

2 April, 2018

Hon. Joseph H. Jefferson, Jr.
Chair, Education and Cultural Subcommittee
House Legislative Oversight Committee
Blatt Building, Room 228
Columbia, SC 29201

Representative Jefferson, I received your follow-up to our letter to you. You asked some excellent questions and I hope these answers are helpful.

In light of the feasibility study completed last fall, and other options presented over the past five years related to use of the property and the agency's programming, has the John de la Howe Board of Trustees determined a new strategic direction for the agency?

- 1) **If so, what is that direction?** The board is entirely committed to the idea of a South Carolina Magnet School for Agriculture, Biotechnology and Research at John de la Howe. We are concerned with the current shape of the Wilderness Program. After losing our accreditation, it has been difficult to run a true Wilderness Program and provide an education to the participants. We have tried several different options (virtual school, and an MOA with McCormick County Schools), and we find them detracting from the process of the program as run in the past. We are looking at some possible solutions: contracting out to another wilderness program, or suspending operations until we get accredited for the Magnet School being two possibilities.
- 2) **What other options were considered?** In the last five years, the other options we have considered included the proviso we operated under for the previous year. It would have had us serving "youths" who had aged out of DSS or DJJ. It was a plan that had not been studied for its feasibility. We had questions as to whether "youths" who had aged out were really youths and conformed to the John de la Howe's Will. More importantly, that plan would have had us run a career center, train the students in a job skill, and then place and follow them into jobs and apartments. With McCormick County's lack of industry and apartments, the logistics of following and mentoring the students who graduated from the program would have been a nightmare. On top of that, the "youths" who had aged out of the system would have had to voluntarily commit to staying out in the rural part of McCormick County at JDLH. In essence they would be voluntarily re-inserting themselves into the system. We had some real doubts about how many young people would be interested in doing that. We also talked about giving homeless students from all over the state a place to live and go to school. We were hoping to combine that with court appointed truants. Apparently, there was an issue with the courts sentencing truants to attend school at JDLH. We were hoping both those segments of the population would stabilize our enrollment. However, every time we would try to move in a direction we thought might solve some of our enrollment problems, another proviso would come to us that redirected our energies elsewhere. On top of all that, due to the supervisor-to-student ratio dictated by DSS, adding more students was never going to significantly change our cost per student. The more students we had, the more staff we needed to hire. (The ratio is 1:8, but that's really 3:8 because you needed to fill three shifts with adults.)

- 3) **Has the board sought a legal opinion on the consistency of this, or other considered options, with Dr. de la Howe's will?** We have run the ideas in the feasibility study by our lawyer, Rob Tyson, and he believes the Will lines up with the study. In fact it may line up even better than what we have been doing in the recent past. The Will addresses in detail agricultural and mechanical education. We'd be getting back to that idea. There is little doubt that a significant percentage of students who would enroll in a Magnet Ag school would qualify for free or reduced lunch. And of course, we hope to continue a Wilderness Program in the future.
- 4) **Has a plan for implementation been developed? If so, please provide that plan.** The board had scheduled a work session for April 2nd (which we canceled following the most recent proposed Senate proviso) to discuss the transition phase, and the qualifications we expect of our next president. We will be looking at, and tweaking, a timeline drawn up by the group that did the feasibility study. We feel it is imperative that the person who leads JDLH into the new mission have input to the plan moving forward. Of course all of this is dependent upon what the State Legislature decides they will allow us to do.
- 5) **Are there any statutory or regulatory barriers to implementing the chosen direction, or any of the other options considered? If so, please detail those barriers and any recommendations for amendments.** For starters, if we are allowed to become the Magnet Ag school, we would need flexibility in our budget to use as much carry-over funds as possible (hopefully all unspent funds from this year's JDLH budget) and next year's budget to upgrade, renovate, and gear up the facilities (infrastructure, labs, shops, cottages, etc.). We expect to largely follow the template of the Governor's Schools, so we would hope for similar regulations from the State Department of Education. For instance, if a retired Clemson professor specializing in hydroponics was willing to teach, hopefully they wouldn't have to go through all the certification bureaucracy a typical high school teacher goes through.
- 6) **Under the agency's current structure, does the board have any recommendations for statutory or regulatory changes that would increase the agency's ability to fulfill its mission?** Honestly, the board recognizes the need for the agency to change. JDLH in the past served as the alternative school for many counties that didn't have one. But now, nearly every school district has its own. To fill beds we would have to admit students with problems that we are not staffed to serve. On top of that, it is very difficult to fill the beds every single day. The enrollment of the current clientele is much too unstable. The board feels that with 1300+ acres of former plantation land (some in timber, 100 acres in protected old-growth forest), with cattle, hogs, goats, horses, and chickens, a well equipped greenhouse, a high school building with solid framework, and cottages for residential students, a magnet school of agriculture is the best possible fit for JDLH's future. There is nothing like this plan with these type resources anywhere in the United States. A shortage of farmers is looming in the not-too-distant future, and agriculture is the number one industry in South Carolina. This could be a crown jewel in our state, and fill a need. Therefore, we would very much like the legislature to take the necessary steps to create such a school at John de la Howe.

There have been some interesting developments in the Senate. My fellow board members and I hope you and your committee can be a voice of reason and support the idea to implement the feasibility study. John de la Howe can become a very special place that serves hundreds of

students every day of the year for years to come. It will be a good use of the state's money and serve a vital purpose.

Sincerely,

Daniel B. Shonka, Chairman
Board of Trustees