

## Trustees won't seek patrons for Argyle

### Private fundraising to build schools a 'slippery slope'

[Jane Seyd](#) / North Shore News

February 26, 2016 12:00 AM



Students at West Vancouver secondary outside the Kay Meek Centre. Some have questioned why private philanthropists couldn't be pursued for an Argyle project. photo Mike Wakefield, North Shore News

North Vancouver school trustees aren't counting on a wealthy patron to ride to the rescue of their preferred option for rebuilding Argyle school, which was to include a performing arts theatre and public sports facilities.

In a split vote, trustees recently voted down the idea of getting staff to report on what would be involved in seeking out philanthropists to fund capital projects like the preferred Argyle replacement.

Trustees who voted against the idea said the school district doesn't have the time or expertise to mount a major capital funding campaign before decisions are needed on the Argyle project. They said the topic also raises philosophical concerns about who should pay for capital projects in public education.

The idea of seeking out private funding to help close the deal on an Argyle school replacement was raised by trustee Megan Higgins at the board's regular public meeting Feb. 16.

Higgins told her fellow trustees it's time the school board started looking at other options to fund desired capital projects. Scaling back the Argyle project "is not a preferred option," said Higgins. She added continuing to fund capital projects by selling off lands to developers is also "not sustainable in the long term. We just don't have enough surplus properties to fund new schools going forward."

Higgins said she'd like staff to put together a report on what would be involved in seeking funding from non-corporate private donors for both Argyle and future projects, like the replacement of Handsworth secondary.

But others trustees weren't sure that was a good idea.

Trustee Cyndi Gerlach described it as a “slippery slope.

“It will send a message the government doesn’t need to fund capital projects,” she said. “I’m really concerned about where this goes.”

She added it’s too late to start fundraising for Argyle. “We could have had this discussion last year if it was something we were seriously going to consider.”

Schools superintendent John Lewis reminded trustees the school district has raised enough money – \$11.3 million – through land sales to pay for a full school replacement, rather than simply a seismic upgrade, which would have cost the province \$8.9 million. But it doesn’t have enough to pay the full \$13.7 million required for the school district’s preferred option.

That means that some of the extras trustees were hoping to include in the project – a 250-seat performance space, capacity for an extra 100 students and additional recreational space – may have to be cut from the project. So far, the board hasn’t discussed what the priorities for the project would be, said Lewis.

The school district is still waiting on official word on a project agreement from the Ministry of Education. Without that, the school district can’t start work on a replacement project.

Trustee Jessica Stanley said she’d welcome any discussion that explored how to move forward on the project that doesn’t rely on land sales.

“My community is wanting creative thinking,” she said. “People are looking for creative fundraising options that (don’t) involve selling off community assets.”

Trustee Barry Forward blamed the province for the situation, adding in the past the school district only had to have a plan in place to pay back any capital debt, while now the ministry insists the money be in the bank.

He said he thinks the school district should be allowed to carry a small capital debt to fund its preferred option.

But he added, “Someone has to take leadership on this.”

Higgins pointed to other public facilities that have been funded through partnerships with private donors – like the new emergency room and HOpe mental health centre at Lions Gate Hospital and the Kay Meek Centre on the site of West Vancouver secondary.

Earlier in the evening, Samantha Mason, a parent involved in advocating for an Argyle replacement, urged trustees to look into “every possible avenue” to raise the extra money needed to build the preferred option.

But Lewis warned trustees previous reports that looked into private fundraising for projects like the outdoor school concluded the time and money required to mount a major capital fundraising campaign would be too much for the school district to take on.

In the end the motion for staff to put together a report on the issue was defeated, with trustees Franci Stratton, Cyndi Gerlach and Christie Sacré voting against it.

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