By NORMAN HUNNION

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 campus by 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 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 Bouquet 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 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 townsmen 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 133 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 $12-15,000.

The sales agreement was signed in the Putney branch of the Bally's 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.

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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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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 finances 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, particularly Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt.

“The government has acted very decently,” said Dodd, one of the four investors. “They agreed not to file a lien against the campus. The government has also been very fair.”

Prison officials said earlier this year they would abide by a town wide 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 grants so it can extend its system to the campus.

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.”