

Q&A: What's going on with seismic upgrades and the "pilot" program for General Gordon?

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Parents and members of the community interested in the future of General Gordon Elementary:

As you've probably heard, on September 3rd, Premier Gordon Campbell, Minister of Education Shirley Bond, Chair of the Vancouver School Board Clarence Hansen, and VSB Superintendent Chris Kelly formally announced what they called a \$30M 'Neighbourhoods of Learning' pilot project covering 3 schools in the City of Vancouver and 2 more in rural areas. General Gordon Elementary is of the schools in this program.

Video highlights of the announcement:

http://www.multimedia.gov.bc.ca/EN/neighbourhoods_of_learning/

Press release:

http://www2.news.gov.bc.ca/news_releases_2005-2009/2008OTP0216-001326.htm

Everyone has lots of questions about what's going on. Below are some questions and answers, or at least guesses at answers.

Q: Is the seismic program still moving forward?

A: Yes. All the schools that were moving forward before the announcement are still moving forward. The money for the pilot program is not being taken from other seismic upgrades. The \$30M is being added to the seismic program 'baseline' for the 3 Vancouver schools to help pay for all the things the current standards don't cover. The pilot will be expanded to include 2 rural schools in the near future (with, we have been told, additional funds.) In parallel, the Ministry of Education has initiated a review of the 'Area Standards' (the rules that say how big a school with a given number of classrooms can be), and the 'Unit Rates' (the budget per square foot for school construction).

Q: Is there a timeline in place for when public input, design & construction will be done?

A: We haven't seen a specific timeline. Secretary Bond has said the overall pilot program will take 1-3 years, but that is thought to include construction and analysis of what worked and what didn't in each test school.

Of course, we will push for this to move as quickly as possible. At this month's VSB Committee II (Planning & Facilities) meeting, Mark Dale (senior planning & facilities staff) said that they are working with the Ministry to come to agreement on how to manage this pilot and would start working on individual projects in October. A Ministry official told us Friday that they are circulating a draft memorandum of understanding now and expect to have it back to the VSB in the next 1-2 weeks.

Q: Are we getting a new school, a renovated school, or a hybrid?

A: Nothing has been decided. Under the old rules for seismic mitigation, a smaller new school was the "cheapest" project budget but renovating the old school while replacing the gym was the lowest cost per square foot and preserved the full-sized library and JKC, and had the lower environmental impact. It is assumed that the the \$30M figure for the pilot program is based on an internal study within the MoE of what it would take to preserve all the educational and community services functions provided by the 3 schools, so one might assume some very rough plans made of a hypothetical solution or solutions for each school. This approach is common in funding proposals and does not lock the recipients into building the hypothetical solution. MoE officials have spoken of the importance of preserving heritage buildings, and that some of the funds are to cover heritage restoration where appropriate; they have also pointed out that one of the two rural schools in the expanded pilot will include an all-new school, to serve as a model for new school construction.

Premier Campbell stated quite clearly at the September 3 announcement that it is up to each community to decide what it wants. The Ministry of Education officials we have spoken to have said they believe it is the responsibility of the VSB to handle the public process.

Q: Why is there a 'pilot' program? Why aren't they just raising the standards for all schools immediately?

A: When we met with our MLA, Premier Gordon Campbell, back in March, we asked that the Area Standards and Unit Rates be revised so that no schools in the province be faced with a choice between seismic upgrades and having school facilities with room for afterschool care, music, a full-sized library, or other functions. We said that many schools we knew of were already functioning as 'community hubs' but that the standards were based only on classrooms, not all the other things schools do. We also said that since they had announced that all provincial buildings would meet high environmental standards (LEED Gold or better), they should adjust the Unit Rates to reflect the associated costs. We also said that heritage restoration may sometimes be the most appropriate path, but that provincial standards ignore all associated costs & benefits.

We said that we understood revising the standards province-wide would take time, so we proposed that we serve as a test-case, a pilot, for how to determine what revisions were fair.

Campbell agreed that a pilot was a good idea, but wanted to expand it to '3 or 4 schools' across Vancouver. We submitted a list of schools across Vancouver that we knew were at risk of losing significant elements and programs. Then, in a follow-up meeting of officials, VSB Superintendent Chris Kelly said he suggested 3 schools: General Gordon, Queen Mary, and Strathcona. Queen Mary and Strathcona weren't actually on our list of schools with the most at risk (both were not as far along in the Seismic process as General Gordon or the other schools on our list) but they are the ones Kelly suggested and the ones the Ministry agreed to.

Q: Why are some people criticizing the pilot program in the press?

