

School District 68 (Nanaimo-Ladysmith) News Release

December 6, 2006

School District 68 needs to undertake a process of consolidation and renewal of school facilities in order to provide safe, upgraded school buildings for all students and to address the pressures that declining enrolment is putting on the district's operating budget.

That is the conclusion of a report presented to the Nanaimo-Ladysmith Board of Trustees on Wednesday evening by the school district's senior staff.

The report says that the Board needs to consider closing eight or more elementary schools and at least one secondary school in the next several years, as part of a process of consolidation and renewal of facilities.

Superintendent Michael Munro said that staff are proposing that the Board use the proceeds from the sale of the closed schools to upgrade the remaining schools.

"Our vision is that all students would be in safe, updated, well-resourced schools by 2020," Munro said. "To get to that point, the district needs to look at all schools district-wide and consider how our current 40 schools can be amalgamated into 31 or fewer schools."

He said that the process will affect every school and student in the district and will require that parents, students and staff think outside their traditional neighbourhood boundaries.

The superintendent said that staff will be recommending to the Board later this month that a consultation process start in January for the closure of two elementary schools – Dufferin Crescent and South Wellington – in the fall of 2007. Staff will also be recommending that once the closure consultation process is complete there be a "community conversation" in the spring about the next steps that need to be taken to consolidate and renew school buildings and to receive input on other creative ideas and solutions.

The Board of Trustees will make the final decisions about whether there will be a consultation process for the possible closure of the two schools, as well as whether there will be a community conversation in the spring.

Pete Sabo, manager of planning and facilities, said district statistics show that there has been an enrolment decline in the past nine years of about 2,000 students. Most of that has been at the elementary level, but the decline is expected to impact secondary schools over the next nine years.

.../more

The school district's enrolment reached a high of 17,439 in 1997. This year's enrolment is 15,451. By 2015, enrolment is expected to be about 14,500. The enrolment decline is expected to level off by 2015, but is not expected to return to the 1997 levels in the foreseeable future.

Sabo said that the district's elementary schools currently have almost 1,800 more spaces than students and the district expects to have about the same amount of excess capacity in 2015.

At the secondary level, it is projected there will be almost 800 more spaces than students by 2015. The currently planned additions to Dover Bay and Woodlands would raise that number to more than 1,200 excess spaces.

District Secretary-Treasurer David Green said the excess capacity has an impact on both the district's capital budget and operating budget.

The capital budget pays for the buildings to house students. Funding for construction projects has traditionally come from the Ministry of Education, but the government is now starting to require schools districts to help pay some of those costs. When there is excess capacity in a district, Green said, the Ministry does not normally fund any additions or renovations. This will create problems for District 68, because there is a need for additions in growth areas and also for upgrades to facilities.

The secretary-treasurer said that the district's operating budget is under pressure because it is supporting more school sites than are required by enrolment. "Our current district operating budget is not sustainable," Green said. It is estimated that the closure of an elementary school would save about \$250,000 a year and a secondary school from about \$400,000 to \$1.5 million a year.

Munro said, "Failure to come to terms with declining enrolment will have a direct negative impact on programs and services for students and on the long-term sustainability of school facilities."