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Academy plans new building KIPP School set to raze VFW hall

By John Laidler, Globe Correspondent
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A Lynn charter school is preparing to break ground this fall on a \$25 million middle and high school building in the city's Highlands neighborhood.

KIPP Academy Lynn last December reached agreement with the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 507 to purchase the 5.5-acre site next to High Rock Tower Park for \$1.35 million, according to Josh Zoia, the academy's principal.

Zoia said the academy plans to raze the VFW building and construct a 68,000-square-foot facility to house its existing middle school and its planned high school.

"We are very excited about the opportunity," he said. "The Highlands is an incredibly vibrant community and it's a community where many of our students come from."

KIPP is not eligible to receive funding from the Massachusetts School Building Authority since it does not operate under Lynn School Committee oversight. Zoia said the academy plans to finance the project — the \$25 million cost includes the site acquisition — through a federal tax credit program that would be awarded by the state, bank loans, and a private fund drive. He is confident the funding will be in place by this fall for the start of construction.

Since 2005, the state has included in its annual per-pupil payments to charter schools money they can use for facility costs. KIPP plans to use some of that to repay its debt.

"We're off to a good start, but we have a lot of work still to do," he said.

Zoia said the academy hopes to become active in the neighborhood, in part by expanding its evening programs for students and adults and inviting local residents to participate.

"We look forward to making this something that benefits everyone in the neighborhood," he said.

The VFW post plans to relocate in Lynn, according to John Hartley, the organization's attorney. He said the post is negotiating the purchase of a property in the city, but would not identify its location because the talks remain in progress.

Planning for the building project began in earnest after the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education approved a change to the academy's charter on Dec. 15 that will allow it to gradually increase enrollment by 430 students to a maximum of 750 in 2019. The growth will

come through the addition of the high school and increased enrollment in its existing fifth-to-eighth-grade middle school.

The charter school, currently in a Bessom Street building that it leases from the adjacent Holy Family Church, needs a new facility to accommodate the expansion, according to Zoia, a cofounder of the six-year-old academy.

“This is going to more than double the size of the school we have in place now,” he said. “We believe our kids deserve a first-class building.”

Zoia said the new school, set to open in the summer of 2012, will include some basic features — including a gymnasium, an athletic field, and dedicated facilities for arts and music programs — that KIPP Academy Lynn currently lacks.

“This building is going to allow us to continue to do what we are doing but in a much more robust and hopefully effective fashion,” Zoia said. “We can run a school and run adult programming from anywhere, but having a really first-class school building allows us to do it even better and reach more people.”

Zoia said neighbors voiced some concerns at a recent meeting, including that the new school could cause traffic tie-ups and obstruct their views. He said the academy will try to address those issues. For example, plans had called for a two- or three-story building, but the academy will restrict it to two stories to preserve the view.

Charter schools are public schools that operate independently from local school committees. The Lynn academy is part of a nationwide network of 82 KIPP charter schools that share core principles and methods.

Catherine Latham, superintendent of the Lynn School District, said last December that she opposed KIPP Academy Lynn’s expansion.

“I don’t see that they have anything to add except possibly after-school programs, which we are now adding to some of our schools,” she said.

But Zoia said last week he is encouraged by what he said has been an improvement in the relationship between the academy and the district.

“Ultimately, our goal is to help be a part of the solution for all the students in Lynn, not just our school. That’s going to require collaborating and moving beyond some of the traditional walls between charter and traditional public schools.”

“KIPP is here to stay and I am committed to working with them,” Latham said last week. “KIPP will ultimately have 750 students and we are going to have 13,000. We have to work together,” she said, noting that the district and the charter school are developing protocols for transfers of students between them.