

Parents 'cautiously optimistic' about possible Williams move

By Brock Weir

East Aurora parents who have been vocal advocates for the need of a new high school to address the needs of families east of the GO tracks are 'cautiously optimistic.'

They welcomed last week's decision of the York Region District School Board to earmark moving Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School to address population growth but say there is much more advocacy work to be done, not only for this case but for others down the road.

'I am quite pleased they are looking at this situation in its entirety,' says parent Sandra Manherz of the Board's move to look at the distribution of high schools throughout Aurora and Oak Ridges. 'I am quite pleased that the Board is at least looking at the area as a whole in trying to determine what the issues are and what the problems are in the Region and that they are looking to create some sort of solution to address that.'

'Up until a year ago, the Board had commented to us there wasn't a problem but now they are actually looking at the situation, taking the broad perspective and seeing what is happening in the community and that, in and of itself, is good.'

That being said, they are stopping short of declaring victory, after all any possible move of Dr. G.W. Williams is contingent on Provincial funding.

That will be a challenge, she says, and until that funding comes forward they are merely 'cautiously optimistic' that change will come about.

'There are two fights that are happening with regards to this issue: there is the local issue with regards to the school and then there is a Provincial issue with regards to the funding model.'

The funding has been a significant hurdle in this battle for both the parents and the York Region District School Board in that students have to already be in place, creating an overcrowding situation, before the Provincial dollars start to flow, rather than anticipating future growth.

'Our group continues to kind of fight both battles,' she continues. 'The funding model in general looks at rural areas, growing areas and stable communities are all created equally but I believe each of them have their own needs and the current funding model doesn't look at it that way. On top of that, they don't tend to look at the Region as a whole. They tend to divvy out Catholic and Public school numbers and in our situation it kind of doesn't illustrate what is actually happening in our community right now. The funding model still needs some improvements.'

Over the course of public talks over the future of Williams 'whether the current building needed to be shuttered and rebuilt eastward, or whether a third public secondary school was needed to complement both Williams and Aurora High School' it was pointed out by both Board members and parents alike that enrollment at St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic Secondary School on Wellington Street East was picking up significant enrollment from teens on the east side of Bayview whose families had been clamoring for a more local high school option.

The parents say they are working to address that gap for the future, convening talks with Newmarket-Aurora MPP Chris Ballard to discuss that issue as well as Progressive Conservative Leader Patrick Brown.

'What we're looking for is a great solution for Aurora as a whole,' says Ms. Manherz. 'I think with regards to the York Region District School Board the option of relocating Dr. G.W. Williams may be a good solution for all of the issues that have been presented, the issues being low enrollment, low funding, problems with programming. I think they have done a good job in creating a solution that will ideally address those things.'

'By relocating the school I believe those issues will be resolved and we will have a larger number of students that will actually utilize the facility. In turn, if you have an increase in enrollment there will be an influx of new teachers. Funding will come back up and, with that, more programming opportunities. I think that solution as a whole for the community will provide better opportunities for our students in the Williams catchment area to actually access a facility that can provide good quality care and education to the students in that catchment area.'