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## Area may get 6 new charter schools

By John Laidler

Globe Correspondent / February 27, 2011

Proposals for six new charter schools in the region are poised to win state approval tomorrow.

The Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education is set to vote on a recommendation by its commissioner, Mitchell Chester, that it grant charters to 17 schools, including those that would serve Chelsea, Lawrence, Lynn, and Salem.

Proposals for 42 new charter schools were submitted for the 2010-11 cycle, and after review, 25 were invited to submit formal applications.

The surge in applications this cycle — the highest since 1997-98 — was spurred by a state law passed in January 2010, doubling the spending cap on charter — or independent public — schools in the lowest-performing districts. The area schools earning Chester's recommendation include a Horace Mann charter school proposed for Salem.

Unlike autonomous Commonwealth charter schools, Horace Mann schools are funded directly by the local public school district and developed with the district's involvement.

The Salem Community Charter School would be a ninth- through 12th-grade school for Salem students only, starting with 50 students and increasing to 125.

It would initially target students who have dropped out of high school, and later expand to those considered at risk of dropping out.

William J. Cameron, superintendent of the Salem schools, said he is "delighted" that the school was recommended for a charter, praising the work of the community members and school staff who collaborated on the application.

"One of the things we want to focus on with this school is not simply completion of high school, but having students leave school with a clear plan of what their next steps are, moving ahead with their lives," he said.

The other recommended schools, all of them proposed as Commonwealth schools, include the Lynn Preparatory Charter School.

The K-8 school at full enrollment would serve 324 Lynn students, targeting those from the city's lowest-performing schools.

A year ago, Chester recommended the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education grant the school a charter. But the approval never came after Chester reversed his recommendation, citing concerns that the proposal might be construed as a conversion of a private school — the Hathaway School in Swampscott — to a charter school, which state law does not allow.

Lynn Preparatory's founding group includes Mark Hathaway, the Hathaway school's chief financial officer, and his wife, Joanne Civitarese, the school's director, who would assume the same roles with the new school.

Hathaway said last week he is confident his group has been able to put to rest the concerns previously cited by Chester, including by pointing out that Hathaway students will have to seek admission to the charter school via the same lottery as other students, and that the new school will be significantly larger and located in a different community.

"We're very pleased," Hathaway said. "Our whole board did an excellent job in meeting with the commissioner's people. We think the application is even stronger than last year."

Lynn Superintendent Catherine Latham is not taking a position on the group's application. But she said it concerned

her that charter schools are not “held to the same standards” as regular public schools, noting for example that charter school teachers do not face the same licensing requirements.

“I don’t object to charter schools. . . . I just wish they would follow the rules that all public schools are required to follow,” Latham said.

Chester recommended that Community Day Charter Public School, a 340-student K-8 school that operates at two sites in north Lawrence, be granted charters for two new 400-student, K-8 schools in the city.

Like the existing school, the new ones would be managed by the nonprofit Community Group and target low-income students, particularly those whose first language is not English.

“We opened our school in 1995 and were one of the original charters granted in Massachusetts,” said Sheila Balboni, the school’s executive director. “We’ve been very conservative about expansion or replication, but we feel at this point we are just ready to take on that challenge.”

Chester recommended charters be granted to the Edward W. Brooke Charter School in Boston for two new schools, one serving Boston and the other East Boston and Chelsea.

Like the existing school, the new ones would be K-8 and serve about 450 predominantly low-income students. The group also has proposed another Boston-only school, but Chester did not recommend a third new charter.

“We’re very excited at the opportunity to serve almost 1,000 new Boston-area students,” said Jennifer Jordan, the school’s director of external affairs. She said the group “is looking forward to serving Chelsea kids alongside our Boston kids.”

Chester recommended that Excel Academy Charter School, a grade 5-8 school in East Boston that also serves Chelsea, be granted charters for a new grade 5-8 school in Chelsea — serving 225 students — and a grade 5-12 school in Boston.

Chester did not recommend a charter for another grade 5-8 school in Boston proposed by the group.

“We’re very pleased with the recommendation and eager to expand our reach in order to serve more students and families,” said Rebecca Cass, Excel’s interim executive director.

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