

Bias accusations stall Japanese School sale

By Neil Vigdor

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Delays in the sale of the Greenwich Japanese School campus to a Hebrew academy are being met with charges of anti-Semitism.

An attorney for the Westchester/Fairfield Hebrew Academy says a \$20 million deal for his clients to buy the 16-acre Lake Avenue campus has been languishing since last October because of anti-Semitism among some Japanese School administrators and parents.

The Hebrew school, which serves 113 students from kindergarten through eighth grade, has been seeking a permanent home to replace its temporary quarters at Greenwich's Temple Shalom.

The Greenwich Japanese School, which is operated by the Japanese Educational Institute of New York and offers a curriculum modeled after Japan's to 240 children from first through ninth grades, has been looking to sell its property because of declining enrollment.

"Indeed, so pervasive and so open has been the discriminatory animus emanating from some members of the Greenwich Japanese School community toward the Westchester/Fairfield Hebrew Academy as a Jewish day school, and toward Jews in general, that a prominent and highly respected JEI board member remarked publicly (in a meeting with GJS parents in late May) that many of the GJS parents opposed the sale of the campus due to anti-Semitism," the Hebrew school's lawyer, Richard Emery, wrote in a July 13 letter to Japanese School Chairman Kazuhiko Sakamoto. Emery did not cite specific evidence of alleged public comments by the school board member in his letter.

Douglas Schwarz, who represents Greenwich Japanese School and its board of trustees, blasted the letter in a written response to the Hebrew school's attorney on July 26.

"Greenwich Japanese School is an open, tolerant education institution," wrote Schwarz, who practices with the New York City law firm Bingham McCutchen. "Neither its trustees, nor its administration, faculty, staff or student or parent body harbor the hateful beliefs suggested by your allegations. Indeed, as you know, Japanese-Americans and Japanese citizens living in the U.S. are not strangers to racism."

Japanese School parents also rejected the allegations, saying they oppose the school's sale to any group because of potential disruptions to their children's education, but are open to renting space to Hebrew academy.

"That's just absurd," said Emil Jachmann, a member of the school's PTA and a New Canaan resident. "It's clear that the financial prospects for the school are much better served by renting unused portions of the campus rather than selling the entire campus without any plans for the future."

Jachmann called the allegations unfounded and said they were being used as pressure tactic to expedite the school's sale.

"As a faculty member told me today, it's shameful that a Jewish group would take this tactic," said Jachmann, who has an 8-year-old son at Greenwich Japanese School.

A partner in Emery's New York City law firm referred questions on the potential sale to Hebrew school officials, who would not discuss the letter yesterday but released a statement.

"We are continuing our good-faith negotiations with the board of the Japanese Educational Institute (JEI) in the hope of finalizing the agreement that has been reached in principle," Westchester/Fairfield Hebrew Academy spokeswoman Lauren Marcus Eisenberg said. "We are aware that there is pressure on the JEI board from certain individuals opposed to the sale, but we expect that the JEI leadership will conclude the transaction and that an agreement will be signed shortly."

Schwarz would not discuss specific roadblocks to the sale yesterday. But, in his written response on July 26 to Emery's letter, the attorney said a number of terms of the land sale remain unresolved, from asbestos removal to an arrangement that would allow Greenwich Japanese School to lease back space from the Hebrew school for several years until it found a new home. Emery ended his July 13 letter with a warning for Japanese School administrators and parents.

"The risks to the Japanese Educational Institute and its affiliates of not closing the transaction with the Westchester/Fairfield Hebrew Academy are enormous. To be sure, there will other costs as well - costs in time, energy and public good will."

New York City civil rights lawyer Arthur Block, who represents members of the Japanese School PTA, said Emery's label cast the school community in unfair light.

"My understanding is people are upset, particularly Japanese here in America and people who consider themselves subject to discrimination in the past," Block said.

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