

Seismic upgrades need cooperation

Progress has been made: But Vancouver school board needs help from province to speed things up

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The Ministry of Education and the Vancouver school board were frequently in the news recently.

The issues included our seismic program and the challenges we face around educational funding for our coming budget. Continuing collaboration and communication are critical in these difficult times and that's why I was surprised by the approach taken by the ministry.

On the issue of our budget, the board has always had the intent to submit a balanced budget. We expect a balanced preliminary draft budget from senior staff by the end of this month.

We're also dedicated to turning over every rock to find savings, but we've been doing this for over a decade and are now at a point at which it is extremely tough to find cuts that won't significantly affect our system.

With this in mind, we signed a contract this month with the independent professional accounting firm Price Waterhouse Coopers to provide an update on its advisory report done in 2012.

We wanted to see how far we have progressed, have a review of our preliminary balanced budget and identify any additional savings opportunities that may exist. We notified the ministry of this contract at the beginning of March. Despite this, we were surprised to learn the minister has decided to appoint a second special adviser.

We're not sure what this second third party adviser will be able to add, but we are hopeful they will be able to clarify for the minister that, as reported in our



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Lord Nelson School in East Vancouver was slated for an upgrade in 2004, but it has since been decided building a new school would be cheaper.

audited financial statements, we do not have an unrestricted surplus of \$28 million. Unfortunately, the minister has incorrectly mentioned this surplus a number of times.

I wish we had that money available to help us during another year of challenging budget cuts but all the money he has referred to is already committed to items such as outstanding purchases or to help fund the board's current or next year's funding shortfall.

In addition to working together collaboratively on our budget, the VSB is also willing to work closely with the ministry in accelerating our seismic program. The good news is we've made significant progress.

The VSB has completed 20 seismic projects, which is as many projects completed as any

other district in the province. We also have six projects in the pipeline at various stages of development and another 23 projects supported by the ministry that we are anxious to proceed with. That means almost half of the remaining 69 seismic projects are moving forward at this time.

We want these 29 projects done in the next three to five years, but to do so we need a collaborative and supportive partner in Victoria.

While we share the ministry's sense of urgency to get these schools upgraded, their recent decision to withdraw funding for portables has made planning for our seismic program much more challenging.

Despite this, our staff and the board remain committed to doing what it takes to ensure

our kids will be learning in safe schools.

Equally problematic is the ministry's intent to fund only basic seismic upgrading of schools. Vancouver schools are some of the oldest in the province. Old schools need maintenance and over the years we've been forced to defer this work because we have received inadequate funding. Seismic projects should be a terrific opportunity to tackle these significant maintenance issues.

I'm still optimistic. Moving forward with such a massive construction program valued at about a billion dollars takes plenty of work and that's why the Vancouver school board has been pushing for the establishment of a Vancouver seismic project office for years.

The board was pleased to hear last year the province had decided to support the idea. The director of the new project office has just been hired and he will join our current facilities team in pushing our program forward aggressively.

It is my hope that from this point forward, all parties will focus their energy on what is truly important: completing the seismic program in our district expeditiously and ensuring we have a financially stable environment to support our students' learning.

As the new chair of the VSB I will continue to work in this spirit of cooperation and collaboration with all parties.

Christopher Richardson is the chair of the Vancouver school board