

Comments on Williams are 'misguided', says parent advocate

By Brock Weir

The future of Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School should be taken out of the equation when discussing the need for a school on the east side of Aurora, says an area parent.

Appearing at Council last week on behalf of her neighbours, who have been passionately campaigning for a new high school on Bayview Avenue north of Wellington, Sandra Manherz told elected officials that cautioning their campaign could have 'ripple effects,' including the potential closure of Williams is 'misguided' and sends a message of 'Let's not fix a problem for fear of what someone may or may not say.'

'How would anything in Town get better if this was the approach we took,' Ms. Manherz asked Council. 'As quoted in the Board's School Improvement Plan, many students on the east side of Town are opting for the Catholic Secondary School to which they can walk, a factor contributing to G.W. Williams' enrollment dropping. Parents and students are exercising their right to choose. There is already a ripple effect due to no high school being on Bayview. Everyone seems to want to talk about Williams, so let's talk about Williams tonight.'

'In our opinion, the Board hasn't just let the children down on the east side of Aurora, but they have also let down the children in the west at Dr. G.W. Williams. In 2007, the school was in need of great repairs. What did the board do? Nothing for five or six years. It took the school's ventilation system breaking down and the school not having heat before they acted. Williams, at this moment, is at approximately 55 per cent capacity. Its attendance has dropped significantly each year since 2010. What has the Board done? Again, nothing for four or five years until the enrollment was at critical levels and then it added an enriched program and will be adding the IB program. That will only result in approximately 100 to 150 students, insignificant for their enrolment issues.'

According to Ms. Manherz, as enrolment decreases, Williams will be left with a reduction of extra-curriculars, specialized teachers and staff, leaving a deficit not only for the teens living west of Bayview, but those living on the east as well.

'The Board is being reactive, not proactive in their approach,' she continued. 'This is also the case with building a school on Bayview. We have waited almost 10 years for them to solve this issue. How much longer are the kids in Aurora supposed to wait? I have heard many times that there will be no high school on Bayview because of the space available at Williams. If that is the Board's rationale, why are we building elementary schools on the east side of Aurora? Aurora west elementary schools are all under capacity.'

'Why aren't we bussing the kids from the east to the west in order to fill up the schools? Because the Board recognizes there is value in having kids walk to school, there is value to having kids go to school in the community they live in, value in the social connections when you go to school with kids that live on the same block as you, not to mention all the other reasons 'academic, health and wellness, environmental 'we discussed the last time we were in front of Council.'

'The Board and Councillors keep putting an east-west divide into this issue. Let me make this very clear: we are not divided, not when it comes to the education of our kids, not when we are talking about programming and extra-curricular activities, good teachers and the health and wellness of our children. We, east and west alike, want what's best for our children. This issue isn't about the residents, who lives beside what plot of land, building a park or how sentimental we all feel about a building. This is about our children, both east and west sides. This is about all of us: parents, Council and Board being accountable to the kids these schools service.'

In the end, she said, it is about the best interests of students, what will afford them the best education, programming and opportunities.

Following her delegation to Council, Councillor Tom Mrakas said she would find Council 'will stand up and be that voice for residents' and that their voices are behind them. Following Council debate, that is just what happened.

'We're all united in this,' said Councillor Harold Kim. 'But, in terms of how we got there it might be a little different.'

Added Ms. Manherz: 'You say, 'let's not express our dissatisfaction in case we create a ripple?' I say, forget about that. Let's exchange some ideas and come up with a great solution for Aurora.'