

Kate Smart - Presentation to School Board

My name is Kate Smart and I am a resident of the Cathedral Area, a former Connaught student, and the parent of two children – a daughter named Bronwyn who will be ready to begin Kindergarten at Connaught in 2015, and a baby boy named Thomas who will be old enough for Prekindergarten in 2016, and Kindergarten in 2018.

A General Consensus

In our community and school community, there is a general consensus that we would like the Board to pursue repairs to keep Connaught School open until at least June 2015, or longer. This position is supported by the Cathedral Area Community Association, by Save our Connaught, by several members of the Cathedral Village Business Association, by every single person I've spoken to in my neighbourhood, and by the vast majority of the Connaught School community who attended the Feb. 25 meeting in the Connaught Gym (I only heard one dissenting voice there).

At the Connaught Gym meeting, people lined up to plead with the RBE representatives present at the Gym meeting to keep the school open at least one more year. I wish that the meeting had been videotaped so that all the Board members would have been able to hear their words.

Fundraising Campaign

As you may be aware, I, along with the significant support of other community members, have begun raising funds to support the general consensus in our community that the repairs specified by J.C. Kenyon Engineering (for the front steps and for a portion of the wall to be braced) be done to Connaught School so that it may remain open at least for the 2014-15 school year, or longer if possible, as we await a new school or a repaired school. To this end, a crowdsourcing fundraising campaign has been undertaken to show that our community is committed to ensuring a neighbourhood school in our community for next year. And the community is stepping up. Parents and other community members are putting their money where their mouths are. Since the campaign's launch on March 2nd, including online donations and cheques (which do not appear on our indiegogo account) the community has raised over \$7500 of our goal of \$10,000. The campaign will end on April 14, and I am confident that we will meet our fundraising goal.

We would like to offer the Board a cheque for the repairs from the community, if the Board is willing to sign an agreement stating that it will be used for repairs to keep the building open for at least the 2014-15 school year.

A request for Emergent Funding would also do the trick.

Children's Safety

I understand that the School Board and Administration's chief concern is the safety of students. However, it must be stated that there is nobody on earth who cares more about the safety of their children than their own parents. In asking for another year of continued operation, parents are not

playing 'fast and loose' with their children's lives, we are asking the Board to pursue the option that an engineer put on the table to keep the school open.

We trust the opinion of the engineer hired by the Board when he provided the option for the school to remain open until June 2015 with his recommended repairs. Kenyon Engineering's report states that, *"Unless major structural upgrades are implemented, the building will soon become unsafe to occupy. We recommend that the school be closed at the end of this school term, at the end of June 2014. It is possible to extend that date by up to one year with immediate repairs to some areas of the foundation walls and with enhanced structural monitoring. JC Kenyon Engineering is prepared to continue to monitor the condition of the school and to provide (sic) structural engineering services for continued operations until the end of June 2015..."*

If we trust the engineer's assessment that the school is unsafe if it continues to go without "major structural upgrades", then we must also trust his assessment that with \$20,000 worth of repairs, it would be considered safe for occupancy for another school year. One cannot believe and accept one portion of the engineer's opinion and report, and not another part. If there truly is that much skepticism about the report and the engineer's opinion, then it should warrant a second, or third, opinion, and preferably by an engineering firm that does not stand to potentially benefit from the old building being torn down, and a new building built. I point this out as it was raised at the Connaught Gym meeting that J C Kenyon Engineering was the firm that worked on the Arcola rebuild.

There is a strong rationale to pursue the repairs specified by the engineer - (1) it is the most economically responsible option (\$20,000 vs. significantly more to bus students); (2) it is the clear preference of parents and stakeholders; (3) it would make for a smoother transition for students and less time at a more marginal location, possibly out of the neighbourhood as they await a permanent school building; (4) it would have the Board's engineer's stamp of approval. I understand that a few individual parents might have doubts and want their child to attend a different school, however I am certain that they could be supported in that individual choice by Regina Public Schools.

CONSIDERING ALL THE OPTIONS

We have been told that the ship has sailed on a new build vs. a renovation. I would urge Board members not to shut the door on any viable, economical, safe options that would improve the experience and outcome for Connaught students. **Last March, when the Board voted to rebuild Connaught School, it was under very different circumstances than today.**

Many in our community consider the renovation vs. rebuild process to have been severely flawed. It so clearly did not respect the wishes of the community. It only considered two options – a new build or a very extensive, extravagant renovation – transforming a turn of the century building into an open concept school. I can accept a new school, and can even feel reasonably positive about it, particularly if it is on the existing site (as I understand is the current plan). However, I still believe that a modest renovation that focused on foundation repairs, mortar improvements, and upgrades to the plumbing and electrical systems would be less costly, and could be done more quickly than the 3-4 years estimated for a new build. I was reviewing J.C. Kenyon's May 12, 2012 engineering report, which

estimated \$6.25 million for structural renewal of the building, plus profit and overhead. And 10-11 months.

