Tabares balks at charter school idea



Twenty-third Ward Ald. Silvana Tabares at a recent press conference on Archer Avenue. Just before the event, Tabares told the Greater Southwest News-Herald of her opposition to a proposed charter high school at 51st and Keeler. --Greater Southwest News-Herald photo by Mary Hadac

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Wants focus on neighborhood public schools

By Joan Hadac

A plan to establish a charter school at the south end of Archer Heights has run into opposition from 23rd Ward Ald. Silvana Tabares.

Youth Connection Charter School has reportedly proposed to situate a new school at 51st and Keeler, in space occupied by New Life Community Church Midway.

Founded in 1997 and headquartered on the South Side at 35th and State, YCCS is a charter school operator that seeks to "advocate, develop and provide world-class education to high school dropouts in collaboration with the alternative high school community," according to a statement on its website.

In an April 15 letter to Chicago Public Schools Chief of Public Policy Francis "Frank" Bilecki, Tabares made her opposition clear.

"Our priority should be working to ensure that our existing neighborhood schools have the resources they need to provide our children with the best education possible," she wrote. "Adding this charter [school] does not move us closer to this goal, and will only further jeopardize the resources so desperately needed by our existing schools."

Charter schools are public schools owned and operated by a private organization. Critics of charter schools claim that such schools siphon students and tax dollars away from government-operated public schools—and that they leave behind students with special needs and others.

Charter school advocates say they give more education choices to parents and that they provide opportunities to children—particularly those living at or below the poverty line—that they otherwise would not have.

Copies of Tabares' letter also went to Chicago Teachers Union President Jesse Sharkey, New Life Associate Pastor Mike Berry, 14th Ward Ald. Edward M. Burke and 12th Ward Ald. George Cardenas.

New Life is right across the street from the 14th Ward. Burke has long been a supporter of charter schools and has welcomed them to his ward—especially the Acero charter school network and the Noble Network, which built the brand new Mansueto High School near 47th and Richmond two years ago. Before it was in its new home, Mansueto was temporarily located at New Life's campus.

New Life is two blocks west of Curie High School.

A Greater Southwest News-Herald request for comment from YCCS was not responded to earlier this
week.

In response to a request for comment, Berry said that New Life is willing and able to rent space to YCCS but is respectful of Tabares' position. He essentially said that New Life is taking a wait-and-see position and respects the CPS process of proposal review.

Reaction in the community was mixed.

Archer Heights resident Gloria Olvera, who has a grandchild at the nearby Edwards School, said she agrees with Tabares.

"Our neighborhood schools have to fight for every nickel they can," she said. "I'd rather the Chicago Public Schools take our tax dollars and invest in Curie High School—maybe establish a program to give dropouts a second chance, so we don't need these private organizations [like YCCS]."

Archer Heights resident Carol Zwiasek, a retired CPS teacher and longtime public education advocate, expressed doubt that Tabares would be able to stop YCCS from establishing a school at 51st and Keeler. She said that charter schools' "siphoning from the public dollar may never become a thing of the past. Once they all learned that there was money in education, all the privateers showed up. They'll continue to do so as long as they keep getting paid. The laws are in their favor."

West Elsdon resident Herminia Moreno, whose children graduated from the Acero charter schools at 47th and Kildare, said she welcomes the idea of a YCCS school in the neighborhood.

"The reality is that a lot of kids fall through the cracks in the Chicago Public Schools system," she said, "and I don't see [CPS] doing much to help them. If a charter school operator wants to find these kids and help them finish high school and maybe get a job in the trades or maybe go to college, isn't that something we should support?"