

Board targets 2023 for Dr. G.W. Williams' move to Bayview

By Brock Weir

Future high school students living on Aurora's booming east side will have a shorter walk to school, potentially within the next five years, after the York Region District School Board struck an agreement with the Ministry of Education to relocate Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School.

Described as "not a typical path forward" by the York Region District School Board (YRDSB), the YRDSB ratified their deal with the Province on Tuesday night.

The agreement, "a path to proceed", will see the relocation and replacement of Dr. G.W. Williams, currently on Dunning Avenue, just east of Yonge Street, to Board-owned lands on Bayview Avenue at Borealis.

Moving Dr. G.W. Williams to this long-held location is something which many parents in Aurora's northeast have been pushing for in recent years.

Advocacy came to a head in 2016 with a number of lengthy meetings between the YRDSB and the community, as well as several discussions around the Council table, which ultimately led to five Councillors making deputations to the YRDSB advocating for the move.

While there was some division on whether the need was simply a new building and location for Williams or a completely new third high school to service the growing community, the Board and Province have ultimately agreed that only a move is necessary and there is no need for a third public high school in Aurora.

"It is not a typical path forward in terms of funding and capital funding because the building was in existence, but we worked very hard in the planning department to devise a secondary school strategy that did not look just at Aurora on its own, but looked at the north part of Richmond Hill up through Oak Ridges and into Aurora," explains Dawn Adams, Planner for the YRDSB. "Our goal was, and we had community input and public meetings, that we wished to rebalance and right size the enrolment in our secondary schools [at these locations] through a combination of program and boundary changes, and new and replacement people places. The Ministry supported that strategy compared to a typical new school capital process."

Ms. Adams tells The Auroran that the Board currently plans for the new Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School to be open by September 2023 at the earliest, and this is dependent on site plan approvals.

The current Williams building will be retained by the YRDSB, which will "repurpose it in the future for administration purposes."

"Through our secondary school strategy, it was highlighted that due to transition and evolution of development in Aurora that Aurora went from a north-south alignment, and with the new development coming on the Bayview Northeast Area, Aurora really went to an east-west alignment in terms of residential," says Ms. Adams.

That being said, meeting the objectives of the YRDSB's secondary school strategy will have a domino effect. While the Board is clear they do not believe there is a need for a third secondary school in Aurora, the strategy looks at area French immersion programs.

Students in Oak Ridges currently enrolled in French immersion programs now go to Aurora High School and this includes just over 400 pupils. Forecasts project this number is going to increase to 800 and this has resulted in the creating of new boundaries. If approved by the YRDSB, these boundary changes will see Oak Ridges students heading towards a new French Immersion program at King City Secondary School.

Keeping all these changes in mind, next steps will include finalizing capacity at the new Williams site along with determining which technical programs will be distributed throughout the area high schools to meet the needs of students.

"Depending on information from the local schools, feeder schools, and superintendents, we tailor it to the needs of the local community," says Ms. Adams. "There is then also a process for public input on the design of what this new school would be. If there are partnerships, such as with the Town, those conversations will commence shortly."

Northeast parents began ramping up the pressure for a new school in 2016.

They called on the YRDSB to take action to address their growing alarm.

Living on the northeast and getting their teens to and from Williams presented many challenges from both a practical and financial standpoint.

Students are often reliant on York Region Transit to make class, and student bus passes run upwards of \$1,000 annually per student, the only alternative being students walking nearly an hour from Aurora's 2B and 2C areas.