

NEWS

School closure 'is the wrong decision': mayor



About 150 people attended the Bath Community School sustainability study meeting in January. Community leaders have mixed reactions to the decision to recommend the school be closed, along with three other schools in Florenceville-Bristol in favor of a new kindergarten to grade eight facility in Florenceville-Bristol.

Photo: Mark Rickard/Bugle Observer

Community leaders are divided on whether the Anglophone West District Education council recommendation to close four Northern Carleton Schools and build a new K to 8 school for students in Bath, Florenceville-Bristol and surrounding areas is the right move.

The DEC voted on a series of motions, passing a recommendation to close Bath Community, Bristol Elementary, Florenceville Elementary, and Florenceville Middle in favour of a new school to minister Dominic Cardy. A motion to recommend the completion of the renovations at the former Bath Middle was defeated with a vote of five DEC members for and six against.

Bath Mayor Troy Stone said he was disappointed and angry the education council voted to close all schools in his community.

Renovations at Bath Middle School were halted last year after asbestos was discovered in the building. The province issued a tender to demolish the project, but Premier Blaine Higgs halted the demolition tender and asked the DEC to study the elementary schools in Florenceville-Bristol and Bath in a new sustainability study.

“A bunch of us who have been involved in this from the early days, I think it would be fair to say this is the wrong decision,” mayor Stone said. “From 2015 when the initial study was done to close the (Bath Middle) school and relocate kids, we said the better decision was to bring everyone together in a K-8... We spent hundreds of hours of time and effort to get to that conclusion. It was studied at length and was the right choice.”

Mayor Stone said Bath parents followed the rules and wanted a facility that met the community's needs.

“Obviously the issue of asbestos challenged this... We have said all along that you are going to have a \$7-million (renovated) school or a \$5-million parking lot,” the mayor said.

The Bath mayor questioned what the recommendations mean for the Bath Step Ahead program, an early childhood education program operating at the overcrowded Bath Community school.

“I’m not being uncharitable towards Florenceville-Bristol. We have our set of needs here in Bath and Florenceville-Bristol needs to have a new school, for their kids, that’s fine. We have never stood in the way for that... But completing the Bath school will save the taxpayers some money,” he said.

Mayor Stone said Bath residents will be meeting this week to determine their next steps. With the new school slotted at fourth in the district's priority list, an announcement of a new school will not be held anytime soon.

“Realistically we are five years away from any planning for a new school, let alone construction,” he said. “If this asbestos issue had never shown up in Bath, the school would already be completed.”

In Florenceville-Bristol, mayor Karl Curtis said he was happy with the DEC recommendation that aging schools in his community will eventually be replaced with a new K to 8 school.

“I can see the argument (In Bath) to finish that project and move the kids into a community school,” mayor Curtis said. “I’m happy with the outcome but I know there will be some disappointed people in the Bath area.”

With the DEC recommendation complete, the mayor said Florenceville-Bristol residents can now start lobbying the government to approve a new school for the community.

“At the end of the day, these are recommendations... The Department of Education will decide where it falls on their priorities. We will start lobbying for this new school.”

Curtis said a new school for the town has been a council priority. The municipal government has seen what a new school can do to other communities, attracting families to move there.

“We have schools that are very old, that are not handicapped accessible. We have a school that is a split entry. People don't even build those homes anymore,” Curtis said. “There are people that work in Florenceville-Bristol that live in Woodstock because of schools in Woodstock... We would like to have the same opportunities to have people live in our area that other communities do.”

Andrew Harvey, Carleton-Victoria MLA, said he was hoping for a different outcome from the school study.

“The people of Bath went ahead with a sustainability study in 2015, and the government approved the project. They run into bumps along the way in terms of construction, but the government could still have finished the project,” the MLA said. “They had the facts four years ago. None of that has changed.”

Harvey said the province could finish the Bath project and then move on to construct a new K-8 school in Florenceville-Bristol.

“All the work that has been done in the (Bath) community plus all of the money invested in the project to date is being lost. I don’t understand the rationale from the government on why we are in this position. We could have the school finished right now and it would have been a nice school for another 20 years.”

The MLA said he spoke in favour of finishing the Bath school, and building a new school in Florenceville-Bristol.

“I think they can both co-exist. The Bath school can be completed in five to seven months. The children can go back into a renovated school. Constructing a new school will take at least four to five years from the time a decision is made.”