

SCHOOL CLOSINGS

By PATRICK MALONEY - FEB 24/2010

The issue of school closings -- and the role civic governments can play in making such difficult decisions - will again be raised at London city hall Monday.

Directors with the local Catholic and public school boards will meet with politicians to discuss the importance of municipal involvement in the often-contentious school-review process, which has been met with reluctance by some politicians.

"As a school board, we're interested in doing this differently in terms of school closings," said Bill Tucker, the Thames Valley District school board's education director.

"It's very important for municipal leaders to be involved in those discussions. (We're asking them to) please step up to the plate."

The issue flared up recently when the Thames Valley board invited board of control to appoint a city representative to a so-called accommodation review committee reviewing the future of four east London schools.

That invitation was rebuffed by Coun. Bill Armstrong, in whose ward three of the four schools are located, who said he plans to set up his own community group to fight to keep schools open.

The school board has recommended closing Sir Winston Churchill and moving its pupils to three other schools.

That process -- having boards recommend closings before a review starts -- represents a flaw in the provincial system that must be fixed, says a school activist also addressing council's community and protective services committee Monday.

Doug Reycraft, representing a group called the Community Schools Alliance, will ask politicians to back his call for the province to freeze school closings until a system to replace review committees is developed. About 150 Ontario municipalities have backed the call, he said.

"It needs to be a process that involves municipalities in a much more meaningful way," Reycraft, mayor of Southwest Middlesex and a former MPP, said of the proposed moratorium on closings.

"(This) would give municipalities time to work with school boards and the (education) ministry in developing a system that better allows for input by municipal councils into the process."

Tucker, who doesn't share Reycraft's views on the moratorium, will also be joined Monday by his counterpart with the London District Catholic school board, Wilma de Rond.

Schools across Ontario are facing closure amid falling enrolment and an inability to continue operating empty spaces.