

Public schools to undergo much-needed repairs

By JASON MISNER

Special to The Champion

Over the next five to six months Halton public elementary and high schools will undergo a frenzy of renovations like they've never seen in such a short period of time.

The sound of saws and hammers will fill the spring and summer air as dozens of elementary and high schools throughout the region undergo scores of repairs, mainly to address urgent big-ticket items like boilers, windows and roofs. Board staff say in many cases these items have deteriorated due to a lack of provincial funding over the last few years.

The projects total \$20 million and are part of \$50 million worth of repairs that have been identified as urgent by engineers hired by the Ontario Liberal government to investigate the province's 5,000 schools. The idea is the government will set aside the urgent money over the next year to ensure these repairs get done first.

Overall, engineers have determined the Halton public board needs a total of \$90 million worth of repairs.

The first round of local repairs should be completed by around October.

The Ministry of Education in February announced funding of

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GERRY CULLEN

\$280 million for school boards to leverage \$4 billion in loans to repair, expand and build new schools.

The Halton public board has been initially earmarked \$1.46 million to finance around \$20 million worth of work on schools that are expected to be open for at least 10 years.

Trustees approved the long list of projects — more than 200 — at a recent board meeting.

In an interview, Gerry Cullen, the board's superintendent of facility services, said the sheer number of projects slated for the next few months — the majority to be finished by September — would be intense. About 12 years ago, the board underwent \$20 million worth of repairs but over a two-year period.

"That's the cost of a new secondary school," he said.

He said next year the second phase of funding should be completed, with the anticipation the board will get another \$20 million for additional repairs.

The issue of spending money on schools that might be tagged for future closures was brought up at the meeting. Mr. Cullen said the board currently receives \$6 million a year for renewal to spruce up older buildings. That money, he said, would be pegged at the appropriate time when a school might be tapped for closure, thus ensuring the urgent repair money goes where it's supposed to go.

What the latest funding announcement speaks to is the fact the \$6 million annual renewal grant — the amount the board has been receiving since the late 1990s — is woefully inadequate, Mr. Cullen said.

He said in the case of the Halton public board, taking into account its building inventory, it should be spending roughly \$20 million a year on repairs. That would mean the board has been short tens of millions of dollars over the years to properly fix aging buildings. The board has a total of 90 buildings — 17 of them high schools and the rest elementary schools.

"Six million dollars has been barely enough to keep things going forward," Mr. Cullen said. "You get this backlog you haven't caught up on. The slippage is millions, which the Province has acknowledged and they're starting to address."

Trustees applauded the move by the Province to invest money into fixing up crumbling infrastructure that has needed attention for a long time.

Oakville Trustee Mary Chapin said it's an "exciting shift in attitude."

"I'm very encouraged that we finally have an influx of money into this area that has been neglected for so long," she said. "There are some schools, buildings and properties that are really crying for attention. It won't do everything we want to do. In my opinion, there is never going to be enough money to bring everything up to the standard we'd like it to be."

Burlington Trustee Debbie Downs said the repair funding is "absolutely a step in the right direction."

"It's (the number of projects) going to be intense."

Meanwhile, board senior staff have told trustees they're still awaiting information specifically about how Provincial money will flow to build much-needed schools. The Halton plan includes the need to build 10 schools over the next five years.

The Liberals have said that Ontario boards will no longer have to close schools to free up pupil spaces to build new ones, which was a major component of the formula introduced by the previous Conservative government.

Public open house on housing strategy

The Region will host an open house/information session on Halton's housing and the related strategy it's developing June 14.

The event will run from 6:30 to 9 p.m. at the Halton Regional Centre, 1151 Bronté Rd., in Oakville. It will cover the current housing situation in Halton, the range of housing types across the region and the continuum of housing for all incomes and stages of life.

For more information visit www.region.halton.on.ca, call (905) 825-6000 or e-mail housingstrategy@region.halton.on.ca.

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Campbellville's Newest Day Spa

Lauren Cairns, owner and operator of Elements Day Spa has lived in the Milton area for over 12 years and was a graduate of Milton District High School. She went on to a three-year program at Sir Sanford Fleming College earning her diploma in Registered Massage Therapy. Her working career started at the prestigious Ste. Anne's at

Haldiman Hills Spa Village in Grafton, Ontario. It was here that she first discovered how much she enjoyed helping others and being a part of their spa experience. At that time she planned on one day opening a spa of her own. Since then her goal has been reached and transformed into Elements Day Spa. Lauren is looking forward to meeting new clients and new friends. Come and visit us soon.

Saturday, June 4
12 Noon

GRAND OPENING

Come and enjoy refreshments as well as a chance to win prizes and giveaways. Meet our friendly staff and tour our newly renovated facility. see you there!

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