

## Wants say in closings

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Renfrew County's finance and administration committee would like to see a freeze on all future school closings in order to give all parties, especially municipalities, a greater say in the process.

Deep River Mayor Ann Aikens said it is important the school accommodation process has their direct involvement from the beginning, because the Renfrew County District School Board and its accommodation review committees need to listen and heed local municipalities before making decisions which lead to the closure of schools.

"The board has to be made to remember that schools are the hub of rural communities, and what happens to them has implications beyond just the parents and the students who attend them," she said.

Greater Madawaska Valley Reeve Peter Emon agreed, saying they fought a losing battle to keep Calabogie Public School alive as it was slowly killed by board policies.

"We had a great school, then the

board started taking away students a grade at a time and moving them to other schools to top up gaps in enrolments there," he said. "Then they tell us the school's numbers are not sustainable to keep it open."

The school was closed this year. Reeve Emon said the township and its residents told the board repeatedly their objections to this, and what would happen, but feel they weren't heeded. If their input had been respected, he feels the school wouldn't have been closed.

Admaston/Bromley Mayor Raye-Anne Briscoe said the same thing happened to Admaston Public School, when students in Grade 7 and 8 were transferred to Renfrew Collegiate Institute to bolster its numbers.

"Now we're on the block," she said, as enrolment is beginning to drop at the school as a result. "This just keeps on going."

Mayor Briscoe said this shows why municipalities need to have an active role in these decisions, as they have a better view of how changes such as school closures will impact their communities.

The finance and administration committee was commenting on its support for a resolution drafted by the newly formed Community Schools Alliance out of London, Ontario, which calls on the Minister of Education to impose a "smart moratorium" on all and any planned school closings which are disputed by municipalities.

Currently, there are 100 schools in Ontario undergoing accommodation reviews and 146 either closing or being recommended to be closed.

Doug Reycraft, former head of AMO and now alliance chairman, stated in a July 21, 2009 letter circulated to Ontario municipalities, that schools are an important part of their communities and should be treated as such.

"We would not allow our municipal water systems to be taken away without strong public input into the decision making process," he said. "Likewise, we believe municipalities, parents and students should have a strong voice at the table where school accommodation decisions are made."

The goal of a smart moratorium, Mr. Reycraft explained, is to provide time for the Education Ministry, school boards and municipalities to work together to develop policies addressing key issues.

These would include planning for declining enrolments, a mutually agreed-upon accommodation review committee process, a review of funding to rural and small community schools and establishing a working relationship between municipalities and school boards which provides transparency and accountability.

The resolution, along with the finance and administration committee's recommendation to support it, will be passed on to county council for consideration.

Stephen Uhler is a Daily Observer reporter.

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