

## **Why is the Woodland School Board Trying to Close Prairie Crossing?**

Greg Richmond

Here is what you need to know about the Woodland school board's lawsuit against the Prairie Crossing Charter School: the Woodland school board wants Prairie Crossing's money.

Not all of it, necessarily, but a lot of it. And if it can't have a lot of it, Woodland wants it all.

Prairie Crossing has been educating the children of the Woodland and Fremont school districts for 15 years and has been doing it well. It is an innovative, high-quality educational program focused on the environment that has received multiple national recognitions. It is open to all students in the two districts, tuition-free with no admission criteria.

Prairie Crossing underwent a lengthy and rigorous evaluation when it came up for review before the State Charter School Commission last year. All of the Commissioners bring valuable community, educational and financial experience to their position. A majority are current or former employees of school districts in Illinois. The Commission fully vetted every aspect of Prairie Crossing and a majority of Commissioners voted to renew its charter in conformance with the provisions of state law.

During that review process, lawyers for the Woodland school board asked the Commission cut the charter school's funding 25 percent and give that money – about \$775,000 – to Woodland. When the Commission declined, the Woodland school board sued, not just to take \$775,000, but to close the school and take it all.

Ironically, closing the school doesn't even help Woodland. Yes, it would get all of Prairie Crossing's money, but it would also get their kids and the cost of educating them. There would be no windfall.

In the first round of the legal process, Woodland was fortunate. Attorneys from the Commission, State Board of Education and Attorney General's office believe the law is on the side of Prairie Crossing. The judge's hand-written, one-page decision provides no insight into his reasoning.

There will be a second, and likely third, round in this lawsuit, extending for many months or years and the Woodland school board will end up paying hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars to its lawyers as proceedings drag on.

If the Woodland school board were spending that money to improve the educational opportunities available to families in their district, they would be doing what the voters expect. Instead, they are spending that money to try to close Prairie Crossing and reduce the school options available to their families.

The Woodland school board believes that Prairie Crossing's money belongs to them, the school board, and that it has been wrongly taken from them. Others see it differently. They believe that the money belongs to the taxpayers and is provided by them for the purpose of educating the children of the community, whichever public school they choose.

One other note. Prairie Crossing also serves children from the Fremont school district. During the State Charter School Commission's review process, Fremont indicated that they have no objection to Prairie

Crossing. Fremont has not filed a suit against Prairie Crossing and is not spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on lawyers' fees.

Prairie Crossing has been meeting the needs of hundreds of community families for years. Most people consider it to be an asset for the families of Woodland and Fremont. Next week, the Woodland school board is asking voters to go to the polls to raise their taxes and give the school board more money. Each voter has to decide for him or herself whether the board is truly representing the interests of parents and taxpayers.

*Greg Richmond is the Chairman of the State Charter School Commission.*