Work begins on the Lafayette Renaissance Academy on March 14 in the Courre Farms development along Pont des Mouton Road. The charter school is a result of a partnership between the Lafayette Charter Foundation and Charter Schools USA, a Florida-based charter management company.

Lafayette, Acadiana Renaissance Charter academies set to open in August

BY RICHARD BURGESS
rburgess@theadvocate.com

LAFAYETTE — Charter Schools USA on Friday marked the start of construction for two new charter schools, one each in northern and southern Lafayette Parish in the first wave of local public schools to be run by private organizations.

The Lafayette Renaissance Charter Academy in north Lafayette at the Courre Farms development and the Acadiana Renaissance Charter Academy in Youngsville near the Sugar Mill Pond development are set to open in August.

Next school year also will see a third charter school in Lafayette Parish — Willow Charter Academy, operated by National Heritage Academies and now taking shape in the shell of the old Albertsons on Evangeline Thruway.

All three charter schools were opposed by the Lafayette Parish School Board, which will have to give up a share of state school money and local education tax dollars because some of those funds will follow students who attend new charter schools.

Charter school supporters ultimately sought and won approval from the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education under rules that allow BESE to approve and oversee charter schools, even if local school boards object.

Youngsville Mayor Wilson Viator said he can understand the local School Board’s position, but his community, the fastest growing in the parish, has long since outgrown the existing public schools in the area.

“We have more portable

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buildings than we have permanent classrooms,” Viator said Friday at a groundbreaking ceremony for the Charter Schools USA school in Youngsville.

The Florida-based company’s two schools will both open initially to K-6 students, then add seventh grade and eighth grade as the first class of students progresses.

As of Friday, about 500 students had applied for the 591 slots at the charter school at Couret Farms in north Lafayette, and about 700 had applied for the 591 slots at the charter school in Youngsville, said Charter Schools USA Director of Marketing and Enrollment Kal Gajraj.

He said open enrollment ends Monday.

If there are more students than slots — as there are now for the Youngsville school — a lottery will be held to determine which students get in, Gajraj said.

If there are still available slots at the close of open enrollment, additional applications will be considered as they come in until the slots are filled, he said. Gajraj said enrollment is open to all students in the parish.

Charters Schools USA President and CEO Jon Hage said the enrollment applications so far, especially for the Youngsville school, show there is clearly a demand for charter school education here.

“There are already 700 students trying to get into this school. There might be 1,000 by next month,” Hage said at the groundbreaking for the Youngsville site.

The walls of a new charter school are erected Friday at Couret Farms in Lafayette.

The introduction of charter schools in the parish could cut into the finances of the School Board, with the shortfall estimated at around $7 million for the upcoming school year, when money that would ordinarily go to the public school system follows the students who shift to one of the three new charter schools.

Even so, Lafayette Parish Superintendent Pat Cooper has voiced support for charter schools, acting against the wishes of the majority of the School Board.

Cooper has reasoned that the new charters will take pressure off the school system to build new schools at a time when there is little money to do so, despite the need.

In addition to the three charter schools opening in the fall in Lafayette Parish, two more are set to open by the 2017-18 school year.