

Presentation to the Regina Public School Board

By Leslie Charlton

Tuesday, March 25, 2014

I am a Connaught parent – I currently have a daughter, son and nephew attending the school. As a parent, I share in the opinions that Pete Joyce has expressed. Today I am also presenting as a local business owner – since 2004 I have owned and operated a store located two blocks from the school. I am also a current board member of the Cathedral Village Business Association and have been since 2006.

The Cathedral area is a gem that must be protected – a true neighbourhood designed organically through decades to be a people-friendly, liveable place. Educating kids works best when they are in an environment where everyday living is not a struggle. Like today's Cathedral area, the Regina neighbourhood where I grew up in the 70s had a bank, a gas station, a library, a pharmacy, a post office, a grocery store, a local school within walking distance of student's homes... and today that same neighbourhood has none of those amenities. This kind of mixed-use neighbourhood is becoming endangered in our modern world. Each element of an old neighbourhood is in a symbiotic relationship with all other parts and when one is taken away, the rest are in peril of disappearing, too. I am concerned about the decision to possibly close the school as soon as June 2014. I worry about that promises may not come to fruition and that we may be without a neighbourhood school for the future. The recent closure of nearby Athabasca school, coupled with the lack of available space at other schools makes this situation entirely unprecedented. Connaught families are left in absolute crisis mode.

I am fearful for Connaught's future and believe that we, as a community, have not even begun to talk about all the possibilities for renewal. The Cathedral area is full of organizations who have consistently shown their concern for the wellbeing of neighbourhood children. **Real** consultation with the **entire** community would benefit this project and give us the best outcome for our kids for decades to come. This consultation should include the school board, educators, parent groups, the local business association, the community association, and city planners - not just developers and designers. Tonight I would like to present a few hypothetical options for a way to turn this difficult situation around.

Long term school facility location

I propose we locate the new school at a nearby, different location other than 13th Avenue and Elphinstone. In the ten years that I have operated a business on 13th Avenue, there has been a dramatic rise in traffic in the area. The Cathedral Village Business Association has a mandate to promote a liveable, walkable area here in Cathedral, so we met with former city councillor Fred Clipsham several years ago to discuss the growing traffic problem and he suggested it would only get worse. It has. Our board also met with City of Regina traffic police. They indicated that they are very aware of increased traffic, particularly on 13th Ave. They informed us that adding more stop lights or stop signs is not a good tactic – the safest option is to keep traffic flowing. With all the development in our city, unfortunately, our main drag is becoming more and more of a through-street from downtown to new residential areas. I believe that if we did not already have a school on the corner of 13th and Elphinstone, we would not consider building a new school here today. My own great grandparents lived in Cathedral through the Depression and five of my grandma's siblings attended Connaught School. As much as I love the beautiful old building and this generational connection that my family has to this place, I know for a fact that when walking to Connaught, my ancestors did not have to navigate heavy traffic the way my own children have had to. As a parent, my one trepidation about sending my kids to Connaught School has always been the high traffic corner on which it is situated. I suggest the school board examine, as one possible option, a new build in the green space on 15th Avenue. A cooperative plan would probably have to be hammered out with the City of Regina, but it is well worth investigating. The location is calm, beautiful, easily accessible, close to the Neil Balkwell Civic Arts Centre and could provide space for all the amenities a modern school needs.

Relocating current Connaught students to other, possibly questionable learning facilities.

The story that we have been given is that the Regina Public School Board has been planning for some time to build a new Connaught School and it was just a question of waiting for funding from the province. If that truly was the plan, where did the Regina Public School Board intend to house the Connaught student population during construction? Connaught's structural condition has been monitored for six years while Athabasca was sold off three years ago and enrollments in all other area schools have been climbing. Prove to us that keeping Connaught School was always the school board's true intention. Keep Connaught open while a new school is built. It can be done. If it takes three years for a new build, do the repairs to keep the building safe for that period. As I said before, this situation is unprecedented – other Regina schools have closed but there was always a plan in place of where those kids would go. We have an incredibly eclectic and diverse school population and relocating a dual-track school adds even more challenges to a possible temporary move. The options presented so far are dismal and may seriously compromise children's elementary school experience and education. The best possible outcome for current students - the plan that would disrupt their educations the least - is to do the work to let them stay at Connaught and make a seamless move when the new school is ready. This is also the best way to ensure that a new school gets past the drawing board stage and is actually built.

Heritage Building

Repair the building to house the current student population and programs until a new school is built. Sell the building to a buyer who will commit to keeping the heritage building intact. Legally binding clauses that control use of a property, also known as restrictive covenant, can be negotiated into real estate purchase agreements like this. Our beautiful old Connaught could house museums, heritage condos, artist studios, adult education, a daycare, shops, sport and recreation groups.....who knows what? Examples abound in our city of historic buildings redeveloped into wonderful, functional public spaces – just look at what is what is happening in the Warehouse District. Heritage status would provide sizeable property tax reductions for the new owners as well as avenues to pursue grants for renovation. Even if the Regina Board of Education has no interest in maintaining historic buildings, other organizations most definitely do.

As a Saskatchewan taxpayer, I want to stay happy, too.

To send the province a bill to bus 320 kids for three plus years is not fiscally responsible. Spend a fraction of that money to do immediate repairs to the existing Connaught School building and keep the kids there while a new build happens. As a business person who has done major renovations on a commercial building, I know that even when good intentions promise a short period for consultation and design, it rarely works out that way. Three years of bussing time is extremely hopeful, especially considering we have only been promised funds for the initial planning process. Connaught children could be on busses for years and we taxpayers would be left paying the tab. Doing the work to keep Connaught open until a new school is ready is best for our province's bottom line. It just makes sense.

There really are workable ways to:

Keep a heritage building intact.

Build a new school.

Educate kids in their own neighbourhood.

Preserve the synergy that is so important to the Cathedral area.

Save taxpayer dollars.

Please don't close the school just yet. Vote to give Connaught more time, and work with us to turn a difficult situation into a wonderful, lasting legacy.

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