

A new high school shouldn't spell the end of Williams: Council

By Brock Weir

A new high school should be built on Aurora's east side, but a new school in the Town's fastest growing neighbourhood shouldn't mean the end of Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School.

That was the message Council members drove home last week when they unanimously approved a motion from Councillor John Abel that formalized Council's support for a new high school off Bayview Avenue just north of Wellington Street East on land that has already been secured by the York Region District School Board for that purpose.

Council hoped delaying their decision until last Tuesday would give school trustee Peter Adams-Luchowski, or a representative of the Board, a chance to provide further input on the matter but, when that didn't pan out, local lawmakers forged ahead.

In supporting Councillor Abel's motion, Councillors rejected an amendment proposed by Councillor Michael Thompson, which said Council would support the new school's construction as a 'third' high school in the area.

'I think there is agreement around the table, and the residents have amply demonstrated that there is a need for the area,' said Councillor Michael Thompson to his amendment. 'It allows us to continue to advocate on behalf of the residents with York Region to try and make some progress on that property without any concerns of there being an impact to anything else.'

The amendment, however, set off alarm bells with other Councillors who said it would indeed have an impact. While adding the word 'third' would drive home a message to the Board they support keeping Williams open, they said it could mean the motion would be doomed to failure at the outset as the Board has opposed a third high school.

'We have in our Official Plan that people should be able to have a school central to the feeder primary schools, just like the other side of Town,' said Councillor John Abel saying that without Councillor Thompson's amendment Council won't be seen as telling the Board what should be done. 'Very simply, if you build a school on Bayview, everyone in Town will be able to walk to school. If you say we want a third one, right away [the Board] will say no. I don't think we should be asking for that. We should be supporting what the residents have brought forward and they have asked, simply, that they build a high school as planned.'

'We fought hard for our residents to keep Williams open and it is what [but it is also] need,' agreed Councillor Wendy Gaertner. 'The Town was planned with a third school on Bayview. The school board purchased the land to provide a third school on Bayview, and I think it is appropriate we call this the 'third' school.'

Mayor Geoff Dawe was also supportive of the amendment.

'The reason why I am in favour of this amendment is [the residents] all indicated they were looking for a school in the area but I think everyone was pretty clear they weren't looking for a school in their area at the expense of closing Williams,' he said. 'I believe I heard that more than once. My concern with the original motion is it is implied that if we support the motion it would be the closure of Williams. Whether or not the closure of Williams is a good thing or a bad thing, I think it is not the purview of this Council.'

'Our Council is to advocate for the residents, wherever they live. All the decisions we make have to be for the Town as a whole. That is our job. I have no problem supporting a request for a school in the east side and that goes back to 2020 when I was banging on doors on the east side. It makes perfect sense there is a high school there and I am absolutely committed to supporting our residents there, but I am not absolutely committed to supporting it at the expense of other planning the Board does, whether or not we like it is not our purview.'

The amendment nevertheless fell on a 5-3 vote, with Councillor Paul Pirri absent from the meeting.

'I was initially in favour of the amendment because, based on what [residents stated earlier] this was not about one area versus another,' said Councillor Harold Kim on why he eventually opposed the amendment. 'It is about accommodating the increase in capacity that is going to be happening in the Bayview corridor. For that reason, it sounded like it would be more fitting language.' He called on Sandra Manherz, a delegate earlier in the evening, to respond to the amendment. She said the original wording was what residents wanted and they did not want to 'dictate' to the Board, feeling the phrase 'third school' would stop all discussion at the start.

'I don't think we need this change in there,' agreed Councillor Tom Mrakas. 'I think if we go ahead with the original motion the way it was we're stating a strong support for that school on Bayview and if the school board does come back and say, 'the only way we're going to build that school is if we close Williams,' then we can deal with it at that time.'