

PRESS RELEASE

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How they do it in Seattle--upgrading schools into community resources

While Vancouver's School Board is planning to aim the wrecking ball at many of the City's oldest and finest schools and narrow the role of schools as community resources by eliminating much of their non-classroom space, Seattle is headed in the opposite direction.

According to Kathy Johnson, Facilities Planning Manager of Seattle Public Schools, Seattle's idea of an 'adequate' school includes integrated child care, a gym that functions as a community fitness facility in the evenings, and a library that is big enough to function as a community reading room. This kind of school usage depends on the sort of space that we have today at General Gordon Elementary School and many other Vancouver schools. But if the VSB and the Ministry of Education have their way, this will increasingly become a thing of the past.

The State of Washington, like the Province of BC, has a much lower area standard for what constitutes an 'adequate' school than does the City of Seattle. But the citizens of Seattle made these schools-as-community-hubs possible by passing a bond issue.

Seattle is on track to preserve 85% of their pre-1940 structures as active schools. Trustee Ken Denike's expectation is that the VSB's current "seismic mitigation" program will result in at least half of the 68 heritage schools in Vancouver being demolished.

Back in Seattle, Johnson says that on average, renovation and upgrading of existing structures have cost about 10% more per square foot than new construction, but that job-to-job variation means that the decisions were not usually based on costs. Seattle decision makers simply worked from an assumption that, barring exceptional circumstances, they were trying to preserve all the heritage structures. This is a very different situation than the one we are currently facing in BC, where provincial government funding rules strongly favour demolition over retention.

Seattle's average project costs about \$400/SF. This compares to an anticipated cost in BC of about \$290 - \$350/SF. But Seattle's residents, it seems, are prepared to pay a bit more in order to gain a lot more: larger schools, better educational environment for children, significantly enhanced community resources, and a huge amount of the city's heritage preserved.

If Vancouver City is serious about its EcoDensity plan, it would do well to take a page from Seattle's approach to transforming its schools into not only great educational facilities, but great community facilities.

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