

Back-to-school leaves Aurora High School neighbours worried



By Brock Weir

Back to school season is upon us, a time of year typically seen as one of relief for parents as they get their kids back out of the house.

On Timpson Drive, however, there is a different feeling in the air: dread.

Early one Saturday morning, residents in the area were shaken awake by vibrating floors and rattling walls, only to find construction workers just metres from their back fences erecting a bank of portable classrooms at the adjacent Aurora High School.

'They were pretty much snuck in,' says Jodi Gibson, who was in the midst of planning a 90th birthday party for his great aunt later that day, a celebration which had to be quickly shifted to Whitby after the noise and dust coming through his back yard made a party impossible. 'Our house were shaking and all of the neighbours were wondering, 'What the hell is going on?' They came in the morning, bulldozed everything, and got them in as quickly as possible.'

The neighbourhood shakeup has resulted in a battle between the York Region District School Board and those living on the east side of Timpson who contend the portables were 'snuck in' to the local high school without any neighbourhood notification, much less consultation.

The resulting bank of six portables has left them frustrated with communications, worried about their property values, and fears for their property's safety after spotting vandalism and rooftop partying taking place less than a month from their installation.

'Our neighbours were away when [the portables] were being put in and they came back to this,' says Mr. Gibson. 'They said, 'What if we just put our house up for sale? What if we were looking to move?' I took a list of questions and concerns and put them in a big letter to the School Board. They basically sent me fluff back saying they followed the rules and regulations, but didn't answer any of our questions.'

Jennifer Hazelton, who lives two doors down from Mr. Gibson, was one of the few people in the area who knew portables were coming 'although she didn't know exactly where they would be placed on the property ' but only because her daughter happens to go to Aurora High School.

'They are an eyesore,' says Ms. Hazelton, stating her biggest concern is safety. 'I realise the portables are within their boundaries, but I don't think it was courteous of them not to let anyone know since they started at 7 a.m. on a Saturday. Why did they have to do it so early? They could have waited to let everyone know and they could have done it on a Monday morning when most of us are getting up and going into work anyway. On a Saturday morning in the summer? It sounded like they snuck everything in. We get notices that they are cleaning out sewers, but to put monstrosities in our back yards? Nothing.'

Notice is the primary bone of contention between the neighbours and the Board.

They do not disagree with the Board having the right to put school portables on their property, but they question the need when Aurora High School and Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School have both been reported to be operating significantly under capacity, as well as the lack of 'consideration' for the local impacts these portables might have.

'For me, they [just] are a bit of an eyesore because they are not directly behind my house, but for my other neighbours, they are pissed,' says Mr. Gibson, who has been communicating with the Board on behalf of his community. 'Property values are going to go down, we're already having an issue already with kids running on top of them at 2 a.m. drinking and partying, and our neighbours want to know, because of security, are they going to put up lights? There are a lot of questions that have not been answered. 'I asked [the Board], 'Don't you find you have an obligation to the neighbours and the taxpayers? You could have told us.' They keep coming back saying, 'We followed regulations,' and my argument was basically, 'The money I am spending on taxes that are going to the schools are coming back to screw me over in property values?' They just don't seem to care and they are just going to bully their way through it.'

The York Region District School Board contends that they were not required to submit the location of the portables to the surrounding community under the requirements of the Planning Act as the school existed prior to 2007.

Further, they say, the school administration, as well as the Board's Plant Department determined the location on the west side of the Aurora High School Property to be the best location due to proximity to the school ' necessary for power connections ' and less-than-ideal terrain on other portions on the site.

'The required rear yard set-back is 4.5m to the property line and the closest portable is located much farther at approx.12.5m to property line,' say Christina Choo-Hum of the YRDSB. 'The portables are brand new and were delivered to the school on June 21 and 22. Installation and connections to building systems will continue throughout the summer.'