As I recall, one of the major stumbling blocks to pursuing a renovation was that children would have to be relocated for a period of time. One thing that was more appealing about a rebuild was that children could remain in the existing school as it was constructed. Connaught is now in a very different situation from that of every other new build that I am aware of. And it is not a good one. We are talking about relocating them for 3 – 4 years, with very little warning.

Plan A was to keep the kids in the existing building while a new school was built. With no building, Plan A is out the window. Perhaps it is time to go on to Plan B. And to go back to the drawing board. With the community playing a real role in finding a solution. We did not neglect the building, and our children certainly didn't neglect it. But we need to live with the outcome of that deferred maintenance.

Davin School Structural Repairs

When the news came out last month about Connaught's dire engineering report I thought to myself, "Oh no!" and then I thought, "Well, maybe the Board will reconsider their choice and fix the school that we have, like they did for Davin School in 2002 when it was facing demolition and the community united." I found a heritage walking tour for the area, and I quote from it, "The Regina Public School Division considered the possible demolition of Davin School in 2002, but was dissuaded by strong public support for its conservation."

Some time ago, a community member contacted a former member of the Davin SCC to ask about their experience. This is what he recounted:

“In the spring of 2000 the SCC was informed that an engineer had inspected Davin School and found the whole front part of the building was sagging into the ground, placing stress on the roof beams. Because of this, the building would not be safe for occupancy come September. The school board said it would be very costly to bring the building up to modern codes, and there were no funds available for foundational repairs. Because there were no clear answers about where the children would go, the parents decided to demand that the foundation be rebuilt before September no matter what. The students presented a petition to the board's annual general meeting in May that was signed by every student in the school. The parents went door to door with a petition that they presented to the mayor. Their request to the mayor was for the City, as the code enforcer, to consider the age of the building and to not strictly enforce the code as they would for modern construction. Bringing it up to code would have required too many changes, making renovation too expensive and difficult. The City sent some inspectors to the building, and then they met with the school board, and it was agreed to relax the code. In the end, the City inspectors just asked for some basics like emergency lighting and fire doors. This meant the cost would be about \$2 million to fix the foundation. At that time, there was no theory about the configuration of the classrooms not being acceptable for modern education, so the interior was allowed to remain as it was. A deal was made in which the province agreed to put up half the cost, and the school board the other half. Over the summer, work crews scooped the earth out from under the entire school, jacked up the front

part, and put new pilings under the whole school. They were able to complete the job before school started in the fall.”

There were roadblocks, but they were overcome – especially with no clear answers about where the children would go. This sounds familiar.

Cost of Repair

The walking tour document notes that Donovan Engineering conducted the foundation repairs. The firm has since been acquired by KGS Group Consulting Engineer. I have their phone number if you’d like it for a quote on structural repairs on Connaught: (306) 757-9681. If they (along with another firm less-invested than Kenyon Engineering) in the Connaught School outcome could specify repairs that would be needed for a modest, safety-first renovation, and the Board obtained quotes on the cost and a timeline, then many people would be satisfied that all options were being considered given the current state of crisis. If it was not feasible – fine. Question answered. I have heard that we will not find an answer that everyone will like – but I believe that would be an option that 99% of people would stand behind.

If somebody told me that my house was about to become unsafe, and that I would be required to move out for 3-4 years while a new house was built, the first thing I would do would be to seek another opinion. Or two. And I would find out how much it would cost to do the repairs with the least amount of time, expense, and disruption to my family’s life. **I would get quotes.** Has the RBE gotten a quote to do the “major structural upgrades” to Connaught? Not the extravagant renovation quote. But just a basic repair quote.

I have heard the suggestion that the cost of repair would be exorbitant given the new engineering report. However, to my knowledge the board has not gotten quotes on a basic, safety-focused repair of the building. Without that, it is difficult for the community to embrace 3-4 years of upheaval. Conversely, if it was genuinely considered and could not be done, I believe that people would be satisfied. To my knowledge, a modest renovation was not costed or considered, and that is where the problem lies – especially now that Connaught students are in the unfavourable situation of being without a “home”.