A: There have been criticisms in the press from some who have pointed out that 2 of the 3 schools are in Gordon Campbell's riding (BC Liberal), while the other one is in Jenny Kwan's riding (NDP), and charge that the choices were 'political.' Some raised concerns that this pilot program was an attempt to distract voters from general underfunding of education. Others stated that the government should complete all seismic upgrades first before starting other initiatives.

As stated earlier, the seismic program is not "on hold", it's moving forward, with work proceeding on such schools as Trafalgar, Kitchener, and Douglas. Those of us involved with the effort at General Gordon want to see adequate funding for all schools; that's why we've linked our work to the review of Area Standards and Unit Rates. We want seismic safety, but without loss of school quality and functions like afterschool care. We have seen how concerns over loss of school quality and function can slow down the seismic process, and it's our hope that the pilot and the revised standards will help accelerate the process for future schools.

The political fact is that this pilot has happened because Premier Campbell responded to us, and there are those who've worked for school funding and school safety who feel Campbell hasn't done enough, and are suspicious of anything coming out of his office. They have valid reasons for their concerns. We still see no overall timetable for seismic upgrading of all schools. Our schools don't have enough money for all the things we're asking them to do. Some might think that the pilot program will "buy off" those concerned about the schools; for us, it just whets our appetite for system-wide change.

It's a complicated situation and we'll continue to seek to work with all sides.

Q: What's the difference between a 'Neighbourhood hub', 'Neighbourhoods of Learning', and 'Community Schools'? Isn't this an old idea?

A: All these terms have some ideas in common. Schools as the centres of neighbourhood life is a *really* old idea. Historians have found VSB documents from the 1920s talking about the responsibility of school buildings to support more than just instruction for children from 9am-3pm. Schools locations were chosen so that no Vancouver resident would have to walk more than 10 minutes to reach a Vancouver School building. Auditoria were built to allow lectures for adult education, and full-size basements were conceived of as covered play areas for kids during the day and for community use in the evenings.

The idea was re-introduced with the 'Community Schools' initiative in the 1960s and 1970s; JKC started at Bayview Community School and then expanded to General Gordon. Britannia is also a Community School and integrates a City of Vancouver Parks Board Community Centre along with child care. But the concept suffered from budget cuts in later years.

Several years ago, VSB Superintendent Chris Kelly wrote a thought-piece called 'Neighbourhoods of Learning', which laid out one vision of how the increasing pressures on schools to provide adult education and pre-school might be handled.

When we sought to preserve the functions such as JKC at General Gordon and similar functions at schools across Vancouver, we started calling our schools 'Neighbourhood hubs'. This turned out to have similarities to what Seattle has done over the last 15 years, seismically upgrading their schools while adding more support for community functions; the gym is for the kids by day, the community at night, child care is built in...

Q: I've heard that Seattle has almost completed seismically upgrading all their schools while only a handful of schools have been done here in Vancouver. What are they doing differently?

A: One important difference is they have switched from having their school board do the upgrades to an independent authority that obtains its money from the voters in 5-6 year authorizations for specific schools to be upgraded in that period. This authority has 100% focus on upgrading school facilities into school-community centres and expires at the end of the period if not re-authorized by voters. It has worked with each neighbourhood to tailor each project to each community, and works with school boards, parks & recreation boards, and library boards as clients. They spend more per square foot than we do here in BC on their buildings, but voter approval of 3 successive rounds would seem to indicate that voters like what they're getting. We think it's a model worth looking at that might be adapted to our BC / Vancouver context.

Q: How big is this \$30M compared to overall project costs? How much of this will be for the General Gordon project?

A: The direct construction costs being discussed for General Gordon were in the neighbourhood of \$13-\$16M. Queen Mary and Stratchona are both somewhat larger schools, but not a lot bigger. This pot of money is significant. The Ministry of Education has told us that the shares of this pot will be 'equitable but not necessarily equal.'

Q: What about the schools already moving through the process? Have they missed their chance?

A: Mark Dale of the VSB was asked this last week at Committee II and he said that they would attempt to intercept projects already underway (such as Kitchener and Secord) and 'see what they could do' to help them minimize the loss of their afterschool care and community functions. For those who were trying to save the 1913 wing of the old Dickens Elementary to allow it to be converted into a children's arts education program, however, it's too late; the VSB went ahead and demolished the structure over the summer. We owe a big debt to the parents and community members around Dickens who helped us learn from their efforts.

Q: How can I help push to keep this thing moving forward?

A: You're welcome to become part of the General Gordon Building Renewal Committee. This core group meets as needed (sometimes weekly, sometimes monthly). Join at the next PAC meeting or contact PAC chair. If you've only been involved peripherally, it's good to read over the documents on the "Seismic" page of the Gordon Elementary website.

<http://www.gordonelementary.ca/node/1>

Z Smith, Chair, Gordon Elementary Building Renewal Committee