

Green Woods Charter School, a Roxborough 'landmark' in the making, on track for Jan. opening

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By Alan Jaffe for NewsWorks, @GtownWOLane



They ran into a little more rock in Roxborough than they anticipated, but construction of the new Green Woods Charter School is proceeding on budget, on time and going "wonderfully," according CEO Jean Wallace.

The staff and students are expected to be in the building located off the 400 block of Domino Lane by January. The projected opening date when the project broke ground last October had been Sept. 2013.

"We decided to give ourselves some time to move in," Wallace said. "This assures that we aren't rushed."

A decade-old vision

The innovative new campus — an educational oasis that will include a large pond, rain gardens, wetlands, and a stream flowing by a welcoming structure of steel, stone and glass — has been a gleam in Wallace's eye for 10 years.

Green Woods had been housed in the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education until last year when the students were moved to two former parish schools in Manayunk: St. Mary of the Assumption and St. John the Baptist.

Cost of construction for the three-story, 60,000-square-foot building will come in at \$12.5 million to \$13 million, Wallace said.

When they move into their new home, there will be a student body of 475, which administrators expect to grow to 675 — the building capacity — by 2017.



Revitalized site

The campus covers 5.5 acres on what had been Keenan's Valley View Inn for nearly three decades until it closed in June 2012.

It had since become a dumping ground and was designated a brownfield site, with high levels of lead and arsenic from the region's older industrial past, explained Rich Costigan, project manager for BSI Construction.

Remediation was no big problem; it was Roxborough's geology that slowed things up.

"We hit a lot of rock and ledges," Costigan said. But construction is moving along, and by Jan. 1, "they'll be ready to walk in."

Building identity

Architect Joe Jancuska, who has built 15 charter schools in the Philadelphia region ("all of them different"), said the style of the Green Woods school reflects "their identity."

The modern feel of steel on the exterior is broken up the texture of stone on the first level. And, throughout the building, "We're bringing the outside and inside together."

The mission of Green Woods is to raise students who "understand their place in the natural world and how to lessen their impact on the environment," whether they become environmental scientists, lawyers or whatever, Wallace said.

Seeing the site

On a tour of the construction site, Jancuska pointed to features that will complement the school curriculum: The stream with a self-contained water system; easy access through multiple doors instead of one grand entrance; halls and stairwells filled with natural light; views of the outdoors through 9-by-12-foot windows in each classroom; see-through interior walls, a second-floor observation deck; a third-floor balcony and outdoor science center.

"We developed a building style for their needs," Jancuska said. "It's very user-friendly, with multiple uses for all the spaces."

There will be eight outdoor learning centers around the water features in front and the wetlands in the back; a large gym with movable wall for special events; science classroom; an art hub and kiln room; technology center and computer lab; seeding farm and organic garden. "The building evolved from how Green Woods operates and how they think" Jancuska said.

There have been no models for this campus, Wallace said.

"Ten years ago we started building our curriculum," said Wallace, "and since then, others use us as their model."



Shane Brody, a member of the Green Woods board of directors who grew up in Roxborough, said the new school is "a breath of fresh air" for the neighborhood.

"I went to Catholic schools in Manayunk," Brody said. "When they closed, parents thought about moving out of the city or looked into the charter school options. Green Woods gives them a legitimate option."

The majority of Green Woods students come from the Northwest section of the city, but the enrollment includes kids from 30 zip codes, Wallace said.

Mike Gondos, another board member, said there are a 1,000 names on the lottery to get into Green Woods. His son entered as a kindergartner and has "excelled" thanks to the atmosphere and staff at the school.

"This new building," Gondos said, "is going to be one of the landmarks of Roxborough."

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