

Parents urge board to "rebuild trust" and reconsider new high school



By Brock Weir

This fall, Grade 8 student Tristan Gilchrist will begin high school at Dr. G.W. Williams, a decision he made, like so many of his friends, after shopping around.

But, many of his classmates will be going elsewhere, namely St. Maximilian Kolbe Secondary School.

It is not simply that many of his classmates are Catholic, and indeed some of them aren't; but the challenges in getting to Williams from Aurora's fastest growing quadrant is proving to be a challenge.

Last week, Tristan, along with his mother Amanda, made a plea to the York Region District School Board (YRDSB) to step up and address these challenges by reconsidering a new secondary school on Bayview Avenue at Borealis.

Amanda and Tristan were just two of the dozens of northeast residents who filled the YRDSB's Board Room on February 22 asking the Board to review enrollment numbers at Aurora's two existing public secondary schools and open the resulting report to public consultation.

Although the YRDSB has long since secured the land for a new secondary school, they contend the numbers just don't add up. Planners were on hand at last Tuesday's meeting to reiterate data presented earlier this year at Aurora Council, noting Provincial policy on potential new high schools states that students have to already be in place before dollars can flow for expanding to a new site.

As things stand, Dr. G.W. Williams has a capacity of 1,196 students with enrolment standing at just 677. Aurora High School is below capacity as well, and both need to be above capacity before planners will consider a new site, or closing down Dr. G.W. Williams and moving it to Bayview Avenue.

‘The business case is more about a spreadsheet and the numbers than it is about the other good points raised here this evening, although those are important as well,’ said Jane Ross, Senior Manager, Property & Planning, for the YRDSB. ‘It really does come down to how many children are going to be attending this school over the next decade and how many empty people places you have over the next decade. It's as simple as that.’

It wasn't, however, as simple as that for many of the parents in attendance last week and the ‘good points’ they raised attested to that.

Back in 2007, the YRDSB recommended a rebuild of Dr. G.W. Williams at the earmarked location but this decision sparked a vehement backlash from the existing community, as well as the Council of the day. Parent Sandra Manherz, a prominent area voice in favour of a new Bayview school, however, reminded Board members the northeast community was not yet in place to speak out. ‘What they failed to note is 22,000 people in the Bayview northeast area, the ones that it will attract the most, did not exist at the time to express their opinions,’ said Ms. Manherz. ‘Their homes had not yet been built. The trustees will state the community wanted to keep their old school and I would dispute that. The trustees knew [growth] was going to happen, their planning department had foreseen it, but the trustees decided not to act.’

60 per cent of the Bayview northeast has left the public school board ? a strong statement from your community that the York Region District School Board is not servicing Bayview northeast correctly and can't keep those students in the public school board. She rejected the Board's plan to introduce an international baccalaureate (IB) program at Williams as a way to boost numbers. That, she said, will take another seven years to make Williams operate at full capacity on top of the decade local parents have already waited for a new school.

The next solution [offered by the Board] is to have our group advocate on your behalf, convince all the parents to send their kids to Williams and get its enrolment up, she concluded. Relationships are built on trust. You're asking the Town of Aurora to trust you after you have ignored us for the last 10 years and made our needs, and more importantly, the needs of our children, your lowest priority. Why should we advocate that you will take care of us now?

As parents took to the podium last week, they agreed that the wellbeing of northeast Aurora students, as well as the teens from other neighbourhoods who make the trek to Williams, was at stake.

Funding for schools is often contingent on enrolment and with dwindling numbers at Williams, programming such as special education and ESL, as well as library and extra-curricular programs will take a hit.

This is effecting the quality of education being offered to our students regardless of where they live in Aurora, said Kelly Steedman, adding while the YRDSB has said the IB program will bolster student numbers, it will have very little impact on the average student outside that specialized program. We are individually and collectively responsible for creating the best possible school community to support the achievement and wellbeing of all individuals. We are responsible for the delivery of effective and sustainable educational programs and stewardship of Board resources. The IB program is a wonderful opportunity that a select group of students will be able to participate in. It is not, however, the solution to support the wellbeing of all individuals. We need a school that will do this.

This was a view shared by student trustee Claire Zhou, who attends Bayview Secondary School in Richmond Hill.

Bayview Secondary School, Claire noted, has an IB program, and she questioned how an IB program would help address the core issues identified by Aurora parents.

There has been a lot of talk about the numbers and enrolment for the schools and I was wondering how socially that would work because for many IB and gifted programs there is sometimes a tendency for segregation, she said. I was wondering would resources be mainly allocated to the new programs and how would the people not enrolled in these programs be supported?

Board staff at last week's meeting did not have handy the answers Claire wanted.

So, why has Tristan decided to go to Williams this fall over St. Max? After all, he says, there are many challenges and barriers that come with his decision, living 5km away from the school. The first is minimal public transportation with just two special York Region Transit buses serving Williams which run just two minutes apart in the morning, leaving northeast students, many of whom live a 20 minute walk from the nearest bus stop, a very narrow window.

Walking time to the bus stop and a long ride on the bus could take 50 minutes of travel time, not to mention the over-an-hour it might take to walk to school.

I was really hoping to be involved in after school activities throughout my public school career but the public transit schedule will make it very difficult or me to do this, he said, adding transit costs would cost families approximately \$150 per month per student to get to school. I will likely have to have my parents pick me up after hours if I would like to participate in extra curriculars. This puts a large burden on my parents to always have to be available to drive me in early or pick me up later because I have other siblings who also need to be picked up and taken to after school activities that are equally important. Walking the whole way to school is just not an option because from our house it will be an hour to an hour and a half walk. I don't see how forcing students to endure these many challenges is supporting student achievement and wellbeing.

Help us reach our full potential, he asked trustees. Invest in students in east Aurora and build a new local high school [which] should have been built in 2007.

Trustees did not shut the door on their pleas.

Your presentation does not end in this room, said Trustee Billy Pang (Markham), Chair of the Board's Property Management Committee. I am not making a promise for a miracle, but I promise I will revisit all your requests to staff and your local trustee to see how we can support you.