

Rural schools group gets to make case to minister

By DEBORA VAN BRENK

Rural school advocates will get the ear of Ontario's education minister next week in their fight to keep small schools open.

The Community Schools Alliance is calling for a timeout -- what proponents call a "smart moratorium" -- on closings until municipalities can be involved in school board review processes.

"There is a need to see schools as community buildings" and not just as educational facilities, said Doug Reycraft, chairperson of the alliance and mayor of Southwest Middlesex.

The alliance asked for a meeting with Education Minister Kathleen Wynne at next week's conference of the Association of Municipalities of Ontario in Ottawa and has been granted a half-hour with her on Tuesday.

The timing is a positive sign, said Reycraft, because other groups have been granted just 15 minutes.

"I think that indicates the importance that she attaches to the concerns that we're bringing to the table," he said yesterday.

He said the alliance, which began only weeks ago, has the support of many municipalities, some facing the loss of their only school. In Ontario, 146 schools are closing or are recommended to be closed.

Some buildings in rural areas are full or nearly so -- even as many urban schools that are half empty remain open -- but school boards say their small size makes it more difficult and expensive to offer the needed scope of education there.

The alliance was started in Middlesex County, but it's more than just a Southwestern Ontario issue: executive members of the alliance include Hastings County Warden Ron Emond, Simcoe Warden Tony Guergis, former AMO president Michael Power of Geraldton in northwestern Ontario and East Garafraxa Mayor Allen Taylor.

Taylor is chairperson of the Rural Ontario Municipal Association.

Reycraft said many other municipalities and groups are jumping on board, and he has received calls from trustees in Toronto who are also asking that the process for reviewing schools be changed.

In rural areas, a school serves as a community hub -- closing them affects everyone, even those who have no school-age children, Reycraft said.

In Grand Bend and Plattsville, for example, new libraries are attached to new schools. In Glencoe, a job-search centre is imbedded in the high school.

South-West Oxford Township council is negotiating to buy the elementary school that closed in Sweaburg this year and to designate its green space as a local park.

Reycraft said the alliance isn't looking for school boards to pick up the costs of community use but to sit down with municipal leaders to plan together what's best for the whole community during disputed accommodation reviews.

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