

Accommodation Review Committee

Delegation Submission

Meeting Date: Wednesday, April 27, 2016

My name is Gordon Malo and I am the parent of children enrolled in Kindergarten, Grade 2 and Grade 4 classes at West Lynn Public School.

Upon receiving notice of the Accommodations Review process, and in reading the initial recommendation to close West Lynn Public School, I was naturally quite disappointed. I am very pleased with the educational experience my children are receiving at West Lynn, and the broader West Lynn community, including staff and parents, is very positive and supportive. It is a healthy and vibrant school and its closing would certainly be a loss for our community.

Nonetheless, in reviewing the information provided within the initial Recommendation report and through listening to the additional information presented at the first ARC meeting, it is very clear that with the declining enrolment rates in our schools it is necessary to close a school to achieve the targeted school utilization rate of 85%.

To this end, it also appears as though large steps have already been taken down the path of closing West Lynn and investing in Elgin Avenue Public School – what I will refer to as the “Elgin Option”. Not only is this the initial Recommendation put forward, but significant work has been completed in determining what expansion and improvement investments are required at Elgin and a proposal has been submitted to the Ministry of Education for these specific capital funds.

However, the details of this direction have proven quite concerning to many parents and community members. Through discussions with others it has become clear that many are asking whether a better result could be obtained by investing in West Lynn Public School – what I will refer to as the “West Lynn Option”. At the first ARC Committee meeting I asked if this alternative could be modelled out, and at the April 12, 2016 meeting Mr. Jamie Gunn presented the West Lynn Option. To me and many others the West Lynn Option is strikingly superior to that of investing in Elgin.

These are the reasons:

1) Enhanced Utilization Rates

This is the primary reason for closing a school. The Elgin Option immediately improves the utilization rate to 87.7% and has a 10-year projected utilization rate of 85.8%, or just barely over the 85% target. The West Lynn option does far better, and in doing so provides a buffer against projection variance. The West Lynn Option results in an immediate utilization rate of 89.2% and a 10-year utilization rate of 90.4%

It does this while achieving other, student and community-focused results, such as:

2) Keeping Students In Their Community School

Under the Elgin Option, the school boundary between Walsh and Elgin shifts west, resulting in 50 children being transferred to Elgin from as far away as Turkey Point Road. We heard very clearly in the first ARC

meeting that these families associate with the Walsh Public School and community and this change is of great concern.

Under the Elgin Option the school boundary between Walsh and Lakewood also shifts west, resulting in 100 children being transferred to Lakewood in Port Dover. This is most certainly not their community school, as some children would have a one-way, direct bus route of over 22 km. Put another way, they would be riding the bus for a marathon a day if the bus went directly from their house to the school.

Finally, under the Elgin Option the school boundary between Simcoe and Lakewood shifts west towards Simcoe, resulting in 20 children going to school in Port Dover despite living in, or only a few kilometers from, Simcoe.

Building strong communities requires children to attend school in their community. The Elgin Option fails to do this.

The West Lynn Option results in no changes to English programming school boundaries outside of Simcoe. Within Simcoe, all Simcoe children will continue to attend a Simcoe school.

For French Immersion students, their situation will be improved by being able to attend either Walsh or Lakewood, significantly reducing transportation times for many students and allowing them to attend school in, or closer to, their home community.

3) French Immersion Expansion

The West Lynn Option would see French Immersion fully implemented at both Walsh and Lakewood. This would likely entice additional families in the east section of the zone to consider French Immersion. Further, student retention would be supported as students who may otherwise consider enrolling in French Immersion within the Catholic School Board in Simcoe, which is soon to be introduced, will have multiple options within the Public School Board. This will help further support the projected utilization rates.

4) Transition

With the Elgin Option a significant number of portables will need to be located at Lynndale Heights and West Lynn to accommodate the 225 Elgin students during Elgin's construction project. Once completed, all 225 original Elgin students as well as 265 West Lynn students and 50 Walsh students will be re-located back to Elgin. Further, an additional 100 students will be re-located from Walsh to Lakewood. This will be a stressful experience for all of these students, and particularly concerning for those enrolled in the self-contained classes.

The West Lynn Option should experience a much more streamlined transition, with an isolated school addition and far more modest improvements to the existing structure.

5) Capital Cost

Only a couple years ago Elgin Avenue Public School was determined to be beyond repair. It is an old, inaccessible school requiring a vast overhaul in order to accommodate the Elgin Option. Per Mr. Jamie Gunn, renewal costs would be significantly less at West Lynn. If we are going to invest in a school, we should invest in the better asset. That is the West Lynn Option.

6) Property Re-Purposing Opportunities

The Elgin Avenue Public School property has much to offer the community. With its proximity to Norfolk General Hospital and Nursing Home, the land may be an attractive investment to the hospital or to other public or private healthcare institutions looking to supplement the health care offerings in this area. Accordingly, the West Lynn Option provides the opportunity for greater community re-purposing of the Elgin Avenue property while also offering the Board enhanced revenue-generating possibilities.

For these reasons, on balance, the West Lynn Option provides a superior result for our students, their families and the community at large. The West Lynn Option results in a higher near and long-term utilization rate, it allows more students to go to school within their community, it makes French Immersion more accessible to more families, it allows for an easier transition process, it invests fewer dollars into a better asset, and it makes available a public space of great community value.

So why was this not the initial Recommendation to the Board? Perhaps because the West Lynn Option requires the acquisition of additional property for expansion, and all adjacent land is privately owned. Without knowing if such land can be acquired the West Lynn Option is purely hypothetical.

Fortunately, since the time of the initial Recommendation, new information has come to light. On April 13, 2016 Ms. Phyllis Renton provided a letter to the Grand Erie District School Board indicating that her family owns approximately 3 acres of property adjoining the south boundary of West Lynn Public School. Her family has been made aware of the Accommodation Review process and the ARC meetings, and they wish to inform the Board that they would be open to discussing the sale of their property to the Board, at its fair market value, should there be an interest in expanding West Lynn Public School.

This information allows the West Lynn Option to be a real, rather than hypothetical, alternative. In completing your review within this context, I believe that you you will find that a comprehensive, objective consideration of the alternatives will show that the West Lynn Option is unequivocally the best path to satisfying the targeted 85% utilization goal.

I thank you for your time and the opportunity to present my thoughts.

Sincerely,

Gordon Malo