

Push for new high school could have ripple effects, politicians caution

By Brock Weir

A new public high school in northeast Aurora could have ripple effects in other areas of Town, including a consideration on whether or not Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School should be shuttered, cautioned local lawmakers.

Councillors and Aurora-King School Board Trustee Peter Adams-Luchowski said a full picture needed to be considered in response to local parents eagerly campaigning for a new secondary school in the highly populated community.

"I don't know how or where the money would come from to build another school without Williams being sold," said Mr. Luchowski. "In 2007, there was Provincial money to close Williams and build another school, but it is off the table."

The community's concerted effort in 2007 to keep Dr. G.W. Williams open in the last decade was touched upon last week when Councillors responded to the concerns of parents calling for Council to "be their voice" in getting the York Region District School Board to the table and facilitate talks for a new high school in Bayview and Wellington's northeast quadrant.

The parents, in turn were responding to a notice of motion from Councillor John Abel to bring together Council, the Board, and the Province to get moving on the land which is already earmarked for such a purpose.

"Now is the opportunity to bring this to light before a decision is made [on the future of the land] which could affect not only this generation but generations to come," said Councillor Abel, speaking in favour of his motion. "A school in the east and a school in the west just makes sense. We have to let the School Board know we have a concern in our community and that Council is aware of it and wants that concern addressed as well."

During the discussion, Councillors made it clear they shared the concerns of residents but had two notes of caution: in the end, a new school is a matter between the Board and the Province; and a new school could have other impacts, namely the closure of Williams. Enrollment at Williams is on the decline, they said, with the majority of students now walking their halls coming from the east side of Town.

"The next body that needs to get 300 emails is the York Region District School Board," said Councillor Jeff Thom. "If we can turn the energy from this evening and this past week to contact the School Board and get as much awareness out there as possible, that would be the next step."

"I support the residents in their call for a school on the east side of Town on Bayview. I strongly believe that Williams is an important part of our community as well and should be protected, especially when we note that a lot of intensification that we're planning in Aurora is going to be coming up along Yonge Street where Williams is in closer proximity. I think it is imperative we keep Williams as well."

But, will that be an option?

Councillor Michael Thompson said there is a "perceived need" for a school in the northeast when the kids growing up in this area are older, but it is important to "never deal with anything in isolation."

"We deal with a lot of different issues and there is always a ripple effect," he said, noting that enrollment at Williams is down to just shy of 700 from the approximately 1,100 students there when residents fought to keep it open. "While the motion just speaks to a high school in the Bayview area, it does have an impact on G.W. Williams."

"If that school were to be closed, the same concerns that are being expressed by these residents about the sale of that land would be the same concerns being expressed by those residents in that area for the sale of G.W. Williams. Nothing is done in isolation, but I think it would be good to address some of the questions the residents have and we have of inviting the trustee to come in and talk to him."

Councillors ultimately voted to defer a decision on the motion until more information and the Trustee could come to Council to shed light on the situation.

"Aurora High has about 1,100 students for a projected population base of 1,050 whereas Williams has 661 for a capacity of 1,075," said Mayor Geoff Dawe. "Overall the high school system in Aurora is undersubscribed. I am very much looking forward to inviting the trustee to come to us so that we can get a much better feel on how those numbers look now and in the future."

A deferral, however, did not sit well with Councillor Abel who said it wasn't "fair" for northeast residents to have the "Williams demise" held over their heads. It is not their concern, he contended, but rather something the School Board has to deal with.

"We, as a community, need a buy-in for the wellbeing of everyone," said Councillor Abel, turning his attention to the families in the audience. "Deferral is often used in a Council to not address a situation so it will be completely up to the trustee to come forward as his leisure. What we're really doing is mothballing it at this time."

His comments raised the ire of fellow lawmakers, who said that was not what they were doing at all and, in response, a 30 day time restriction was placed on the deferral.