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## Charter school clears its first major hurdle

By FULLER ROYAL

Columbus County is one step closer to having a charter school.

Last Thursday, the North Carolina Charter School Advisory Committee selected the Columbus project as one of nine to be forwarded to the interview process.

“We are pleased that when the committee reviewed the education that our students at the Brunswick County (Charter Day) School were receiving they saw fit to lift our Columbus application up to the next phase,” said Headmaster Mark Cramer.

Cramer, and trustee Baker Mitchell were in Raleigh for the deliberations of the committee.

“We are closing the achievement gap between the major ethnic groups at our school,” Mitchell said. “For example, the gap between the scores of black and white students at Charter Day School is 3.5 percent, while the state’s average disparity is 22 percent. This shows that we are equalizing the achievements of all students, and I believe this fact carried a great deal of weight with the committee.

“In addition, our exceptional children’s division has earned good recognition from the Department of Public Instruction in Raleigh. Last year, 80 percent of our students with disabilities passed the state’s End-of-Grade

tests, compared to a statewide average of 47 percent.”

Cramer said that the trustees want a chance to duplicate those statistics in a Columbus-based charter school and, “to work with the rest of the public system to benefit all of the county’s children.”

Cramer said the next step is for the advisory committee to conduct interviews with the trustees of the nine remaining groups applying for charters. The state will grant five charters this year.

North Carolina law allows for no more than 100 charter schools statewide and no more than five per school district.

The five recommended charter school applications will be forwarded the state Board of Education and then to the General Assembly for final approval. If granted, the Columbus Charter School would not begin operations until the fall of 2007 with kindergarten and first-grade students.

The state board is expected to make its recommendations in May.

Charter Day School, a free public charter school open to all children, is managed by The Roger Bacon Academy and is located on a 50-acre campus 15 minutes west of Wilmington off U.S. 74.

The school, founded in 2000, has 750 students enrolled for next year in grades kindergarten through eight.

It is a North Carolina ABC’s “Honor School of Excellence” and was named as a top 25 school by the state Board of Education in 2004-2005.

Earlier this month, the superintendents of both local school systems sent letters to officials with the Office of Charter Schools and the state Board of Education urging the denial of a charter school in Columbus County. Among the reasons cited was the lack of full service to students, the inability of many children to attend because of no transportation and the possible re-segregation of affected schools.