

Trustees vote to replace Handsworth

New school preferred over seismic upgrade

[Jane Seyd](#) / North Shore News

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How to pay for a full replacement for aging Handsworth secondary is the big question that the North Vancouver school board is currently facing, photo Mike Wakefield, North Shore News

The North Vancouver board of education has voted to ask the province for a full replacement of Handsworth secondary rather than just a seismic upgrade.

But so far there's no plan for how the school district will pay for the difference in cost between the two projects – estimated at about \$10.4 million.

Both Argyle and Handsworth schools have been approved for seismic upgrades by the province after being rated at a high risk for significant structural failure in an earthquake. The school district is still waiting for the province to give final approval for plans to go ahead with replacing Argyle. Trustees have now opted to ask the ministry of education to approve a similar plan for Handsworth.

Those projects remain the top two priorities in the school district's capital plan.

Schools superintendent John Lewis told trustees during a public meeting Jan. 19 advantages to a full replacement of the school include allowing a more compact building footprint, reduction in long-term maintenance costs and a shorter, less disruptive and less expensive construction period – 20 to 24 months for a replacement versus 36 months for a seismic upgrade.

A replacement would also allow the school district to request the school accommodate a larger enrolment – 1,300 students instead of 1,200.

Handsworth currently has an official capacity of 1,200 students although actual enrolment is about 1,500 students, including about 100 international students, who are not included in official head counts, said Lewis.

“Every room is used throughout the day,” said Lewis, adding enrolment at Handsworth has consistently exceeded projections.

In the case of a seismic upgrade “it’s just a seismic upgrade,” Lewis told trustees. “You don’t get to touch the heating or electrical systems. You’re just strengthening walls in a seismic upgrade.”

That means the school district would eventually have to spend a lot more money upgrading those systems within the old school in the case of a seismic upgrade, he said.

But he also warned trustees that North Vancouver school projects are competing with other seismic projects for schools across the province that have also been deemed high-risk.

Provincially, seismic upgrades still need to be done on about half of the 342 schools identified as high-risk.

North Vancouver has already completed seven seismic projects on its schools, with Argyle, Handsworth and Mountainside the high-risk projects yet to be done. A seismic upgrade on part of Windsor school is also going ahead. In comparison, many schools in Burnaby, Richmond and Vancouver school districts are still on the high-risk list.

But coming up with the difference between an estimated \$42.5 million for a seismic upgrade of Handsworth and \$52.9 million for a full replacement remains a major sticking point for the project.

To date, the ministry has refused to allow such replacement projects to go ahead unless the school district has a plan to repay the difference in cost within a relatively short time frame – usually by selling off unused school property to developers.

Trustees said in the meeting they will ask the ministry of education to pay the full replacement costs of Handsworth.

The province needs to accept its “basic responsibility in replacing infrastructure,” said trustee Jessica Stanley.

Trustee Barry Forward said he also supports that approach, but has doubts the province will go for it.

“The ministry will push back and say, ‘OK, start selling,’” he said.

“It’ll be about land sales again, and we’re going to get into that debate and it could take years for that to happen.”

In an interview after the meeting, school board chairwoman Christie Sacré said there may be other options to explore, such as generating revenue from a long-term lease rather than selling property.

That would require agreement from the ministry of education.

Sacré said the school district has now paid off all its past capital debts and is in a good financial position.

But she added there are also potential risks to delaying the Handsworth project. “We know we can get the money for a seismic project,” she said. “The ministry’s wanting that money to be used.”

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