

BZA OKs medical office on M-G campus

- By TIM TEDESCHI tteschi@chronicle-tribune.com April 9, 2021

The Grant County Board of Zoning Appeals (BZA) gave its approval Monday for Madison-Grant United School Corporation to move forward in leasing a vacant building on school grounds to a nonprofit health care organization.

Christina Bruno, M-G's legal counsel, told the BZA the school was requesting a special exception to allow Aspire Indiana Health to use the former administration building on the junior/senior high campus. Superintendent Scott Deetz said the building became vacant when the district's business office moved into offices within the school building after renovations were completed in 2019.

Bruno said Aspire will provide access to primary, behavioral and social emotional health care primarily to district students but will also serve the community at large. The building is self-contained and has a separate parking lot, and Bruno said the state Department of Education (DOE) has given its OK regarding traffic flow and school safety.

Area Plan Executive Director Ryan Malott said his main concern regarding the proposal was the effect it would have on traffic flow, but state officials agreed with the DOE and stated there would be no issues.

Aspire Vice President of Strategy & Business Development Jerry Landers said the medical office would plan to initially hold standard 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. hours Mondays through Fridays, though hours may be adjusted down the road to best meet the needs of patients.

Deetz said part of the lease agreement will include Aspire not scheduling appointments during peak traffic times of morning drop-off and afternoon dismissal. Aspire traffic

would follow the same flows as all other school traffic, he said, with the facility small enough that it will not be a substantial difference, he said.

“They will not be seeing dozens upon dozens of patients at a time, so the actual volume of traffic you’ll see there during the school day will not impact us negatively compared to our normal school day operations,” Deetz said.

Landers said the plan is for just one nurse practitioner to work at the facility, and the primary focus is for the office to serve Madison-Grant students. He estimated a typical day would include about 15-18 appointments, with around 70 percent to 80 percent of those visits being students.

BZA member Bob Monroe asked who would be responsible for liability of the building and its operations, noting he did not want taxpayers on the hook for a separate entity’s operations.

Landers said Aspire will have full malpractice, comprehensive liability and rental insurance. Deetz noted that M-G’s insurance provider has estimated the district’s insurance rates will actually decrease slightly when the building is occupied compared to when it sat empty.

BZA Chair Ed Hartman asked if the new medical office would replace existing nurse’s offices in school buildings.

Deetz said the district will continue to employ one RN and two CNAs at school buildings to cover typical incidents a school nurse would handle, but if a situation arose that needed further help the nurses could consult with Aspire staff for further care. The primary goal, he said, is to give students access to preventative primary, behavioral and social emotional health care that is often inaccessible to them.

“Most of my families are working two and three jobs just to hover around the poverty line, OK? If my families have to take their kiddo during business hours to the doctor,

they don't get paid, and when you're struggling to make rent, you're struggling to buy food and to pay for school supplies, and if your kiddo is not really sick, they're not going to get that health care," Deetz said. "Aspire is one of the few groups that were willing to take the risk of inhabiting a building and establishing services that aren't 20, 30 minutes away from my families."

Students will be able to receive care from Aspire without their parents being present if parents give prior consent, but Deetz stressed that parents would still be given full communication from the health care providers. M-G also plans to provide transportation so that students at elementary buildings can be serviced at the Aspire office.

Landers highlighted that the Aspire office is a family practice, so while antibiotics will be on hand, there will be no narcotics stored in the building whatsoever. If narcotics would be needed for a patient, he said Aspire would work with a local pharmacy to fill the prescription.

Several board members asked exactly how Aspire works and who would be paying for services.

Landers said Aspire is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that is also a Federally Qualified Health Center, which means it receives partial funding or underwriting from the federal Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). Aspire will bill insurances including Medicaid as appropriate, but fundraising and HRSA funding also helps pay for services.

"Ability to pay is not required for receiving the services," he said.

Deetz said school counselors, social workers and other staff will work with Aspire to help facilitate services on a daily basis to identify students' needs regardless of their ability to pay.

“Aspire and Madison-Grant have already been working together for the past two years on the behavioral health piece, as they have in-school services happening throughout our elementaries and into our junior/senior high schools,” Deetz said. “The beauty of this is by having a physical structure we are able to get more certified counselors for more of those extreme or needy cases. Our families wouldn’t have to travel out of town to get those assessments or that type of care. It could take place within moments of their homes.”

Hartman asked if there would be significant renovations needed, and Landers said the biggest change will be replacing carpeting with vinyl flooring. Other equipment and lab spaces are modular installs, so there will be no changes to the actual structure, he said.

Deetz said he started as M-G’s superintendent on Jan. 1, 2016, and since around Jan. 3, 2016 he has identified this need for student-centered health care and worked to find a partner to serve that need. Several BZA members said they would like to see the same model in other county schools, and Deetz said he would be an open book and help collaborate with any other schools wanting to create a similar partnership.

The board gave unanimous approval to the petition for a special exception, and Deetz said now both entities are putting the finishing touches on finalizing a lease agreement.