

Trustees await details of new funding criteria

By JASON MISNER
Special to The Champion

Halton District School Board trustees are hoping for good things when the Ontario Ministry of Education soon releases details about new school funding criteria.

Ministry spokesperson Linda Nicolson said the Province is aware of Halton's building dilemma, and noted that the release of guidelines stipulating how new school construction is to occur is on the horizon. But exactly how soon has yet to be determined.

"There are capital planning guidelines that are due to be released very soon," she said. "The board has been very good to send us a lot of information about the situation and staff are reviewing that information now, and hope to be able to talk to the board about it very soon. While there is a process in place, we do realize Halton has a specific urgent situation that we are going to help them deal with."

Trustees and board staff have been anxiously awaiting word from the Province for months about how they will be able to construct new schools. What has them feeling nervous is the fact it takes about a year to have a school designed, built and open. That's why they are crossing their fingers construction guidelines will be released soon.

Building new schools for the public board has been a critical issue for some time, given the student population has grown by more than 11 per cent since 2001. There are pockets in the region where housing growth is exploding and

bringing with it kids who need a school, particularly in Milton and Georgetown.

Burlington Trustee Janie Hames said it's encouraging to hear the ministry is apparently ready to soon release construction details.

The board, she said, needs to know right away how to proceed with building new schools, especially since accommodation plans call for the board to build and open four new schools — one each in the four regional municipalities of Burlington, Oakville, Halton Hills and Milton by September 2006. The total cost is expected to be around \$28 million.

Ms Hames doesn't think the ministry will hand over a bulk amount of money to be used by the board to build whatever number of schools they can.

"Obviously we've been asking and waiting (for direction) and desperately need to build these schools," Ms Hames said. "For the sake of these communities we need to build. It's going to be interesting for sure to see how they are going to fund it."

"The sooner we hear, the better."

But Ms Hames said the ministry should have been prepared to release details about new school construction shortly after it announced major changes to the controversial funding formula in February. Those changes included scrapping the requirement, instituted by the previous Conservative government, that underutilized schools be closed to free up money for more pupil spaces.

"It's been frustrating and disappointing (to wait)," she said.

Clownin' around

Six-year-old Jessica Vala sings along with Patty the Clown during the recent Patty's Beach Party at Milton Mall.

Photo by GRAHAM PAINE





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