

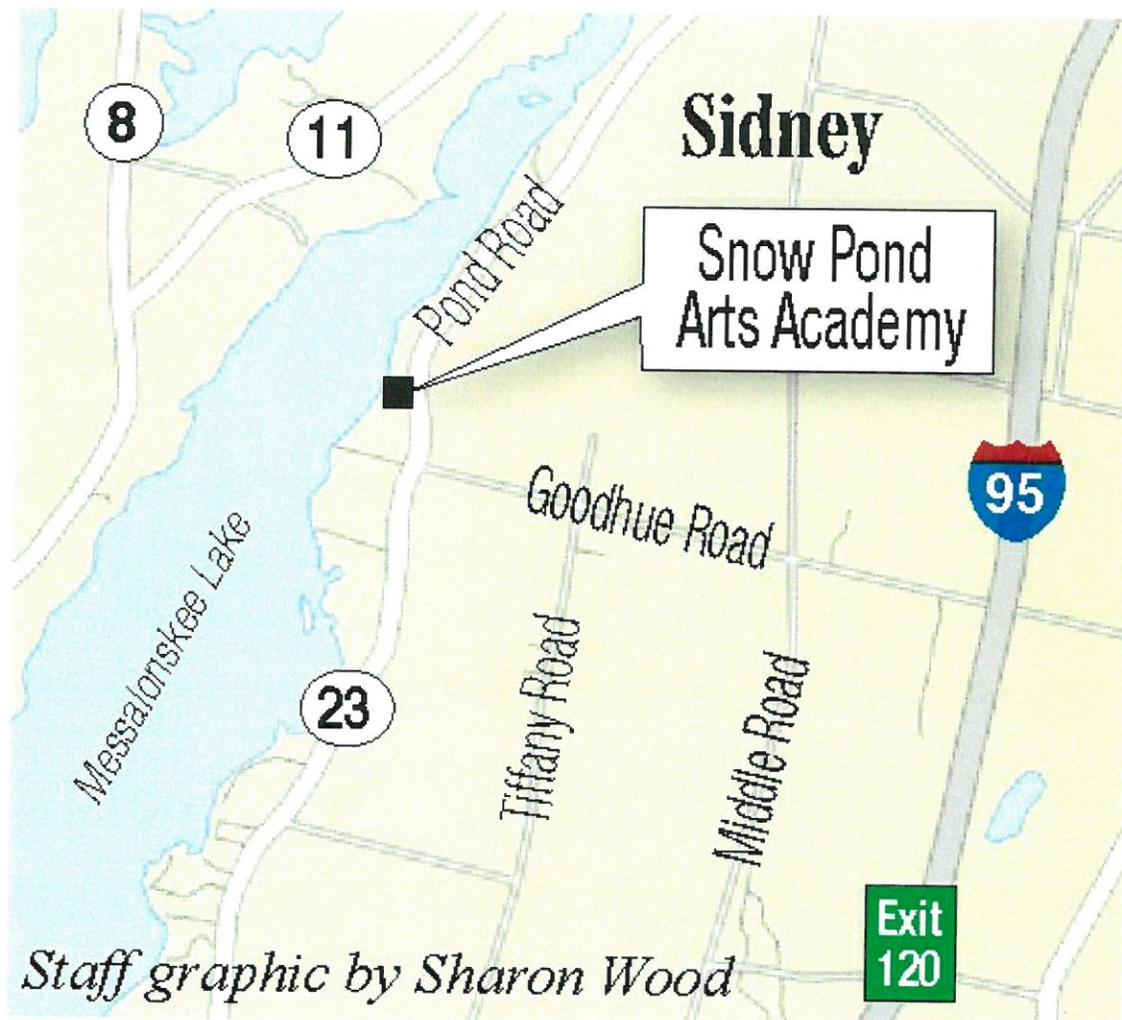
Performing arts charter school in Sidney wins approval of Maine panel

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AUGUSTA — The Maine Charter School Commission voted unanimously Tuesday to approve the contract for a new charter school in Sidney with an emphasis on the performing arts.

