

Board visits, talks North Hastings school reviews

By Sarah Sobanski

'We have not had any discussion what-so-ever about North Hastings,' said Hastings Prince Edward District School Board chair Lucille Kyle to Hastings Highlands council and its audience members on the board's school accommodation reviews.

'I'm telling you that from my heart so you know that it's the truth. I grew up and raised children not always trusting the system. We have not had [that] conversation yet. When that happens you will and we will all be in it together.'

Kyle, the board's director of education Mandy Savery-Whiteway and its vice chair Dave Patterson attended council May 17 to address local concerns for Maynooth Public School. They were invited to attend council after many councillors suggested it was important to relay how valuable the school is to the community following the board's release of its **2016 Long-Term Capital and Accommodation Plan** where all schools in the board are detailed. The board's North Hastings School Group includes the Maynooth, Bird's Creek, Hermon and York River public schools, Coe Hill School and North Hastings High School.

The plan states, 'The board will consider from time to time, the need to consolidate, close or relocate a school(s) due to changes in curriculum, program demands, student enrolment, community demographics, facility needs and other factors. In some circumstances these considerations may result in the need to carry out an accommodation review for a school or group of schools.'

The board has begun conducting accommodation reviews, set to run over the next decade. It is currently reviewing its schools in Centre Hastings, Belleville and Prince Edward. It will complete and vote on these reviews June 19.

'It is a process prescribed by the Ministry of Education, and it involves approximately seven months where an initial recommendation is brought forward by senior administration to trustees,' Savery-Whiteway explained after the meeting. 'That is just to initiate the process. It is not about decision-making. It should never be about a decision that is being made.'

Savery-Whiteway said the process involves meeting with everyone involved with the school including the municipality, parents, students and employees.

'They would come together in order to work through what the proposal is and provide feedback. It's a critical part of the process,' she said.

Councillors asked questions and presented questions from the public to the trio.

'Since this is a rural issue, not just locally or provincially but nation-wide, who have you reached out to for information and support on positive solutions? Other than busing to larger, more central schools, have any more creative alternatives been explored by the school board as a measure for saving the schools that could be in jeopardy?' asked Councillor Nancy Matheson.

Savery-Whiteway said partnership and planning guidelines and procedures were implemented for the school board in 2015. It explores partnerships with municipalities where there is excess space.

'Student programming has to be at the heart of that consideration because you can keep a building open but if you can't operate programming to students that's problematic. It's a balance there-in,' she explained that exploring partnerships was a part of the accommodation plan.

Matheson related that the school could partner with the arts community, community gardens and more to benefit its students.

'Enhancing programming for students is a wonderful thing. We certainly would welcome that. The fundamental [is] delivering the curriculum, connected to the achievement of students. We have to be able to maintain that. If declining enrollment continues, and you do not have enough students, you're going to reduce in staff and programming for students will be problematic.'

Councillors also presented scenarios that could become everyday situations for children if the school was closed.

Councillor Tracy Hagar noted young children don't have the best control of their bladders. She said a student or child could have trouble on extended bus rides and this could lead to an increase in accidents, which could lead to bullying.

Mayor Vivian Bloom said she had had a conversation with a member of parliament who told her there 'was a commitment that no children would be on the bus longer than an hour.'

'We're pretty close to that hour already in areas here in the North. He assured me that there would be no school closures that would put children on the bus an hour and a half each way. How did that fit in with your accommodation process?' she asked. 'There's no way a four-year-old can learn and be on a bus for three hours a day and still learn socially.'

Savery-Whiteway said that there was no provincial mandate related to the length of time on busses. She did note bus time averages were tracked for students across the board and that considering transportation was a part of the accommodation process.

'We would like to have the most efficient ride times possible because we do want students to be able to get to their learning and we do consider that they need to not spend all day on the bus,' said Savery-Whiteway after the meeting. 'We know that but the reality of the geography in our entire board is that we do have some ride times to look at.'

?I would like some of the parent councils do a bit of a poll on what they see as fair just to see what they think,? said Kyle.
When *Bancroft This Week* asked when the North Hastings process would begin Kyle stated no discussion had happened. If further reviews were undertaken, their process wouldn't begin until next year.

?Once it is activated then the process starts. So until that meeting happens, there is no discussion around it,? said Kyle.

?If there is a new one going forward that would be discussed next year,? said Savery-Whiteway.