

School district seeks public input on new West Shore schools

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When Education Minister George Abbott stood in Belmont's gym and announced "not one, not one-and-a-half but two new schools" for the West Shore, he didn't leave a \$100 million cheque on his way out.

Behind the scenes planning for high schools at the Glen Lake site and in Royal Bay began late last year, and the critical public consultation phase will begin at the end of March. As SD 62 officials point out, there's still plenty of work to be done before money is in the bank.

"We are just starting the journey. The ministry (of education) has a number of steps to get the project approved. We've got 13 to go," said Jim Alkins, who is directing the community consultation. "The ministry said they support the project, they haven't said they approved the project."

Since November, district officials have been drawing up the all-important project definition report, a comprehensive rundown of cost estimates, engineering details, site surveys, architectural concepts and projected demographics that will dictate the final design for two 1,200-student schools.

"Staff has been working like crazy since the announcement," said SD 62 superintendent Jim Cambridge. "There's a lot of work behind the scenes. The public hasn't seen much yet."

Beyond designing the buildings, the public and the school board will need to decide if they want Neighbourhood Learning Centres attached to the new schools.

These centres effectively act as space for some broader community need — a theatre, a post-secondary satellite campus, a public health office, a youth drop-in centre or a fitness centre, for instance. Typically the space would be available to the school during the day, and

the community in non-school hours.

If non-profit or government agencies and the public demonstrate interest, the Ministry of Education will provide 15 per cent more floor space for the neighbourhood centre, worth \$3 or \$4 million in capital funding.

The West Shore Chamber of Commerce, for one, is working on developing a playhouse for the neighbourhood centre at the Colwood-based school, tentatively named the Emily Carr Performing Arts and Education Centre.

“The government recognizes schools are an important hub of the community,” Alkins said. “It’s not free space. There is extra capital to build the space, but the program has to pay for the operating costs.”

The public will also have input on specialty education programs they want to see in the new high schools.

With City Centre Park nearby, the new Belmont school at Glen Lake might have comprehensive sports programs, where the Colwood school might have an extensive autobody shop or a fine arts program.

Once the project definition report, the neighbourhood centre concept and the public consultation are completed and approved by the school board, they will be delivered to the Ministry of Education in June.

“Hopefully in September the minister and board chair will sign the project agreement,” Cambridge said. “If there is no project agreement, we’ll never get the money.”

A key aspect of the project too is selling off the current Belmont property to help underwrite the \$100 million project. The process to sell that land hasn’t been confirmed, Alkins said. “I expect that land disposed will have to have the highest and best use to get the best value,” he said.

The district is aiming to open the new Grade 9 to 12 schools in September 2015 or 2016. “The challenge is trying to do it right but do it quickly. In the end the community will tell us when we are finished consulting,” Cambridge said.

“It’s an exciting opportunity for us to build the future for the school district. This doesn’t come often. It’s like building the future of education and how it will become integrated with the fabric of the West Shore.”

Public workshop sessions for the new schools project are in the Belmont north gym, March 28 and 29, 5 to 8 p.m. and March 31, noon to 3 p.m.

Any non-profit or service agencies or individuals with ideas about neighbourhood learning centres should email newschools@sd62.bc.ca or attend a workshop.

See www.sd62.bc.ca/Schools/NewSecondarySchools.aspx the new schools page on the SD 62 website.

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