A final note on the topic of repair/renovation - I know that you are probably tired of hearing about Moose Jaw, but I have to include a small message of hope. This past September, my family and I attended a Heritage Regina bus tour of Moose Jaw’s restored heritage schools. One thing I was struck by was the year of relocation for students. Classes were bused together and stayed together during the renovation year. Plaques were made to commemorate this unique year during which the school was restored and repaired. I have a feeling that almost every parent at Connaught would be thrilled to have their children transported by bus for only one year while their school was repaired. Would the Board or Administration consider making contact with the Prairie South School Division to learn from their experiences? That’s a real question.

The Long Wait for a New Build

But back to the new build. We're all here for the children, so let's think about 3-4 yearsof waiting..... in the life of a child. Children grow up quickly....And there's a lot of construction happening in Regina right now, so there might be some construction delays. There will be 3 new Public-Catholic schools being built, a new stadium, and much more. But let's be optimistic and say there will be a new school for September 2017.....or September 2018. Let's hope that funding comes through. My baby boy will be Kindergarten age. He's lucky, he'll miss all this. My daughter won't though. And the little Kindergarteners of today will be entering Grade 4 or 5 by the time there is a new school. Today's Grade 3 class will be entering Grade 7 or 8 when their new school is ready. And the current Grade 5 students will be in high school when the new school is ready.

So the good news letter that, I understand, went home with students on Budget Day, isn't really such great news. For most students, it tells them that they will be without a school home in their neighbourhood for half their elementary careers, or for some, for the rest of their elementary years. It's better than no school in the neighbourhood, sure, but for any student currently at Connaught, it tells them that they'll have years in limbo. They are being asked to either give up going to school in their neighbourhood, having lunches at home, walking to school with friends, siblings or parents **OR** they are being asked to move somewhere in the neighbourhood that is not *as well-suited* to a school as the building they are currently in.

I have to note that a few things about the letter sent home made me happy - if they actually come to fruition. That the plan is to have a Public school, instead of a Public-Catholic school. That it will be a traditional build, as opposed to a P3. And most of all, I love that the plan is to build on the existing site. The existing site is at the heart of the neighbourhood (north & south, east & west), people have bought their houses to be walking distance to Connaught School, and it won't mean the loss of precious greenspace in Les Sherman Park. If Connaught was uprooted from its location in the neighbourhood I would not be able to walk my two young children to school, as they tire quickly on long walks. At its current site, it is walkable for most people in our neighbourhood. This is critical.

POTENTIAL PITFALLS OF CLOSING THE SCHOOL IN JUNE 2014

The Potential for Declining Enrollment

I am concerned about student enrollments at Connaught during the wait for a new build. Almost every parent who I have spoken to are scrambling to find a non-Connaught option for their children. Nobody is enthusiastic about the options the school administration has brought forward. As one parent stated at the Connaught meeting, "You expect me to put my 5 year old on a bus for an hour to get to Kindergarten at Wilfrid Walker for two hours? That's not going to happen." Any option that splits up the school community among different schools will put Connaught's continued existence in jeopardy.

It has been suggested that a new school would attract new students. However, I think we can all anticipate declining enrollments until the permanent building is open. Two classes of grade 8s will be graduating in June. Will there be the same number of new Kindergarten students to replace them? Or will their parents be looking at other options. I personally know a parent who has already transferred her two French Immersion students to another nearby school for next year, removing them from French Immersion in the process. That is a real sacrifice. She is a single parent who leaves for work before her children start school, and moved to the neighbourhood from the General Hospital area to stop having to put her children on a bus. If they miss the bus, she would have no way to get them to school. So they will be walking to school next year, but not at Connaught.

And unless I am mistaken, nearly a third of Connaught students reside in other neighbourhoods. They may well switch to a school closer to their home. So what happens if children and parents can't live with waiting 3-4 years for a real solution? Can this Board promise us that you will not do a program closure if enrollments drop while we wait for a permanent school? Can we get that in writing? And really get it in writing? We can't lose one (or both) tracks of our dual track school – siblings, cousins, friends are in different programs tracks.

(The continued existence of dual-track programming is critical because even if a child is not thriving in French Immersion, they can transfer into the English program fairly seamlessly, without the upheaval of switching schools and losing friends in the process. As a student at Connaught, several of my classmates over the years transferred out of French Immersion and were able to maintain friendships with their former French classmates, and thrive in the English program. As a parent who plans to enroll my children in the French program, the dual-track school offers the security of knowing that even if one of my children is having challenges in French, they will be able remain at the same school as their sibling without transferring schools or pulling their sibling from the French program to ensure that they attend the same school.)

