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NEWS

UPDATE: Close four schools, build new facility: DEC recommends to minister



Rebecca Howland | Bugle Observer

The Anglophone West District Education Council has voted to recommend the closure of Bath Community, Bristol Elementary, Florenceville Elementary, and Florenceville Middle in favour of a new school to minister Dominic Cardy.

In a public meeting streamed online Thursday night, the DEC voted in favour of four different motions to recommend the closure of the schools and combine them in a new K-8 school in a central location.

DEC co-chair Jane Buckley made the motion to close Bath in favour of a new school onto the floor.

Coun. Laura O'Brien wondered what would happen to the students of Bath Community, who are currently housed in Bath Elementary, while they wait for a new K-8 school to be built.

"It doesn't seem like a sustainable situation to me," she said.

Superintendent David McTimoney said the options would be to either keep all students where they are now, or keep Grades K-5 at Bath Elementary and move Grades 6-8 to Florenceville Middle.

A motion to recommend the resuming and completion of the renovations at the former Bath Middle was the first motion put on the floor by Andy Saunders, DEC councillor for the Carleton North area, but it was denied with a vote of five DEC members for and six against.

Saunders backed his motion by saying he has put the money and cost of the Bath renovations aside and what's most important is the staff and students.

"The students don't have a full [set of] program abilities, given the building they are in," he said. "If we bring the money back in, we have a number of priorities ... right now. If we move to finish this project, assuming we might choose a [new] school for the rest of the schools in the study, finishing the Bath school first takes some of the urgency off building a new school."

Coun. Heather Hogan, representative for the Hartland and Woodstock areas said she had trouble putting the money aside.

"My concern now is that we're looking at a \$9 to \$10 million project and what we still have ... is an older building," she said. "I definitely understand that parents and staff are committed to this school, but when I look at the whole area, I look at Bristol, which is not wheelchair accessible, Florenceville Middle is a very old facility, and Florenceville Elementary is bursting at the seams. Those three schools require almost \$5 million in capital improvement projects. If we have a \$9 or \$10 million project and we still add \$5 million worth, are we really going to have \$15 million put in to bring those schools up to where they should be and is that actually going to happen? That's the part that concerns me."

Coun. Wallace Carr agreed with Saunders.

"We keep hearing \$9 and \$10 million [for Bath], but the actual figures were \$3.3 [million] completed, \$4.5 to complete. The \$1.0 million for parking and demolition has nothing to do with this project at all. That money's going to be spent regardless... The asbestos problem, I can tell you from working in the construction industry for 37 years, the asbestos problem is not going away. You've got to deal with that cost regardless. You just don't go in and tear a building down with asbestos in it," Carr said. "When I look at the community, they've got a great early learning centre as part of their school. They're crammed into a building where they just don't have the facilities for it."

Carr noted midlife upgrades are routinely done on old schools.

"Those buildings can last forever as long as the interior's upgraded," he said.

With the recommendation of closures and a new school being supported by the DEC, the council also voted to move a new K-8 school in Carleton North to number four on the major capital projects list, which will also be sent off to the province.

Both DEC members and the public were reminded the recommendations the council will be passing on to the province, including the order of the capital projects list, are recommendations requiring ministerial approval.

Douglass thanked everyone involved to make the sustainability study move along despite the pandemic.

"It's been a rough few months coming to and getting to this point and it's been a rough time for us knowing that we had a difficult decision ahead of us," Douglass said. "I know that members of the council [were] prepared as well as they could be. Most of our preparation was done before we were locked down."