The panel also discussed a proposal to create a high school program for pregnant or parenting teenagers who have dropped out of school as part of the Maine Academy of Natural Sciences in Fairfield.



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[Snow Pond Arts Academy](#) will open in Sidney in September and will be the state's eighth charter school, after Tuesday's 7-0 vote by the commission. Maine's charter school law, approved in 2011, authorizes the commission to approve as many as 10 charter schools in the first 10 years under the law.

"Now the real work starts," said Rob Moody, chairman of the academy's board, who said the board now can begin hiring staff members and searching for a full-time head of school. Rich Abramson, who is also interim executive director at the Cornville Regional Charter School, is serving as interim head of school.

The Sidney school will serve students in grades nine through 12, will be affiliated with the 80-year-old New England Music Camp Association and will share a campus with the New England Music Camp summer program. The campus is off Pond Road, which is also Route 23, on the shore of Messalonskee Lake.

"It's exciting for our area to have another option for our kids," Moody said. "The focus on the arts is something that is desperately needed."

Shelley Reed, chairwoman of the Maine Charter Commission, also said there is a need in Maine for a school focused on the performing arts. Though the school is in Sidney, students from all over the state are welcome to apply for admission, which will be granted via a lottery system that randomly selects students.

The school is looking initially to open with 124 high school freshmen and sophomores before expanding and adding junior and senior grade levels.

"When we hear the word 'charter' school, there has always been discussion about having something focused on the arts and music," Reed said. "It's kind of exciting to see things that are important to people added to our portfolio, allowing us to develop some real choice for the students, parents and families of Maine."

In addition to the Snow Pond Arts Academy, commissioners also discussed a contract for a new charter elementary school in Lewiston, Acadia Academy. No action was taken on the contract for that school, as commissioners expressed concerns that the school would be unable to meet commission deadlines after struggling to find an adequate facility to house the school.

In other business Tuesday, the commission also discussed a proposal from the Maine Academy of Natural Sciences in Fairfield for a new program that would serve pregnant or parenting teens who have dropped out of or are falling behind in the traditional classroom. The academy, also known as MeANS, opened as the state's first charter high school in 2012 with programs emphasizing hands-on and agricultural-based learning.

Moody, who is also the interim director at the Maine Academy of Natural Sciences, said the idea for the program developed from "being in Somerset County and hearing about all the teen pregnancies in that county."

There were 80 births to teens in Somerset County in 2008, according to the program description. The annual County Health Rankings by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, a nonprofit focused on community health issues, showed that 36 out of every 1,000 children [born in Somerset County](#) in 2014 were born to teens ages 15 to 19.

The proposed program, called Threshold, would operate as part of the charter school; and while students periodically would attend classes at the Good Will-Hinckley campus, where the school is located, teachers also would make weekly visits to students' homes. Such a structure would help students overcome two challenges often faced by parenting teens – lack of transportation and lack of child care while they attend classes – said Emanuel Pariser, curriculum director for the Maine Academy of Natural Sciences.

After starting in Somerset County, the program would expand to neighboring counties and then other areas of the state where need exists, according to a draft program description distributed at Tuesday's meeting.

The program also would include efforts to connect young parents with agencies that can help them provide early childhood care, such as Educare in Waterville, Head Start and the Maine Educational Opportunity Center.

Now there are a handful of programs in Maine that provide educational opportunities for parenting and pregnant teens, including the Teen Parent School Program in Waterville and the Passages program. There were 80 births to teens in Somerset County in 2008, according to the program description. The annual County Health Rankings by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, a nonprofit focused on community health issues, showed that 36 out of every 1,000 children born in Somerset County in 2014 were born to teens ages 15 to 19., a home-based high

school diploma program that serves teens in seven counties. But Pariser said there is still a greater need to serve teen parents in Maine.

If approved by the commission, the program could begin as early as this fall, or later, depending on what funding is available, Pariser said.

"I think our role as a charter school is to fill the gaps in the traditional system," he said. "To me (access to education for teen parents) is pretty much an incontestable gap; and aside from a few great programs, like the teen parent program in Waterville, this is a population that is not getting served much in the traditional setting."

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