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## Small-town mayors seek moratorium on school closures

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GUELPH — Guelph-Eramosa Mayor Chris White is among a group of small town mayors calling for a “smart moratorium” on closing rural schools.

The Community Schools Alliance met with Education Minister Kathleen Wynne last week in Ottawa, during the annual meeting of the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, to discuss the need for the moratorium.

“The impact in a rural area is much greater than in an urban area,” White said of school closures, adding that in rural communities the school is the hub of the community where people gather for dances and elections.

Nearly a decade ago when a school shut down in Marden, he said, it “took away the heart of the community” and made it difficult for people to find a place to rally. In larger urban centres, there are many more options for meeting places, such as community centres, White said.

Mayors from Middlesex County, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Elgin County, Hastings Highlands, Cobalt, Greenstone, Simcoe County, Burlington and Guelph-Eramosa want the province to change how rural and small urban schools are assessed for closing. If a school slated for closure brings public outcry, closure of that school should be deferred while the funding formula is re-examined, White said.

According to the Community Schools Alliance, valuable public infrastructure was lost when 16 Ontario schools closed in 2008 and about 146 schools are closing or recommended to close in 2009.

Just because there is declining enrolment, consolidating two schools doesn't necessarily make children's lives better, White said.

“When you close a school, kids scatter,” he said. “We need to have a philosophy that says rural schools are more than a school,” White said.

Although locally there isn't a school being threatened with closure, White said it could happen anytime.

In 2007, several Eden Mills residents found themselves fighting to keep their kids at Rockwood Centennial Public School, instead of having them bused into Guelph or Fergus. The Rockwood school was becoming overcrowded.

Eventually, the Upper Grand District School Board decided to bus the children to Eramosa Public School in Rockwood.

White said Minister Wynne didn't agree to a moratorium last week, but instead spoke about a draft policy that would see school boards and community partners work together to share facilities. However, White said the Community Schools Alliance intend to continue making a case for a moratorium.



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