

Submission to the Vancouver School Board and Trustees

- to be presented at the February 11, 2008 meeting -

by Catalin Ristea

- My presentation will focus on:
 - the undeniable crisis of appropriate, basic, schooling needs or lack thereof in the UBC/UEL area
 - the urgency of the matter given its history of many years and the unacceptable conditions of a) inappropriate and overcrowded local facilities and b) intolerably high number of students that are denied access to a neighbourhood school
 - a plea to not delay the process any further, not push back the matter into UBC's or prov. gov't hands or request many more years of research, as this will bring a delay not acceptable to the UBC/UEL student population
 - the belief that the student population residing west of Dunbar is better served by the proposal put forward by the VSB, than by the status quo.
- While some have expressed disapproval of the EFR review process as one that brings “neighbours against neighbours”, I argue that in essence we cannot escape these premises, because the problem is indeed that there are many stakeholders with different needs and objectives, “competing” – so to say – for the same limited available resources (in my view, the rightful stakeholders should be the students and their educational needs, and not groups of parents, their emotions and political power)
- In the current context, the money for new schools and efficient use of public education dollars does not come as a contribution out of nowhere; I reason that, when some new school gets the funds to be built, there will always be some group or stakeholder that will have to directly, or indirectly, pay for this

- From the submissions and feedback from various parent/teacher/PAC groups in the west of Dunbar area, it is clear that everyone wants new schools at UBC, but some contend that this must not be done at the expense of Queen Elizabeth Annex. In my opinion, expressing support for rebuilding schools while at the same time saying “but do not close my small annex”, in the context of the current situation, is the same as saying don't do anything at all.
- The annex school is kept full by parents who are looking for specific programs or personal preference. While they get the freedom of choice, other students are deprived of their neighborhood schools.
- A broader issue at stake is whether maintaining any of the annex schools truly represents the best use of taxpayer dollars. The reality is that students and taxpayers throughout the district have been subsidizing those lucky enough to attend one of the annex schools for years.
- There are four schools closer to QEA than U. Hill Elementary is to the majority of its catchment area. Concerns about transportation or inconvenience pale in comparison to those faced by UBC and UEL residents on a daily basis. About one in three students in the U. Hill catchment area will be unable to attend their neighbourhood school due to overcrowding. This also affects students at Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth as these schools are pushed towards their capacities by out-of-catchment students. To demand that the VSB is expected to maintain a small elitist school for the benefit of fewer than 130 students at the expense of the 1500 students attending U. Hill, Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth is irresponsible.
- I personally don't believe that maintaining every school ever built forever is a responsible use of education dollars. Ultimately the needs of students of the present time must take precedence over everything else. We all would like to have our children educated in small and cozy schools like an annex, especially one that dedicates more than half of its school spaces to “choice” programs such as French Immersion, but the reality is that the current system (within the limited resources given by the Provincial Government) cannot afford these types of schools, as they

typically cost more to maintain and deliver education per student space, and are economically less attractive than larger schools.

- Considering the educational priorities that have to be met within a system with limited resources, closing costly annexes with “choice” programs is a necessary measure if the alternative is to not meet our students’ most basic educational needs. It is a question of the answering the greatest need, and the needs of the greatest number of students. In comparison, closing and selling the QE Annex affects a small number of students in a relatively small way (by 2009, only 22 regular program and 45 French Immersion children – currently in Kindergarten and Grade 1, as the other will be graduated by then – will be affected).
- Public education means equal access to tax money. It further means limited resources being evenly delivered to all, and special programs should only be provided after everybody gets their essential share of basic education.
- Sure, we would rather not see the Queen Elisabeth Annex closed, but we also must objectively recognize the limitations of the current context.
- We all need the reality check that the VSB's operating budget grant from the provincial government is based on student enrolment and not on the number of buildings, the amount of floor space or how expensive it is to maintain a particular building. In other words, money spent on maintaining excess space equal less money for education.
- Surely it is easier for individual parents to have a personal perspective, for in this context “my child”, “my school”, and “my neighbourhood” are the main, if not the only, weighing factors
- You, the VSBoard and Trustees, on the other hand, will have to make a decision based on much broader issues: the overall district educational needs, wisely spending our education dollars, other issues that need to be considered concomitantly such as seismic mitigation, and all within the framework of financial sustainability and the limited resources received from the provincial government
- It should be reasonable to expect that the VSB EFR analysis and review will never be 100% up to date nor accurate, because of various factors; this, however,

cannot be a valid enough reason to postpone the decision to bring the new schools at UBC any further. How much more research, how many more public meetings with how many angry parents, how many delays? This is not acceptable, we need our schools at UBC right now!

- I urge you to make a rational – and not emotional or political – decision based on facts, on education priorities, seismic mitigation issues, all within the context of financial sustainability and the limited resources framework that you have to work with.
- It is my view that the student population residing west of Dunbar is better served by the EFR proposal put forward by the VSB, than by the status quo, and in this context and the timeframe that we work with, it has my support.

Respectfully,

Catalin Ristea

UNA resident and parent of a grade 11 U-Hill student