

# *Seismic Gordon Building Renewal Committee Report for Gordon Elementary PAC*

25 Feb 2008, updated 2 March. Written by Z Smith.

## **Renewing General Gordon Elementary: New school or upgrade, it has to be safe *and* good enough for our kids**

The November 2008 PAC meeting unanimously passed a resolution informing the Vancouver School Board that the proposal developed by the seismic feasibility study to ‘replace’ General Gordon with a building 2/3 as large was inadequate, and not supported by the PAC. We offered to work with the VSB to develop better options. We’ve learned a lot since then, and a lot has happened.

- **LEED:** In last year’s Throne Speech, the provincial government had set the goal that all provincially-funded buildings meet the LEED Gold standard for providing a healthy environment and energy efficient performance. However, as of January, the VSB staff had been informed that LEED Gold funding was “below the line” in the project budget. As a result of the efforts of the PAC working with the office of our MLA Premier Gordon Campbell, the provincial government has stated that they will confirm in writing that the funding will be there to meet this goal.
- **Kindergarten and Afterschool Care:** The provincial government announced a goal that full-day kindergarten should be provided province-wide by 2010. It has also stated that schools have responsibility to make available space for before- and afterschool care. Both of these developments imply that demand for space on General Gordon, which is already expected to be full to capacity in Fall 2008, will only increase. This makes the Ministry of Education area standards, which are dictating the 2/3 size with the same number of students, appear to be out of sync with the other provincial goals.
- **VSB Committee II and Trustee actions:** On February 5<sup>th</sup>, a delegation from the PAC met with the VSB Planning & Facilities Committee II. Our presentation emphasized that
  - **The process was flawed:** Looking only to the rules of the seismic mitigation program results in an unacceptable loss in the quality and capacity of the school facility. It took months to discover the inadequacy of the proposal due to ineffective public consultation.
  - **The question isn’t old school vs. new school—it’s adequate school vs. inadequate school:** Some would prefer a new school building, some would prefer renovation, some a hybrid of old and new. But everyone agreed that all the ‘options’ considered by the Feasibility Study were unacceptable.
    - The new school as proposed threatens the future of JKC, our afterschool care program, the music room, the stage, the covered play areas, would be designed to a 20-year life cycle, would have large CO<sub>2</sub> emissions associated with construction without any guarantees of good environmental performance.
    - The renovation as proposed promised to subject our kids and their teachers to life in the middle of a construction zone, due to insufficient numbers of portables. We were also told that things like new windows, better lighting and wiring, or upgraded plumbing could not be part of a renovation (this turned out not to be true; separate funding sources exist for these upgrades.)

Had the Study followed an Integrated Design Process—IDP—(as required by Provincial guidelines) and consulted parents and teachers as to what was needed *before* doing its calculations, they would have been less likely to come up with such unacceptable options.

- **Safety is everybody’s top concern:** But safety doesn’t begin and end with building structural strength. Safety also means safe indoor air quality, safe materials, a healthy environment, and a building built to last. Both new-school and renovation pathways could deliver structural and environmental safety and durability—but the proposal described in the Study did not.
- **School buildings are civic and community buildings too:** While schools buildings must first be about instruction, the Ministry guidelines ignore all the other civic, community, and heritage value school buildings have in their community.

We asked specifically about **the widespread rumour that if we did not accept the proposal as-is, we would risk being sent “to the back of the line.”** The Trustees stated flatly that this rumour was not true, that schools must be dealt with in the order of seismic risk already established. Asking that a better proposal be developed does not risk losing our place in line.

On February 20<sup>th</sup>, the VSB Trustees wrote a letter to Shirley Bond, the Minister of Education, following up on our presentation. Their letter underscored many of our points and added reference to the increasing responsibilities the Ministry is placing on school boards with respect to child care.

