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Surrey mayor balks at building ban

School board sees limits on new housing as remedy to overcrowding

The Surrey School Board is proposing a halt to all new residential development in some areas of the city to alleviate school overcrowding, but Mayor Linda Hepner says the idea is not a realistic solution.

A ban on new housing was proposed for the neighbourhoods of South Newton, Clayton and South Grandview, which are experiencing “explosive” growth in their student populations, said school trustee Laurae McNally.

McNally’s motion, passed unanimously by the school board last week, demanded that the city halt approvals of new residential building in those areas of Surrey until the district receives more capital funding from the province.

“I don’t understand that simple solution,” said Hepner on Monday. “I think while growth is a challenge, it’s a good challenge to have. If we put a stop to development, how does that help young families looking for a home they can afford?”

“Instead, looking at how new schools get the green light should be looked at. It’s the policy question (at the provincial level) that needs to be part of the solution. Not stopping economic growth. I’m not sure (the school board’s) answer is the right one. In fact, I’d say it isn’t the right one.”

McNally said of the 70,000 students in Surrey, more than 7,000 are in portables, which costs the district \$4 million annually — a cost not covered by the province.

“I’ve been a school trustee for 30 years, and this is the worst I’ve ever seen it,” said McNally. “Surrey has always been growing, and portables will always be a fact of life here, but the province really needs to step up and provide funding for new schools.”

McNally said the district urgently needs a new high school in Grandview-South Surrey, as well as two new elementary schools in Clayton and several elementary schools in South Newton and Grandview.

“The province holds the purse strings. People want complete communities — not just houses, but schools as well.”

She noted that even if the province gave immediate approval to build the schools that are needed, it would still take two to three years before the facilities could open.

“We do have a new high school under construction in Clayton, but the number of students who will be going there was based on the number of children in the district at the time (that funding was approved). Since then, many more students have moved in, and chances are high that when we open a new school there’s already going to be a portable on the ground,” said McNally, adding next fall the district expects about 1,000 more students.

She said her motion to temporarily stop new residential development in Clayton, Newton and South Grandview will likely be heard by city council next month, but she has no idea whether it will be approved. But she said she has been getting a lot of support from the public, who are fed up with school overcrowding. Hepner said she was surprised to learn of the school board’s motion.

“We had previously scheduled a meeting with the board in May, and growth was going to be one of the priority topics. I was a little surprised they made that resolution when we hadn’t even met yet,” said Hepner.

Surrey School District spokesman Doug Strachan said the number of portables in the city has hovered around 275 to 300 for the last five years. When a school gets approval to add classrooms, the portables are not eliminated, but simply moved elsewhere in the district.

“As we see the development happening, there’s nothing on the books for approved funding for new schools (in those areas of new developments). The growth is certainly at a high rate, and we’re falling behind,” he said.

B.C. Education Minister Mike Bernier issued a statement saying the ministry is working closely with the district to find a way to deal with growth pressures, but he did not say whether the requested schools have been approved for funding.



“As we move forward, Surrey and other districts experiencing growth will be a priority for future capital investments,” the statement read.