

Silver SPRUCE Academy to break ground on long-awaited permanent location



After years of effort, school construction faces new challenges

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The Silver SPRUCE Academy has a new property where it will soon be able to offer educational programs permanently. (Jerry McBride/Durango Herald file)

After more than seven years of searching for a place to settle permanently, the Silver SPRUCE Academy is about to break ground on its new property.

The academy helps families with home schooling by providing SPRUCE, or Supplemental Programs and Resources Utilized in Curriculum Education. The school has been hopping from location to location in La Plata County since it opened in 2013. After capital campaigns and false starts on property purchases, the academy finally purchased a property for its permanent location in March.

The purchase offered “a feeling of safety,” said Natalie Howard, who manages multiple roles, including principal, teacher and executive director of the nonprofit.

“We were amazed we stayed open through COVID. We were amazed our families stayed with us,” Howard said. “There was a sense of comfort that we were able to provide stability for our families.”

The academy does not provide core curriculum classes. Instead, it works with parents and students to offer supplemental classes, tutoring, testing and other services. It connects students around the Four Corners with services like camps, full moon hikes, a Wolf Creek ski club, teaching aids geared toward astronomy and educational resources.

Its programs became even more relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic when so many students were learning at home.

Home-based schooling doubled across Colorado in fall 2020 compared with 2019, from about 7,880 students to 15,770, according to the Colorado Department of Education. In La Plata County, the number of home-based learners grew 156%, from 71 in 2019 to 182 in 2020.

But over the past few years, the nonprofit academy has had to change rental locations multiple times while searching for a permanent location. And enrollment fluctuated depending on where the school was located, Howard said.

With the new property, the academy has taken a significant step toward establishing a permanent location. But actually building on the property might be a challenge.

In 2014, the academy launched a capital campaign to buy a property, raising \$14,000 of the \$600,000 goal. It got in contact with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to secure a loan.

The money from the capital campaign helped preliminary planning work – then the property fell through because of easement issues.

It moved into the ELHI Community Center in Ignacio in 2015. In 2017, the academy launched another small capital campaign to buy a property on County Road 225A. The property needed to be subdivided and was tied up in the La Plata County process for three years, Howard said.

While waiting, staff members realized the ELHI center would not meet the school's needs. Students met in churches until the COVID-19 pandemic made gatherings more difficult. The academy moved to the Colorado Outdoor Learning School but could use the space only once per week – that meant moving in and out of the space each time. Then it moved to a new location between Bayfield and Ignacio.

In fall 2020, a new option appeared: a 3-acre property off County Road 510 east of Elmore's Corner. The academy jumped at the opportunity and closed its deal on the property in March, Howard said.

“Third try is the key,” she said.

The academy had about \$90,000 in the bank to use for the purchase, personal money, board member donations and other money saved over the years. It had a pre-application approval for 100% funding on a \$1.2 million loan from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Staff members got to work on a new capital campaign. The goal was to raise \$750,000 to use for the loan to reduce the loan payment.

They gathered 1,000 contacts and got organized to make sure the campaign could start as soon as the property was secured. As of June, the academy raised \$70,000. By August, it was likely about \$90,000, Howard said.

She envisioned a 5,000-square-foot building that could open as soon as August 2022. It would be a place where 75 children could meet, with a good location in central La Plata County at an affordable price for the nonprofit.

People would be able to rent the space for music lessons, family reunions and Girl Scout meetings, Howard said.

“We're basically kind of creating a community organization for community gatherings,” Howard said.

With the dream almost within reach, the academy is still facing complications. Construction prices have skyrocketed, almost tripling the cost of the building. The USDA loan is no longer a sure bet, even though the application was pre-approved, Howard said.

“We have the plans drawn out, everything is ready to go. We could start construction tomorrow if the USDA was ready to fulfill the loan application,” she said.

But the academy is still planning a groundbreaking ceremony just to celebrate the progress made so far. Construction will wait, for the moment.

“For us, we feel that a permanent space would mean home to a lot of our families because otherwise we’re constantly moving, constantly going to other places,” Howard said. “They never know where we’re going to be.”