

New high schools for West Shore



By Goldstream News Gazette

Published: **October 31, 2011 11:00 AM**

Updated: **November 01, 2011 02:322 PM**

Province funds \$100 million project for schools in Langford, Colwood

Beloved but battered Belmont secondary is facing its final years after the Ministry of Education committed \$100 million to build two new high schools on the West Shore.

Education Minister George Abbott, after joking about tripping on duct tape in Belmont, announced the province will fund the Sooke School District's plan to build a new Belmont at the Glen Lake elementary site in Langford and a new Colwood high school at Royal Bay.

"I would acknowledge as I was tripping over your duct tape walking down the hallway, quite possibly your 'bricks and mortar' are getting a little bit tired," Abbott said Monday at Belmont secondary. "I'm delighted to say that the Sooke School District will get not one, not one and a half, but two new high schools."

The announcement has set in motion two virtually simultaneous \$50 million construction projects, one at the Glen Lake site and the other in Royal Bay, over the next three or four years. Kids in Grade 5 today will be the first cohort of youth in several generations to enter a new West Shore high school.

To contribute to the project, SD 62 will sell the seven hectare Belmont property for an estimated \$30 million, making the ministry's net contribution \$70 million. With the district's plan authorized, the education minister and SD 62 staff don't expect to engage in a formal public process to sell the property.

"This is the most amazing day I've had as superintendent. It's probably the most amazing day I've had in my 30 years

in the Sooke School District," said SD 62 superintendent Jim Cambridge. "It is the future of our district. I couldn't be more happy."

"I'm over the moon. Christmas came early," added SD 62 board chair Wendy Hobbs.

Over the past four years, trustees, district staff, students, West Shore mayors and MLAs have waged a relentless campaign of nagging and cajoling the Education Ministry that the duct tape won't hold the overflow of students, and that the Sooke District is growing — and fast.

Abbott said the community's overwhelming and consistent advocacy for the plan played a key role in finding capital funding for new West Shore high schools. He singled out Belmont Grade 12 student Ravi Parmar, who organized a student walkout last year, and told the minister about sorry, shabby state of his high school.

"I can't believe it's all over. People have been working on this for 15 years," Parmar said. "Everyone has worked hard to get to this point today."

"Pushing has been team effort, with lots of support, lots of advocacy from everyone at the West Shore," Abbott said. "(The schools) certainly are due and quite possibly overdue."

The two new schools will hold about 800 students each, and each will have a different focus. A new Belmont at the Glen Lake site will use Goudy and Bear Mountain turf fields under an agreement with Langford. Colwood and the West Shore Chamber of Commerce are working to build an arts complex next to the new high school at Royal Bay.

"From an economic development point of view this is huge," said West Shore Chamber of Commerce CEO Dan Spinner. "There were people leaving the community because they were worried about the quality of the schools. This changes everything."

Juan de Fuca MLA John Horgan (NDP) was happy to give credit to the Liberal government for committing money to one of the few districts seeing student growth.

"Now we can say goodbye to this site and look to an exciting future for our kids and our families," Horgan said. "I'm grateful to George, I'm grateful to government recognizing this is the right thing to do. When something is right it's right. Replacing this school has been right for some time, this government recognizes it, now we can step ahead."

New high schools will finally allow the district to reconfigure it's grades — and avoid fields of portable classrooms — has Grade 6 is shifted from elementary to middle school and Grade 9 is shifted into high school.

"This will free up elementary school space, which will be crucial in two or three years," Cambridge said.

The superintendent expects the design and building phase to last three or four years.

"Certainly there is a good construction climate, but we won't know (a timetable) until we have our architectural plans," Cambridge said. "But we're hoping kids in Grades 5 now will be going to new high schools."

editor@goldstreamgazette.com

Find this article at:

<http://www.goldstreamgazette.com/news/132940833.html>