

Dr. G.W. Williams will move to Bayview -- if Board gets its way



By Brock Weir

It has stood near the corner of Dunning Avenue and Yonge Street for more than 50 years, but Dr. G.W. Williams' time as a destination for students in Aurora's south end might soon draw to a close.

The York Region District School Board (YRDSB) last week approved its 2017 Capital Strategy which calls for the construction of a new public secondary school on Bayview Avenue near Borealis and moving the entire Williams staff and student body to the new location.

Now, the next step will be hearing from the Ministry of Education on dollars to make the construction of a new high school happen. It was a significant turnaround for the YRDSB who had, until that point, been firmly opposed to the idea of moving Williams, stating that the business case just wasn't there.

Despite low enrollment at both Williams and Aurora High School on Wellington Street West, they said they had specific thresholds when it came to student numbers before a third high school ? or even a move ? could be considered. Students had to already be in place, creating an overcrowding situation, before Ontario would consider funding a new high school facility.

This flew in direct opposition to a passionate campaign led by parents in Aurora's northeast who said the Board needed to act on building a high school on the land they already owned.

The burgeoning northeast developments are part of Williams' catchment area, but the YRDSB offers no busing to get students to and from school. This, they said, leads to challenges ? both physical and financial ? in getting students where they need to go, leading them to look for alternatives outside the YRDSB.

Low enrolment in turn, they argued, leads to a downturn in the quality of education Dr. G.W. Williams can provide when it comes to extracurricular activities and fostering an energized school environment.

The momentum for a new high school began to turn near the end of last month when the YRDSB presented its Secondary School Strategy, which examined the communities of Aurora and Oak Ridges.

?Continuing enrolment growth at Richmond Green Secondary School and under-enrolment at Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School are the critical accommodation issues of these areas that could be addressed in the Capital Strategy. Staff recommended that an opportunity for public input be provided to the affected communities. This allowed staff to present the accommodation options requiring capital approvals and receive other options the public suggested,? says the YRDSB.

During these public information sessions, fourth options were presented by the Board.

The first was a Status Quo option, which would keep both schools on track as far as plans already announced by the YRDSB to boost student numbers at both Williams (an International Baccalaureate Program) and Aurora High School (fostering the growth of French Immersion).

The second option presented was to introduce boundary and program changes to balance population numbers in both schools.

The third option was to build a third secondary school on the Bayview lands while leaving Williams as it is.

The fourth, which ultimately won the first battle, was to relocate Williams.

“Data supports that the Town of Aurora only requires two secondary schools,” said the YRDSB in its report. “To address growth in East Aurora, staff is recommending that Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School be relocated to the Board-owned site in northeast Aurora to address student growth. This would better align the two secondary schools in Aurora to existing and future students. This is supported by community feedback.

The 2017 Capital Strategy list includes a project for the replacement of Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School. Staff will apply to the Ministry of Education for funding at the next capital priorities submission opportunity. If approved, the potential opening of a relocated secondary school would not occur for a number of years. Staff are also recommending retaining the Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School Building and undertaking a boundary review process to address the southwestern portion of the school boundary prior to the opening of the relocated school.”

Speaking to The Auroran last week, Dawn Adams, Senior Manager of School and System Operations for the YRDSB said they took into consideration all the feedback they had received from advocates for a secondary school in the northeast.

Doing a further study, she said, ensured that all voices were heard in the process.

“At those meetings we did hear a lot of people talk about the same things we had already heard,” she said. “We heard from other people who wanted us to do other things than relocate to help us with Williams' declining enrollment. In addition, we expanded the strategy to include North Richmond Hill, Oak Ridges and Aurora as there is a ripple effect. When we look at Aurora alone it tells one story but when we looked at accommodation needs across northern Richmond Hill, Oak Ridges and Aurora, we could devise a large strategy.”

Added Accommodation Planner Trina Sprayson: “We were very aware that we had a community that was disenfranchised and not being well serviced by public education.”

The planners said funding submissions to the Province are due in September and, although they are not sure when a funding announcement might occur, they said it could be as early as January.

Should the Province approve funding for a new Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School, it would take a minimum of four years to come to fruition, allowing time for designs and the full site plan process.