- **Learning from Seattle:** During the last few weeks we've learned a lot more about how our neighbours to the south, who face the same stock of older schools and similar seismic risks, have been responding. They're much further along, now moving on to the third round of schools. Here are the highlights:
  - **They aren't just seismically upgrading or replacing schools—they're transforming every school into a neighbourhood community centre.** The gym is for the kids by day, the neighbourhood care gets double-duty out of other school facilities (much as JKC uses the Gordon lunchroom and basement).
  - **They are increasing the size of their buildings.** While the MoE standards would have us shrink Gordon from 54,000 SF to 34,000 SF, Seattle is increasing the size of their older schools buildings from 35,000 SF to 55,000 SF.
  - **They are preserving 85% of their pre-1940 structures as schools.** They were comfortable with the level of safety and durability provided by both renovated and newly constructed components. Their track record is that the renovation / upgrades are averaging about 10% higher cost per square foot than the new construction portions, but that this difference is considered acceptable in the overall scheme of things. They use a mix of portables, busing, and re-working catchments as a means to avoid having classes inside buildings as they are being worked on, and so avoid the "dust, noise, and asbestos" concerns that have been raised here.
  - **They've funded this work with bonds passed at the city level.** The citizens must like what they see, because they've passed two of these bond issues and the third one is in preparation now.
- **EcoDensity:** In mid February, several Seismic committee members attended the City of Vancouver's EcoDensity workshops. These plans affect the Gordon discussion in two ways
  - **Densification is expected to increase Vancouver's population by 20 to 30% over the next twenty years.** This would presumably mean more kids in schools.
  - **City plans call for the provision of neighbourhood-based amenities** like child care and community gyms to serve this increased population.

At one of the table discussions, the head of facilities planning for Vancouver Parks & Recreation (Piet Rutgers) was asked about the Seattle model of school-based community centres. He responded that this model is in use in Vancouver in a few limited ways (Lord Byng Pool, Thunderbird community centre), and could probably be made to work at more sites over time. We've held a few follow-up discussions on this concept with City officials and are developing several models of how we might fund these here.

- **Detailed examination of the July Feasibility study.** Until recently, the only document we had access to was the slide show presented back in May 2007, posted on the VSB website. This described a 3200 SM new school as costing \$12.5 M "with the option of preserving the existing lunchroom for JKC", and a full renovation option, including a renovated gym, costing \$16.2M.

In January, the Draft Final Report became available to us. In it we learned:

- **The 3200 SM new school + preserving the existing lunchroom (for JKC) was estimated to cost \$13.1M.**
- **The cost of seismically upgrading the 4900 SM existing school but giving it a new gym would be \$13.1M.** Other upgrades, including replacing the windows, upgrading the wiring and lighting, were estimated at \$1.7M but the Study said these would be funded through an Annual Facilities Grant.
- **It took about 2 months from the initial site visit to Gordon to the public presentation of options**
- **Discussions with teachers.** We'd been scheduled to meet with teachers back in January but this time had been yielded to a presentation from VSB planning and facilities staff. We finally were able to meet with a delegation of 4 teachers last week. In it we learned that teachers had come to the conclusion that renovations could not include new wiring or the provision of washrooms on each floor (a deficiency they saw in the current school), and that having endured previous renovation work while they had to teach in the building, their first choice would be a new school built to the identical size of the current one (4900 SM). Again, it seems the 'options' developed by the Feasibility Study did not start from discussions with teachers to find out what they needed, but rather developed and presented unpalatable choices and said "pick one."
- **Meeting with Gordon Campbell and Ministry officials:** We've requested these meetings through our MLA's constituency office starting in January. We have a meeting scheduled for us with Gordon Campbell on March 12th. We are still waiting for a meeting with MoE Shirley Bond and her representatives. We've been told that Gordon Campbell has asked the Ministry to respond, and we recently sent our own letter requesting the same.

The next big date is the March 4<sup>th</sup> meeting of Committee II (Planning and Facilities) of the VSB. We have a 10-minute time slot to present our update to them, along with any further resolutions from the PAC.