

University Hill Secondary PAC Submission to the VSB, 11 February 2008

Birgit Eder and Jonathan Vogt (Co-Chairs)

1. Facts We Assume To Be Common Ground:

The EFR challenges everyone involved, you as our School Trustees included. The necessary steps to move forward are in part unpopular and painful. However, we are certain that just about every stakeholder involved – parent, teacher, student, trustee – would agree that:

- all of our children deserve the best education possible
- excellent education is expensive
- the VSB is underfunded and cannot in fact provide the best education possible to our children
- the provincial Government has both the moral obligation and the means to fund the VSB fully
- the provincial Government is unwilling to provide the VSB with the necessary funding
- in order to provide even less than optimal education for our children (you do not have the funds to provide the best education possible), the VSB has to find ways of generating greater resources to make ends meet.

2. The Crisis at University Hill Secondary School

We at UHill Secondary have been in crisis for many years. In 1994, the principal at the time, Tom Grant, first demanded a new building as our school was then overcrowded. For the past six years, there have been numerous meetings with administration, VSB Facilities and UBC in an effort to rectify an untenable situation: our students' basic human needs and educational needs are not being met at our facility on Acadia Road.

Our school is old. It was built for 325 students, yet we squeeze 560 into it. Over 100 students are being turned away to other high schools because UHill simply cannot accommodate them. We are the third generation of PAC members (and our daughters are both in gr. 12!) who have been working toward and who have been

promised a new building.

Let us paint a picture of what goes on at UHill Secondary for 560 students, their teachers, and staff every day:

- 3 science classes are currently being taught in a drafting room
- 7 more classes (including Biology 11 and 12) are being taught in a small ESL classroom with no laboratory facilities
- a regular class occupies the library because there is no other space available; this means that there is no access for other students to use the library during that block; the library itself is too small
- there is only one computer lab, yet it is fully booked for classes; therefore there is no computer lab for use by other classroom teachers and students
- there is only one small gym, yet 2 classes are scheduled every block; this means that students regularly spend gym outside on rainy days. However, in the sleet, snow or in high winds, students cannot be outside for safety reasons and thus either miss their PE class, make do in a small hallway, or do non-PE related activities in a spare portable, if available
- the fuses blow out frequently; although engineering is usually able to turn the electricity back on reasonably quickly, there have been occasions when students had to be sent home for the rest of the day
- the weight room is only big enough for 12 students; girls cannot use it because it is only accessible through the boys' changing room
- many courses are scheduled off timetable (i.e. 7:30 a.m.), including core courses such as Science 10, French 11 and Socials 11, in order to obtain classroom space which is otherwise completely booked
- there is no space whatsoever where students are able to interact
- there are absolutely no spaces for students to write make-up exams, have parent conferences or psych-ed testing. Often, students must write exams in the principal's office while she is working there because there simply is no real estate available at the school

- the physical sizes of the classrooms are much smaller than in other high schools: just fitting 30 desks into a classroom makes it virtually impossible to move around the room (and yes: we have classes larger than 30 students)
- internet capabilities are extremely poor
- there is absolutely no space for students to study in spare blocks; this problem will escalate as more and more students choose to take on-line courses as they are being encouraged to do
- there is no space for students to work collaboratively
- there is no teacher workspace, particularly for teachers who must give up their classrooms during their prep time to other teachers because of the shortage of classroom space
- there is no cafeteria
- there is no eating area anywhere. Students eat in the narrow crowded hallways on the floor. Eating on the floor (the preferred option for students chiefly because there is no other) is particularly unhygienic when the weather brings in mud, water, slush and salt on students' boots; those in senior science courses eat in the biology and chemistry rooms where they also work and experiment
- we have 9 portables; even as portables go, they are old and function poorly; access to them is difficult, and they make the entire school feel disjointed; students smell mold in them
- the heating is temperamental throughout the school. Moreover, the temperature in the portables is almost impossible to adjust; some portables are chronically overheated while others are so cold that students learn in them with their coats on
- electricity is generally temperamental and outdated. The PAC has purchased sound and lighting systems for our theatre program, yet the students cannot use the equipment because the electrical system cannot handle it
- there are not enough washrooms for either staff or students (i.e. there are 7 stalls for roughly 280 girls); most students use the washrooms only during class time because they prefer not to spend their entire lunch break waiting in line

