

School consultation meeting draws 40

Wednesday, May 31, 2017 – Fort Frances Times

Monday, May 29, 2017 – Atikokan Progress

By Dawn Lessard (Atikokan Progress)

Almost 40 people attended a community consultation meeting held May 18 at Atikokan High School to hear more detailed information and provide feedback about the potential amalgamation of Atikokan's public schools into one K-12 facility.

The accommodation review committee, consisting of school, parent, and student reps from North Star and AHS, were present.

They included Chloe Machura, Martha Duquette, Jody Labossiere, Beth Fairfield, Karen Gannon, Mellissa Gallagher, Sylvia Parker, Darryl Gannon, and Jeff Lehman.

Also on hand was Director of Education Heather Campbell for the Rainy River District School Board.

This committee has been reviewing options and providing feedback, and will serve as intermediaries between the community and school board administration as the review progresses.

Following an overview of next steps in the process, board administrators provided detail on the enrolment data, financial considerations, building renewal and repair needs, educational program impacts, and student transportation impacts that have been considered for each option.

After an analysis of these factors, administration has indicated a preference for the construction of a new, consolidated Kindergarten-Grade 12 school on the Atikokan High School site.

Of the current structure, only Grayson Hall and the Outers building would be kept.

Administration is to make a final recommendation to the board in a staff report on June 2.

The board again will hear from interested delegations on June 19, then make a final decision in mid-to late September.

That decision will go to the province in the form of a request for funding.

After its presentation, the board opened the floor to the public for their questions and feedback.

The most frequently-raised concern related to the loss of gyms (from the current three to a single gym in the proposed consolidated school).

Several school coaches and representatives from partner organizations expressed concern that many student and community activities would be negatively impacted due to significant scheduling conflicts with only one gym.

It also was suggested there is less need for a proposed regulation-sized outdoor sports field in comparison to the higher priority for additional in-demand, indoor gymnasium space, given AHS does not have a high school football or soccer team.

Other suggestions and concerns related to ensuring a state-of-the-art gymnasium (like exists at Grayson Hall) remains in place, no matter the building location ultimately selected, and ensuring a suitably-sized arts performance space with a large stage and excellent acoustics be included for musical and theatre events.

Several parents sought guarantees the younger children will be safeguarded, including shielding them from possible age-inappropriate influences of the older high school students.

There also was a great deal of discussion as to how to ensure a new school is large enough, with a sufficient number of classrooms for all programs.

Other questions related to possible effects on:

- transportation and busing;
- concerns about the possibility of unforeseen population growth and a lack of room to expand with only one school;
- questions about playground space and equipment;
- expected demolition and construction timelines; and
- relocation plans for students during the construction period.

The responses to most of these questions already have been included in a Q & A document available on the school board's website (see Atikokan Accommodation Review at www.rrdsb.com).

But Campbell said all suggestions, concerns, and questions raised at the May 18 meeting will be included in the final report to trustees.

One of the driving factors in the whole process is the deteriorating state of Atikokan High School, most of which is now more than 60 years old.

Board studies, detailed at the May 18 meeting by Travis Enge, manager of plant operations and maintenance, rate the facility as in “very poor condition.”

Over the next five years, it will need \$21.2 million in repairs and renewal.

North Star School, meanwhile, is projected to need \$4.5 million in repairs and upgrades over the next five years.

The board estimates the replacement value of the high school to be \$29.2 million, and of North Star to be \$12.4 million.