

Schools alliance lobbies minister

By DEBORA VAN BRENK

It was just one step in a lobbying marathon when rural-school advocates met this week with Education Minister Kathleen Wynne, says Doug Reycraft, chairperson of the Community Schools Alliance.

"We had a really good opportunity to express our issues and our concerns directly to her," said Reycraft, also mayor of Southwest Middlesex.

Lobbyists were trying to persuade Wynne to change the process by which rural and under-enrolled schools can be closed. They have called on her to impose a "smart moratorium" on such closings until municipalities can be included in school boards' decision-making.

That assurance didn't happen during a half-hour meeting in Ottawa at the conference of the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, Reycraft conceded.

But Wynne did talk about the ministry's new draft policy that urges facility partnerships among school boards and municipalities and that was an "encouraging" sign, Reycraft said.

"I think we knew when we started this (alliance) it wasn't going to be a 100-yard dash but a marathon."

The next step likely includes advocacy with talks with local MPPs, he said.

The alliance, formed a few months ago, has said too many schools are being closed because they are small and rural, and not enough consideration is being given to their importance as community centres.

The group held its first face-to-face meeting -- its supporters are scattered across the province -- Monday. Reycraft said it became evident the issues with school accommodation reviews extend beyond rural communities and into larger centres.

"Overall I'm encouraged by the response that we had," he said.

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