

Parents petition for Argyle replacement

Jane Seyd / North Shore News

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file photo Cindy Goodman, North Shore News

Parents whose kids will one day head to Argyle secondary are putting pressure on the District of North Vancouver to approve the latest development plan for a school district property that could provide key funding for replacement of the aging building.

Fed up with a decade of delay, parents whose elementary-school-aged kids live in the Argyle catchment area have been making their views known through an online petition and are vowing to show up and let council know how they feel.

"I've known about this for years and only recently was I made aware this wasn't a done deal," said Erika Gailus Hogan, whose elementary-school-aged kids go to school in Lynn Valley.

Parents are focusing their energies on the latest development plan being put forward by Wedgewood Developments for an unused plot of land next to Braemar elementary. If the development is approved, Wedgewood will complete the purchase of the land from the school district for \$2.4 million, which will provide the final funding towards a \$51.5-million replacement of the seismically risky Argyle. Last year, district council rejected a plan to build seven single-family homes on the land in a 4-3 vote.

Having money in the bank to pay for the school district's preferred option of replacing Argyle with a brand-new building is one of the issues the province wants the school district to address before signing a project agreement for Argyle.

Argyle has already received approval for a seismic upgrade – at an estimated cost of \$37.8 million. But the school district has long argued that replacing the aging school makes more sense. A new school would be built to a higher earthquake standard than a seismic upgrade would provide, said John Lewis, schools superintendent.

The price is also higher. Currently, a "basic" replacement of the school is pegged at \$45.7 million, while the district's preferred option – which includes classroom space for about 100 more students plus room for a 250-seat performing

arts area – has a price tag of \$51.5 million.

To make that happen, the school district will have to fund the \$13.7-million difference in price.

So far, land sales have provided more than \$11 million towards that.

The province has also required the school district to finish paying back a \$7.2-million debt owed from replacement projects for Sutherland secondary and Westview elementary. The recent conclusion of a sale for the Ridgeway Annex property will provide enough cash for repayment of that debt, said Lewis.

Another issue that will have to be addressed is a plan to deal with a culvert from Kilmer Creek that runs underneath the school property. School district staff are still in discussions about that, but initial estimates have pegged the cost – to re-route the creek or put in a bigger pipe – at about \$800,000.

Lewis said the school district has been told the Argyle project will be reviewed by the provincial treasury board this month.

If the revised development plan for the Braemar land is rejected, Lewis acknowledges Plan B would likely involve the school district reducing the scope of the Argyle project.

Barry Forward, a school district trustee, says the dynamic isn't comfortable for anyone. "It pits neighbourhood against neighbourhood," he said, and puts pressure on district councillors. "That's a tough situation for everybody."

Parents in the Argyle area are hoping a scaled-back version of the project won't be necessary.

Gailus Hogan said she understands some residents near Braemar elementary – who raised traffic concerns in an earlier public hearing – aren't thrilled about development in their neighbourhood. But she adds, "In my view, it's the same issue that North Vancouver continues to face in terms of density."

Gailus Hogan said she supports the school district strategy of selling "surplus" lands to pay for capital replacements.

"It's unfortunate that the school district has to take that route but that's a provincial government funding issue that isn't going to get resolved any time soon," she said.

A similar discussion is expected among school trustees when it comes to the next project – a potential replacement of Handsworth secondary, which students in the Braemar area attend. So far that school has also only received funding approval for a seismic upgrade.

"Surplus" today does not mean surplus in the future. Sale of any public land to build non-sustainable capital projects is a bankrupt approach robbing future generations of their choices - akin to a farmer selling part of his land in order to build a new barn! - cjk

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