

Board to look at possible school closures

By Tony Pearson

Hastings-Prince Edward District School Board has started a process which may lead to the eventual closure of three local elementary schools in Maynooth, Coe Hill, and Hermon.

This follows on a recent Ministry of Education Ontario-wide requirement for boards to pay close attention to the effective management of their capital assets. Translated, that means the province doesn't like to see large amounts of empty or underused space in its schools as a result of declining enrolment, or spending too much on repairs to old buildings.

Board statistics show Hermon with only 55 students in a space that can accommodate 142, for a utilization rate of 39 per cent. Coe Hill also has 55 students but has space for 118 (47 per cent), while Maynooth has 94 students in space for 144 (65 per cent).

The suggestion it is not yet a recommendation is that Maynooth students could go to the Bird's Creek school, while Coe Hill and Hermon students could go to York River. However, as both Bird's Creek (at 80 per cent utilization) and York River (at 94 per cent) are both close to full, moving in more students would likely require additions to be built on each school building.

An alternate proposal would be to move some or all of the elementary students into North Hastings High School, which has a lot of excess capacity (457 students in a space that can handle 903 a 51 per cent utilization rate). If all the 150 Grade 7 and 8 pupils in the area were moved to NHHS, that would improve the rate, although the board report still feels an addition to the building might be needed.

The other issue with NHHS is the condition of the building, the main part of which was built in 1947 making it one of the oldest schools in the board, and the one felt to need the most work. The board estimates that it might take nearly \$25 million to bring it up to speed. Looking at that amount, the suggestion was advanced that the existing school could be torn down and a new one built.

The process for closing a school is cumbersome, but not as time-consuming as it used to be; apparently it can now be done within two years. The procedures are outlined on the board's website, where there are four accommodation planning bulletins. As a first step, the board is inviting written public input to the Director's Office by June 10. The public is also invited to the board meeting in Belleville on June 20.

At that time, the board may move to start setting up an Accommodation Review Committee (ARC), with membership from staff, parents, senior students, and the community. An ARC will take five months taking in public feedback, and report back to the board. Bancroft has gone through the process before, when Bancroft Public School was closed (in the last five years, the board has closed 10 schools).

There are other aspects to the question of closure. As the board acknowledges, in addition to the schools themselves, there are also transportation issues how long a student should spend on a bus. Economic development ties in as well, with community schools being a selling point to young families. Certainly a lot of public input can be expected in the months ahead.

Local trustee and board vice-chair Lucille Kyle notes that it is very early days, and the draft document hasn't yet been discussed at board level. She did report that the board had wanted to get an overview of the situation, and had done some research and investigation into alternate models, like 7-12 and K-12. Right now, said Kyle, this is an opportunity to see where we're at. In addition, it's a chance for parents and the community to get their thoughts into the board. People who are concerned definitely should let the board know their views.