Secure Funding not in Place

What if funding does not materialize? I understand that both Athabasca/Argyle and the North Central Shared Facility proceeded into the design process for a new build, but Athabasca received a program closure instead of a new school and Scott Collegiate is still standing. What if something changes with Connaught – like enrollment – and funding for the new build does not materialize? And our existing school has been demolished. I think everyone would be more comfortable moving out of the school if there were design plans along with secure funding for a new school. Why not maintain the current building until we are at that point? Currently, we only have planning money and the suggestion of funds in the future.

The Potential for Loss of staff

I'm concerned about Connaught's current staff leaving Connaught during the 3-4 years awaiting a new school. And about more seasoned, experienced staff and teachers with relationships with the students being replaced by less experienced staff and teachers.

The Potential for Loss of Parent and Community Volunteers

If the school is moved out of the neighbourhood, this is a very real possibility.

PARTNERING WITH THE COMMUNITY

Whatever happens, we need to partner meaningfully with the community. This has not happened up to this point. Last week I was reading the Saskatchewan's School Board Association's , "Handbook for School Board Members". In the section on major renovations and new builds, it stressed the importance of meaningful engagement with the school community: *"Get lots of input from students, staff, parents and community when designing the school building. After all, they are the ones who have to live with the building for the next 20 or more years. Students, staff and others can also provide a reality check for architects and ensure that design of the school is appropriate for the functions and activities that take place there."* I read that, and I hear "20 years". Yikes. Connaught has lasted 100 years.

We need to do the inexpensive engineer-specified repairs to keep the school open next year, so that the Ministry, RBE and the community can partner meaningfully so that children can at the very least have a smoother transition, less duration of upheaval, and a better solution that keeps the whole school together and in the community. If the remote possibility of turning sod earlier than June 2015 arises, staff and students could bid farewell to their building in December 2014, or at Easter 2015.

This community is committed, and would work tirelessly in conjunction with the Board and Ministry for the safety and well-being of Connaught's children and future children. We can be your best allies. We are problem-solvers, and are truly united with this Board in seeking the very best outcomes for our children. This is a message of hope. We need to think outside the confines of the current box.

THE BOARD VOTE

Also quoting from the Board Manual, "The director is responsible for implementing policies developed by the board. The board works through the director in order to get things done." To me, this sounds like the board develops plans and policies, and the director implements them. I am concerned about the unelected Director and administration advising the Board on how to vote. I am also concerned that the information provided to Board members is skewed toward an immediate closure. The survey conducted by RPS certainly is.

I am also concerned because at the Connaught Gym meeting the Director said that she would be recommending the Board close Connaught this June. The survey conducted by RPS only offered parents the choice of 5 relocations, and not the most obvious choice of keeping the school open for one more year. Why rule out that option before the Board has voted? Is the Board voting just a formality? Why was this option effectively ruled out before the Board voted tonight? Is this Board just meant to be a sober second thought? To seek genuine community input would not fail to include the option that the vast majority of parents seem to prefer. Nor would it exclude the SCC's favoured relocation option of moving the children to Victoria Campus, supplemented by portables. At least the survey would have

provided meaningful data – I believe that it would have shown that parents want to pursue the option of keeping the school open through to June 2015. The Board could then vote against it, but would at least be aware of the wishes of parents and the community.

I urge the Board members to consider every factor in as they vote. Facts have changed. Circumstances have changed. The engineer's report is a worst-case-scenario report. The best case scenario report is that the school would continue to operate safely next year, and perhaps longer. But for the moment let's just consider next year. The Community is solidly behind keeping the school open another year with repairs, as we await clarity as to where our children will go, and what they will return to. Please keep an open mind as you vote, as I'm sure you will.

Rebuilding Trust

I have heard it repeated that "trust is in short supply" between the Connaught community and the Regina Board of Education. There is a reason for that. It is because at each turn, the Board and Administration has gone against the wishes of the community, has not supported our valued trustee in her efforts, and has declined to seek and/or share any second opinions about our school. Regina Public Schools failed to maintain this historic, valued, functional building. And who suffers? The children whose school it is, and the families who now must scramble to reorganize their lives. This is the time to make things right, and to do the right thing for Connaught families – give them the year that the engineer said is possible.

Please choose to invest this minimal amount and get an engineer's stamp of approval to keep the school open through 2014-15, providing parents and children with the buffer of at least a year to rearrange their lives and adjust while an acceptable option for relocation of Connaught students is determined, in partnership with the Connaught community.