark to get the

buildings from the Department of Education, and Landmark now will buy the land surrounding the buildings from the four men.

The four signed a sales agreement on Friday which Wheeler had signed in New York on Thursday. Selectman Shumlin, who has conducted much of the negotiations with Landmark, and Town Manager Bagge drove to New York City to get the agreement on Thursday. Wheeler said he had mailed the agreement last weekend, but, according to Shumlin and Bagge, it apparently got lost in the mail. Thus they made a round trip to New York to get not only a copy of the agreement, but Wheeler's signature on it as well.

The actual closing of the land sale will be at 11 a.m. Thursday. The price of the land is \$150,000, and the four buyers have agreed to pay Wheeler's land-gains tax on the sale, which is estimated to be about \$12-13,000.

The sales agreement was signed in the Putney branch of the Bellows Falls Trust Co., which is loaning the money to the four investors and will hold the mortgage. Shumlin and the investors praised Beverly Cooke, head of the branch and its vice president and chief lending officer of the bank, for her cooperation. Mrs. Cooke emphasized the bank's concern for the community.

Bought at Auction

Wheeler purchased the Windham College land at an auction in October of 1981, three years after campus activity ceased, paying \$80,000 for it.

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Windham

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He wanted to turn the campus into a center that would stage and host major conferences.

But Wheeler couldn't buy the buildings from the government. Bagge said Wheeler offered the government \$25,000 in 1982, which federal officials rejected as being far too low. Federal officials had indicated they would want between \$5 and \$6 million if the property were to go to something other than an educational institution.

Then Landmark came along, and made its offer.

Why was it accepted, when others were rejected?

Town Manager Bagge said, "It was the first viable offer that the Department of Education had received. Landmark is a sound, reputable organization."

In addition, said Selectman Shumlin, the government seemed to realize that "we have endured a lot."

Specifically, Shumlin noted the fiasco two years ago when a private organization tried to obtain Windham to turn it into a center for the care of Cuban refugees, particularly those with problems; the trauma that affected the town when the Federal Bureau of Prisons earlier this year suggested turning Windham into a minimum security prison; and the long and drawn out negotiations with Wheeler.

Landmark headmaster Drake also noted that until recently, several federal agencies were dealing with Windham. It was only recently that the Department of Education took over the negotiations. And the department, he said, had a real interest in seeing Windham returned to its educational status.

This was particularly true, Drake said, because Landmark is carrying out the functions of Public Law 94-142, passed by Congress to give aid to handicapped students.

Feds Praised

All of those in Putney involved in the negotiations had high praise for the way the federal government has behaved since Windham's closing. They also praised Vermont's Congressional delegation, par-

ticularly Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt.

"The government has acted very decently," said Dodd, one of the four investors. "They agreed not to foist a prison on us, and now they've agreed to Landmark's offer."

Prison officials said earlier this year they would abide by a townwide vote on whether Putney wanted a prison in its midst; and when the town overwhelmingly rejected the idea, the federal officials were true to their word.

Some problems remain. The town of Putney still is pursuing its claim of \$150,000 in back taxes which it claims is owed to it by the old Windham College corporation. A federal judge has ruled that the town can go to court with its claim.

Bagge said that if the town wins its suit, the money to pay the claim is available from a \$300,000 escrow account that is in the hands of the federal bankruptcy trustee. The money came from the original sale of the land to Wheeler and from auctions, he said.

Bagge emphasized that the town's claim is for an "old debt" and has absolutely nothing to do with Landmark and thus will not be a hitch in Landmark's future.

Another problem involves the sewer system. Landmark must either build a new one or arrange to hook into the town's system. Bagge said the town will be looking at the possibility of getting the grants to extend its system to the campus.

Fine Arts Future

Landmark will acquire every building but one on the Windham campus. The exception is the Fine Arts Building, which is owned by investors who originally purchased bonds from the state of Vermont. Windham defaulted on those bonds.

Edward Dodd, one of the private investors who is an author, publisher and longtime supporter of the arts, noted Friday that "the building is in substantially good shape. The theater is a beauty, by far the best in southeastern Vermont. There is a splendid ballet room with wall mirrors and a rubber-based dance floor. There are art studios and exhibition halls on the whole top floor."

In a paper he read to Putney selectmen and his three fellow investors in the land, he said:

"Here's a notion. Could we, should we, convert our presently 'saintly' syndicate into a broader based community cooperative and buy the fine arts building?"

Part of it could be rented to Landmark, he suggested, and it also could be rented to a revived Brattleboro Center for the Performing Arts, to the Brattleboro Music Center for concerts, to the Yellow Barn music festival in Putney, or to a Brattleboro dance group.

In short, he said, it could be an arts center for the area.

Investor George Heller said it is something to think about.

As for the impact of a new college institution on Putney, Bagge said, "I don't think it will change the community. The impact will be minimal

at the outset, and the town will have a chance to adjust again."

Putney merchant Robert Fairchild, at his store, was delighted at the prospect, but seemed to agree with Bagge. The merchants had survived Windham's closing, and now were faced with good times ahead, he said.

How big will Landmark become?

"The need is so tremendous that we can have almost as rapid growth as we want to allow," said Landmark headmaster Drake.

Drake said he had known of Putney's educational and community reputation for years, and that he was delighted with the cooperation he received.

"I had always fantasized Putney as being that kind of town," he said.

"There is a fond place in my heart for Putney."

Dodd put it this way:

"Putney is back on the track."