- there is no storage area of any kind anywhere
- the medical room also serves as the PA room, the office photocopy room and the office workroom; when outside agencies attend at the school (drug and alcohol counselors etc.) they either meet there, or they conduct their business in the hallways
- there is no music room or space for the theatre department. The two share a small auditorium. Especially during Theatre Company productions, the students must take down their set, equipment and the risers daily (and then rebuild the next afternoon) to accommodate choir and band classes

It is a testament to our teachers, staff and students that they have been able to persevere and excel despite the deplorable teaching and learning conditions. Why? They have all been patient, believing that their new school will in fact materialize.

3. The Facts, And What We Think You Must Do

We appreciate that the Provincial Government applies its policies designed for a province-wide declining enrolment uniformly throughout British Columbia. It insists that these policies be applied also to a situation such as the University Hill area, where the neighbourhood population increased 40% between 2001 and 2006 and the student population has been growing rapidly and continues to grow at this rate. Had the Provincial Government approved funding for an entire new school building for UHill Secondary as is necessary, you as our Board would not have to make the painful choices you are now forced to make. Unfortunately, the Provincial Government approved only an expansion to the existing high school.

The funding for this approved renovation (\$10 million) would have to provide an expansion of UHill Secondary to a capacity of 675 students. However, this option is analogous to turning a 2-bedroom bungalow into a home for 12 people - every shared resource (kitchen, bathrooms, family room) is too small to serve its people.

Add to this the certainty that UHill Secondary will have to expand twice more (to 880 and then to 1100 students) within a few years because the student population at UBC continues to grow, and you see that using \$10 million to add to such an unsuitable building is fiscally irresponsible. It will not even provide an adequate stopgap solution. One certainly cannot build a high school for 1100 students out of an old bungalow built for 325.

4. Weighing Your Choices

We appreciate that parents at QEA are distressed that their annex would be closed and sold in order to proceed with the EFR proposal. We also appreciate that they have had a short and challenging time frame in which to absorb the implications. However, the fact is that you as Trustees will have to make choices which benefit the greatest number of students. Not only that: your first priority must be to meet the most basic and most urgent needs of students. In weighing your options, you must consider:

- students at UHill Secondary: their academic aspirations are being curtailed because there their school provides no room to teach core courses, let alone electives. They learn in conditions that try everyone greatly. Their most basic and compelling human and learning needs are unmet (560 and increasing).
- students at UHill Elementary: many of them must attend other Elementary Schools; they deserve a school in their neighbourhood (227 and increasing).
- students at Queen Mary, Jules Quesnel and Queen Elizabeth Main; they deserve a safe place to learn and must be protected from earthquakes (1320).

We all may agree that a very small school like an annex is the best educational choice possible, especially for K-3 children. However, we also all know that with the limited resources the Provincial Government puts at your disposal, annexes are too expensive to operate. If a choice must be made, we would rather the VSB find capital and cut expenses by closing costly annexes and selling valuable assets than not meet our students' most basic needs. It is a question of answering the greatest needs, and the needs of the greatest number of students. In comparison, closing and selling the QE Annex affects a relatively small number of students in a relatively small way.

When you as a Board make your decision, keep in mind that a large percentage of parents at UHill Secondary (and also at UHill Elementary) are new to Canada and do not feel comfortable expressing their concerns either in English, or in public. The number or fervor of responses to the ERF proposal should not be your guide for making your decision. Your guide should be the urgency of student needs.

Our students and teachers need you to act now. It is within your power to have them move into the NRC building, a sound, safe and technologically adequate learning environment, by Sept '09. This chance comes very, very late. Please make it a reality now.

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