

Councillors support parents in high school fight

By Brock Weir

Northeast parents' efforts to get the York Region District School Board to re-think their decision to maintain Dr. G.W. Williams rather than building a new secondary school on Bayview Avenue at Borealis got some significant support last week.

Four local lawmakers ? Councillors John Abel, Wendy Gaertner, Harold Kim and Tom Mrakas ? sacrificed the first 20 minutes of last Tuesday's General Committee meeting to speak out at the York Region School Board in favour of a new local high school.

First up was Councillor Tom Mrakas, who said a new northeast school ?only makes sense? when you look at the numbers.

?Based on the Region's projections, Aurora is expected to grow to around 70,000 residents by 2031,? said Councillor Mrakas. ?That is 10,000 more people than currently we have right now. It is clear to me at least that these numbers support the need for a new school in Aurora. Unfortunately, current Ministry policy doesn't consider future projections when deciding to build a new school or not. It only looks at capacity and this, to my mind, this is short sighted. This forces us to be reactive rather than proactive and that is not effective planning.

?Right now, Aurora has two public high schools thus, based on current Ministry planning, we will have to wait until both schools reach capacity before a business case for a new high school can even be put forward and even then our Trustee has told us that a business case rarely succeeds on the first try. Once it is finally accepted, it takes, on average, four years to build a school. By the time this whole process is complete, it will be eight to ten years from now and by then it is conceivable that two generations of kids will have spent at least part of their high school years in portables.

?But it doesn't have to be that way. We could plan for the future now. I respectfully ask that this Board consider the data and information that we have presented here tonight by Councillors, by parents and by concerned residents. Consider the business case that is being made for another high school.?

Next up was Wendy Gaertner who also said this was the common sense solution.

?As politicians, we have a duty to serve the residents we represent,? she told Trustees. ?In 2007, Aurora Council stood [for the Williams community] to help keep their school open. Why did we do that? Because school is a critical component to a well-functioning community. I now stand with our residents in Aurora's northeast quadrant. They need a high school to provide for their best learning experience. It is their right. As school board trustees, you have a duty and care for these students you serve. I believe it is your responsibility to fight for their needs. Make this school happen for them.?

Speaking next, Councillor Kim crunched the numbers and said when northeast Aurora reaches buildout in a few years, including condos at Industrial Parkway North and Wellington Street east, and on lands currently held by Magna International, up to 62 per cent of Aurora's population will be on the east side of the GO tracks.

To this end, Councillor John Abel suggested a review of people accommodation.

?There was pushback [on closing Williams in 2007] because there was no accommodating and consolidating Aurora High with Dr. G.W. Williams. Instead, it was proposed that people from Williams would all have to commute, so that decision was reversed,? said Councillor Abel. ?The new high school, with new amenities, labs and facilities would be an exciting new addition to the community no matter where it is put. I believe that if we had a proper pupil accommodation review, we have enough before us to consider the Board here tonight.

?I would ask [that staff to] prepare an initial report identifying schools, which challenges might be faced providing a suitable and equitable range of learning opportunities for students, and that would be travel distance, walking distance, and if you're going to put two schools [one should be] on the east side and one should be on the west side equidistant so everyone could walk to school rather than put two high schools in the same quadrant and make half the population commute.?