

Planning for Bayview high school does not consider future growth: Board

By Brock Weir

A new high school on Bayview Avenue to address the needs of Aurora's fastest-growing community might not be on the York Region District School Board's horizon for the next 10 years, parents and Council learned last week.

Council hosted a workshop meeting last Wednesday bringing together officials from the School Board (YRDSB) and concerned parents who have been leading a grassroots campaign to spur development on Board-owned lands on Bayview at Borealis Avenue.

Wednesday's meeting was attended by Aurora-King's public school trustee Peter Adams Luchowski, as well as Dawn Adams, Senior Manager of School and System Operations for the YRDSB.

Their criteria on what it would take the Board to consider making a business case for a new school, however, left many parents and indeed Council members puzzled.

"The Board submits applications to the Ministry of Education on a case by case basis," said Ms. Adams, noting today is a very different climate from 2007 when the Ministry and Board had funding ready to replace Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School with a new high school in Aurora's northeast, a proposal which promoted a furious backlash from the community and opposition from the Council of the day.

"We need to prepare a business case, we need to focus on the long-term needs of pupil accommodation, and we need to include data of all surrounding schools [including] their enrollment projections, their utilization, and existing use and future portables."

And therein lies the problem. Successful business cases, Ms. Adams said, involve existing schools operating at 149 per cent capacity. In Aurora's case, the combined student body of both Williams and Aurora High School would only amount to an 87 per cent utilization rate.

"We have met with parents who reside in the Bayview Northeast area to share this same information," Ms. Adams told Council, noting the Board's plan to implement an International Baccalaureate (IB) program into Williams could help improve the school's student numbers.

Despite population statistics forecasting a boom in northeast Aurora due to current and future planned development, Ms. Adams says the Ministry of Education wants potential students for any new high school already in place before formal plans.

"They look to make sure that the schools they are building are for students in existence," she said.

As this process typically takes five years from start to finish, Councillors questioned the logic of this.

"From what you said, the students have to be in place, but the school will have been built once those students are gone," said Councillor Wendy Gaertner. "If there are enough students in place to build the school, maybe there won't be enough students following them to populate the school. To me, it just doesn't make any sense."

Councillor Gaertner was not alone.

Referencing the 2007 opposition to moving Williams to Bayview Avenue and the YRDSB subsequently backing down from their plans, Councillor John Abel said the community is "suffering" from that reversal.

"We are trying to correct that," he said. "When I look at the Ministry of Education, they talk about wellbeing and wellbeing is about the students, not about what the Board has done and how they are going to fix that. We're talking about our community and our

children. I think it is important. Common sense just tells you [to have one school] on one side and one on the other [so everyone] can walk. You're telling us why that can't be done and I think it is the wrong approach.?

A similar view was offered by Councillor Harold Kim, who read off the Board's list of their own responsibilities, which leads with the promotion of student achievement and wellbeing, and closes with 'practicing responsible stewardship of Board resources.?'

'Although it might not be in the order of importance, it doesn't surprise me that if you were a Board of Education, the education and wellbeing of students is critical, but what I heard tonight so far is the business case seems to reign supreme. The value of an education and the value of several thousand high school students going into the workforce, preparing for university and other careers [can] produce 1,000 times more than what we put in. I would submit the business case, as important as it is, might be overrated in this case.

'It's a flawed system where you're just waiting for people to come. If you're a shop owner, it is hard to entice people to buy something when your shelves are only two items full. I would submit that if you build a school on Bayview and it is full, and I have no doubt it will be, it would increase the business case and increase the educational standards.?'

This having to wait for the students to be in place before talks begin was a common bone of contention throughout the evening. Councillor Michael Thompson, for instance, said he wanted firm numbers on when the threshold of Aurora's existing public high schools reaching capacity might be met.

Ms. Adams said with the introduction of Williams' IB program, they hope the school will reach 100 per cent capacity within seven years, but parents need to do their part too. Many east Aurora students are now choosing St. Max over Williams and this is having an impact on the numbers.

'We need students to go to our schools,' she said. 'We are losing a lot of kids from our feeder schools [to] the Catholic board or other schools. If those trends do not change and IB is successful, I see both schools being full and viable, but I do not see a need yet. We have to see a change.

People ask what they can do to have a school and it is attend a public school. We need to have the students.

'No one is disputing we would like a school on Bayview. No one disputes back in 2007 that planners and the Board suggested that the population was shifting to the northeast area. It was a highly emotional time for the Councillors, the Mayor, and we were lobbied, we were lobbied by the community. You can't go back and change that decision. It is what it is. We can't, as a Board, raise money to raise a new school.?'