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Blueridge School Closure Update

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Blueridge and Seymour Heights School (Update March 2017)

by Doug Blakeney and Barry Fenton

Following a successful campaign back in the Fall 2016 of raising concerns about the closure of Blueridge Elementary at Board of Education public Board meetings, a couple of our community members were invited to sit down with North Vancouver School District Superintendent/CEO Mark Pearmain back in January 2017 to further discuss community concerns.

The meeting with Mark Pearmain was attended by Blueridge residents Doug Blakeney and Barry Fenton, and covered many topics including Seymour Area schools utilization statistics, provincial government priorities, development on the North Shore, and other considerations relating to the current Argyle and Handsworth projects.

One key takeaway from the meeting was that even though the Blueridge closure / Seymour Heights replacement is listed as the highest priority on the District's list of Capital Projects, the likelihood of this happening anytime soon is generally believed to be relatively low. That being said, it is important to remember that the closure of our beloved Blueridge Elementary is currently a question of WHEN, not IF, and that day will inevitably come sooner than we'd all like. So what can you do today? Read on...

Statistics – For the number crunchers among us, Superintendent Pearmain shared capacity and utilization data from the past 4 years for Blueridge, Seymour Heights, and Lynnmour schools. He also provided specific catchment data which the District considers important. One of the areas of note is that even though Blueridge enrolment is near capacity, just over a third of Blueridge students come from outside of the catchment. And even though most of these students come from neighbouring Seymour Heights or Lynnmour areas, the District makes long-term capital decisions based on where students actually reside. Here are the 2016-2017 enrolment statistics:

School	Capacity	Student Utilization	Open Spaces
Blueridge	365	345	20
Lynnmour	295	170	125
Seymour Heights	<u>320</u>	<u>274</u>	<u>46</u>
TOTAL	980	789	191

Current enrolment statistics for 2016/17 school year

Government Priorities – It was emphasized that the provincial government is very much focused on two key areas: i) Seismic upgrades; and ii) New schools in Surrey. On the seismic front, Superintendent Pearmain stated that Vancouver still has over 65 high risk seismic projects that have yet to be funded (with costs exceeding \$500M), whereas North Vancouver seismic risk schools have already received or been approved for upgrades. The other priority for the province is dealing with the exponential population growth in Surrey and that districts desperate need for new schools to meet this demand.

North Vancouver Development – Questions were raised regarding the District’s past prioritization of the Blueridge closure / Seymour Heights replacement ahead of a new school in the ever-growing Lower Lonsdale area. Superintendent Pearmain clarified that the province will not fund new schools until students are in place and the need is fully realized (i.e. not just forecasted). Questions were also raised relating to the development along the Seymour corridor, including Maplewood Town Centre. Superintendent Pearmain confirmed the District is closely monitoring this development and that once a project such as the Seymour Heights replacement is given a green light, detailed studies will be conducted (including community consultations) before budgets/plans are finalized.

Learnings from Argyle/Handsworth Projects – The province has generally prioritized seismic upgrades over school replacements. In North Vancouver, two schools were on the province’s original priority seismic list: Argyle Secondary and Handsworth Secondary. Argyle was originally approved for seismic upgrades in May 2012, however, the project was then resubmitted for full replacement. That resubmission and subsequent re-approval took four years (approved June 2016). The latest forecast is for the new Argyle to open in September 2019. While Handsworth was originally approved for seismic upgrades in 2013, the District only requested that project be upgraded from seismic only to full replacement last Spring. With nothing announced in the recent provincial budget and with the May election now upon us, it will likely be several months (at least) before a final decision is made regarding Handsworth; and from there, it will be several years before the project completes. These timelines and delays are important as they may play a role in determining when the province will look at other major North Vancouver capital projects. In addition, capital project priorities can change over time. This will include future North

Vancouver development in the lower Lonsdale area and in the Seymour area including Maplewood Town Centre.

So what does all this really mean?

Based on the declining student enrolment trends in the period 2000-2010, the North Vancouver School Board made the decision in April 2010 to close Blueridge and rebuild a new larger Seymour Heights school. However, since this decision was made, the student enrolment has increased and many young families continue to move into the Blueridge area. In addition, the 2016 Supreme Court decision on maximum class size may have an impact on the schools in our area. Accordingly, we believe that the School Board Trustees should develop a new long term plan for schools in the Blueridge and Seymour areas before the province approves funding to build a larger Seymour Heights – such a plan may conclude that keeping Blueridge open is in the best interest of the District.

Our local residents may also be wondering what may happen to the Blueridge school property once the school is closed.

We all know that Blueridge Elementary is a critical hub for this community. It draws in families who get to know their neighbours as a direct benefit of the smaller school size before the kids disappear into larger high schools. But if/when Blueridge is closed, and a large replacement school at Seymour Heights comes in its place, we will inevitably lose some of that tight community connection.

And what will come in its place? More private schools like we've seen at Plymouth and Maplewood? Or will the land be sold and its use changed? Might we even see condos being proposed one day?

These aren't questions any of us want to necessarily think about, but if we simply kick the can, leaving it for others down the road, then these are questions that will shape how our community evolves.

So what can you do?

Our suggestions are to become more actively involved which includes talking about this issue:

- 1) Talk to your spouse – figure out if this is something you want to be part of doing something about.
- 2) Talk to your neighbours – see what they think and start to rally up support for doing something. Why not come out to one of the Blueridge Community Association meetings and see what others think!
- 3) Talk to our School Board Trustee Liaison, Barry Forward (bforward@sd44.ca) – he genuinely wants to hear from people in the community so he can make sure your voices are heard by the rest of the Board. Better yet, come out to one of the monthly public Board meetings and talk to the full Board yourself during the public comment period – don't worry, they don't bite! Barry

Forward and the full Board need to know that the community wants the 2010 School Board closure decision to be reconsidered. Click [here](#) for a full list of school board meetings.

4) Talk to your MLA, currently Jane Thornthwaite (jane.thornthwaite.mla@leg.bc.ca) – let her know that the entire Education system needs more funding and strategic long term planning.

Thanks for your continued interest in what's going on with this important community issue – we'll provide updates when we learn anything new. Watch for additional information on the BCA website www.blueridgeca.org. If you'd like to give us feedback on this topic, or find out more, please contact info@blueridgeca.org.