

Middlesex County

Development strategy to fight closing of rural schools

By: Gord Whitehead

Middlesex County Council on May 26 will consider a strategy for a province-wide campaign to fight the trend that is closing rural schools.

Council last week heard an appeal by Southwest Middlesex Mayor Doug Reycraft "to build a coalition across the province to change the policy that leads to closing good schools."

Reycraft told fellow county councillors, "Maybe we need to suggest that the government rethink some of the decisions taken in the late 1990s."

Council at its May 12 meeting adopted Reycraft's recommendation directing Chief Administrative Officer Bill Rayburn to lay the groundwork for a strategy and launch of an advocacy campaign. Rayburn said he will present a report on May 26.

The Southwest Middlesex Mayor - a former Liberal MPP - said it is not his intent to target the Thames Valley District School Board.

However, he and other county councillors cited examples of how Thames Valley administrators have dominated the accommodation review committee (ARC) process.

Reycraft cited as an example Metcalfe Central School which is filled to more than 90 per cent of its capacity. An ARC recommended that the school remain open but "as has been the case without exception, the recommendation of the administration came forward (to the trustees) as opposed to

that of the ARC. The word of administrators takes the day."

Reycraft added, "We need to tell the province how unacceptable we find this. Rural Ontario is under siege, with hospital emergency departments and small schools as examples."

Albert Bannister, deputy mayor of Middlesex Centre, told of his involvement on a Prince Andrew ARC which is not far from two overcrowded schools. A boundary adjustment would have solved three problems, said Bannister, who was told the ARC discussion had to be confined only to Prince Andrew's situation.

Lucan Biddulph Mayor Tom McLaughlin said he served on an ARC and he wasn't allowed to speak "about matters outside the school issue."

Strathroy-Caradoc Mayor Mel Veale said some school board trustees are frustrated as well.

"Death by 1,000 cuts is occurring every day in our municipalities and it's time to say it's enough," said Strathroy-Caradoc Deputy Mayor Joanne Vanderheyden.

In his written submission, Doug Reycraft said, "In my opinion, we must collectively as a county council take a strong leadership role on the issue of rural school closures. I do not have to explain to any one of you the importance of our schools to our communities and the only way that we can protect these vital facilities is to stand together with our colleagues across the province."