

Take the school forward

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It wasn't about winning or losing, although that was the feeling many had when they left the Castleton and South Cramahe Public School Pupil Accommodation Review Committee meeting March 3.

Parents and staff from the two schools and members of the community were faced with two questions at the meeting. Should they consolidate the two school communities? Where should a new school be located?

There were no other options. If the committee decided not to amalgamate, the schools would close anyway and the kids would be shipped off to schools in the Municipality of Brighton.

With agreement they should amalgamate, the thorny issue arose about where to put the new school. There were three choices — on one of the two current school properties or on a new "greenfield" site.

It became apparent relatively quickly that the South Cramahe site was the least attractive option. For some of the 50 in attendance, there was an expectation coming into the meeting that the South Cramahe property would not be chosen. They were ready to accept a "neutral" greenfield site.

Perhaps if they had known ahead of the meeting the restrictions faced in obtaining a greenfield site, the parents from South Cramahe might have been more amenable to considering the Castleton location. But they didn't.

And, after accepting that South Cramahe would close, going the next step to choosing the "other school" site was clearly too painful, too big an emotional concession when they had already suffered one loss.

Several participants at the March 3 meeting at Castleton pointed to the importance of the bond families feel toward their "school community". It is the centre of the lives of their children for 10 years. Accepting its loss is tough.

But, if the committee members are going to complete the rest of the task assigned to them when they started this journey, together they must now find a location for the new Cramahe public school.

The community and the committee members from South Cramahe have to remember this is all about retaining a school in Cramahe when, a little over a year ago, we were losing both schools. It's not about losing. Regardless of the outcome, when the committee meets again April 10, Cramahe should get a new school, and it will be better equipped than either of the two schools it replaces.

Committee members can opt to force a no-decision or look at the two remaining choices and move to consensus.

The greenfield site is an unlikely prospect at best. The location of a potential greenfield site is severely restricted by the township's official plan and provincial government restrictions regarding farm land. If a site were found in the allowable area, and if it could be purchased for an agreeable price, and the required approvals were granted by the township and the province, and the school board accepted the extra cost of buying land when it has another suitable piece within a few kilometers, and if no one opposed the choice at the Ontario Municipal Board, and it was all done within eight months, it would be almost within sight of Castleton anyway — hardly the compromise the South Cramahe families were seeking.

While one can argue it's easy for those who appeared to "win" to be magnanimous, the feeling at the committee table on March 3 was genuine. The suggestion to call the new school Cramahe United was a sincere gesture made by someone acknowledging the pain.

Is this the best possible world for those who live south of County Road 2? No.

Is this the best possible choice for those who live south of 401? Maybe, when you take into account the rules which govern school maintenance and student accommodation.

It is a little gratuitous to suggest the South Cramahe parents should just suck it up and move on. That's simply not fair.

But, the rules which govern having a school in our municipality, and the availability of provincial financing, dictate it must be done this way.

Are there better ways? Probably.

But, this is far superior to the way it was handled only a few years ago when board officials dropped their decisions on unsuspecting school communities, mandating change without reasoned input from those most affected.

Who is to know what Associate Director of Education Sherry Summersides' preference is? Perhaps that's irrelevant. Using the model required by law, we have been taken this far. While she has guided the process, she cannot control the variables which govern selection.

We can take the next steps ourselves, or fall back on the historic approach where Ms. Summersides presents the facts, and her opinion to the trustees, with no mandate from the public, leaving it for the board trustees to decide.

It's not much of a choice on April 10 for those who face the impending closure of their school — but that was going to happen anyway.

What remains now is for residents of Cramahe to decide if they will move forward together, or leave progress to the bureaucrats.

On April 10, we will know the answer.