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Group fights closures

Community Schools Alliance on agenda of special school board meeting tonight

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a new group formed to stop rural school closures and possibly reverse decisions made on others that have been disputed -- will be a topic of discussion tonight for public school board trustees.

There are five local accommodation review committees (ARCs) that have completed, or are progressing through, the lengthy process.

Simcoe County Warden Tony Guergis, a member of the alliance's 10-person executive, called the term ARC "a polite way" of referring to school closures and mergers.

"What's missing is a relationship between municipalities, the school board and the public," Guergis said.

The alliance also says the process used by school boards to make decisions about student accommodation, particularly closures, is "flawed."

At the recent Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) meeting in Ottawa, Guergis said the alliance was "the buzz in the elevators and on the escalators."

The alliance's goal is to make municipalities partners with the school boards when it comes to decisions about where new schools are built and where they are closed. It also wants Education Minister Kathleen Wynne to impose a "smart moratorium" on all school closures disputed by municipalities.

The ministry, boards and municipalities could then develop policies to address issues such as planning for declining enrolment, a mutually agreed-upon ARC process, and a funding review for rural and small community schools.

The alliance also wants a better system to address school facility needs, including boards and municipalities working together on decisions regarding education infrastructure and more accountability on board decisions.

A special board meeting will be held tonight and issues raised by the alliance will be on the agenda.

"With the board of trustees, this will be our first actual discussion about this," said Diane Firman, chair of the Simcoe County District School Board. "This alliance is new to us, (but) our goal is to find the best strategy to help every kid and our municipalities, as well. I think we're on the right path."

Trustees approved a motion in June, accepting Guergis' offer to join forces to meet with Wynne to discuss funding levels for the local school board, which are among the lowest per capita in the province.

Guergis called the funding levels "ridiculous," particularly in a rapidly growing area such as Simcoe County, which covers an area the size of Prince Edward Island.

"This is a fast-growing region with lots of issues," he said. "But our taxes are subsidizing other jurisdictions. Are we getting bang for our buck?"

Firman said board funding levels are below average, but the figures aren't that far out of whack.

"Those numbers are certainly something our staff has been looking into," Firman said. "The difference is not huge, not gazillions of dollars."

Both Guergis and Firman say the public school board and local municipalities have a good working relationship, but the warden wants to see it strengthened.

"There are lots of places they're seeing school boards won't even talk to (municipalities), so we have a good rapport," he said.

Firman said she believes the public school board has a positive relationship with local towns and townships, and the two cities.

"We want to continue that," Firman said, adding the Simcoe County school board's relationship with local municipalities is "absolutely different" than some of the others in the province, which are decidedly strained.

There are about 100 schools in Ontario going through accommodation reviews, and another 146 that will close or have been recommended for closure.

Two high schools in Orillia -- Orillia District Collegiate and Vocational Institute and Park Street Collegiate Institute -- are facing closure, with a new facility to be built on the Park Street site, pending ministry funding and approval. The plan also includes improvements at Twin Lakes Secondary School.

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