



Alliance seeks support for "smart moratorium"

A new group called the Community Schools Alliance is asking for support from municipalities in Ontario in their request for a moratorium on all school review decisions that are being contested by the community.

The alliance distributed a resolution to municipalities in Ontario last week for support in their request to the Minister of Education to impose a so-called smart moratorium.

The goal, according to a news release Thursday (July 23), "is to provide time for the ministry, school boards and municipalities to work together to develop policies addressing issues such as planning for declining enrolments, a mutually agreed upon accommodation review committee (ARC) process, a review of funding for rural and small community schools and establishing a working relationship between municipalities and school boards that provides transparency and accountability".

The alliance, founded by Southwest Middlesex Mayor Doug Reycraft, is taking a provincial approach.

"As municipal leaders, we believe our community schools are vital pieces of our public infrastructure," said Reycraft in a letter to municipalities. "Our schools are as important to our communities as the municipal infrastructure for water, transportation and recreation that we build and maintain. Clearly, we would not allow our municipal water systems to be taken away without strong public input into the decision making process. Likewise, we believe municipalities, parents and students should have a strong voice at the table where school accommodation decisions are made."

The alliance says according to People for Education, 100 schools in the province are currently undergoing accommodation reviews, affecting 150,000 students and 146 schools being closed or slated for closure. Sixteen Ontario schools closed in 2008.

Simcoe County Warden Tony Guergis is a founding member of the alliance and sits on the executive. He is also the mayor of Springwater Township, the home of Elmvale District High School, which is currently included in an accommodation review.

Guergis said funding is key.

He said the alliance formed because, while he was trying to address funding issues in Simcoe County, leaders in other areas were facing the same problems.

"It was one of those things where there were the same interests from several other mayors and collectively they came together and they definitely wanted Simcoe County to be part of that direction because we had already started that initiative to try to get the school board to work with us," said Guergis.

He said trustees have said they do want to work with the county.

"The County of Simcoe's perspective is to work with the school board to see why Simcoe County is under-funded," said Guergis.

The issue of funding is a top priority for lower tier municipalities as well.

"I would suggest that there has never been a discussion between the school board and politicians about their funding challenges [regarding education] and that's why I felt it was incumbent upon me as the regional head of council to invite the school board to a discussion where we could talk in that language."

Clearview Township Mayor Ken Ferguson is among councillors who have been advocating for Stayner Collegiate Institute.

He said he is not sure if he will support the resolution but agrees the funding model for small schools is flawed and sees that as the main issue and it will top his agenda when meeting with Minister of Education Kathleen Wynne at the AMO conference.

"A moratorium... I'm not sure if it's needed. I don't want to delay communities that need funding or schools. Let's get on with it. Education for our kids is a priority so we have to make a decision. We can't drag this out," said Ferguson.

He said he takes no issue with the accommodation review committee itself but agrees that taxpayers should have a say about education in their community.

Wasaga Beach Mayor Cal Patterson responded Monday morning by e-mail.

"As I see it this whole alliance effort is try to protect small schools from closing whether it is because of declining enrolment or the schools are old and need to be replaced," wrote Patterson. "I definitely agree there is a need to review the funding formula for rural and small community schools. As long as the funding formula stays the same the Simcoe County District School Board will have no choice but to support schools with student population of

approximately 1,000 students. The current funding does not provide enough money on a per pupil student basis to support the infrastructure needed for a smaller school. Smaller schools lose money and are subsidized by larger schools like Collingwood Collegiate or Bear Creek with student populations of 1,300 to 1,800 students."

"This is the opportunity for Wasaga Beach. We are a community of continued growth and in need for a new high school," he said.

An accommodation review for high schools in Collingwood, Stayner, Elmvale, Penetanguishene, Midland - Wasaga Beach was also included as a possible school site - is on hold during the summer months after Simcoe County District School Board trustees failed to come to a decision regarding fall closures in June. The review is said to be unique because a staff recommendation recommended a three-school solution for the area known as ARC B and the accommodation review committee made up of school and community members recommended the existing five schools remain open and be renovated to accommodate their current populations.

Clearview-Collingwood trustee Caroline Smith said new Ministry of Education Accommodation Review Guidelines released last month reflect some positive improvements to the process.

"School boards are to provide at least one alternative accommodation plan option to an ARC. This means that the ARC would be made aware from the start, what staff is proposing as a solution. The guidelines also state that if the options require capital investment, the board will advise the ARC on the availability of funding and where no funding exists, propose how students will be accommodated," said Smith.

"School boards will inform the ARC at the beginning of the process about partnership opportunities, or lack thereof, as identified as part of boards' long term planning process. In addition the ARC members are to present their report directly to the Board of Trustees."

Smith said the changes somewhat address the large number of appeals made with regard to school closures in Ontario over the past couple of years.

The Community Schools Alliance will have its first meeting in Ottawa on Aug. 17, during the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) conference. Members are hoping to meet with Education Minister Kathleen Wynne at that time.

Many municipal leaders will also be seeking an audience with the minister, including Wasaga Beach.