

Catholic trustees stand firm against regional campus

By Howard Mozel
SPECIAL TO THE CHAMPION

Halton Catholic District School Board (HCDSB) trustees who recently voted against joining the Halton Regional Campus said they did so to preserve Catholic education and they stand by their decision.

Burlington Trustee Joanne Matters listed three major reasons for her decision, one of which is that being part of the joint facility will be more of a "distraction" than a benefit to providing the board's core mandate, namely delivering quality Catholic education.

"Honestly, I can't see how that helps," she said. "It won't enhance us in any way."

In addition to saying that funding for the project and the cost savings put forward by board staff were "speculative at best," Matters also has concerns about the board maintaining its autonomy — especially in an era when Christian values are being eroded or are under outright threat.

Proximity to the board's "secular partners" at the campus might only further this trend, she added.

"We are different," said Matters, maintaining that the board must remain vigilant to safeguard its distinctiveness.

Some differences between Catholic beliefs and secular beliefs simply can't be reconciled, Matters said, and if it's not careful the board could be "weakened" by them.

"We don't exist to be melted into the secular fabric of society," she concluded.

Rather than look to the past, however, Matters said the board should be excited by last week's decision to move ahead with a stand-alone central administrative facility. That a new Catholic Education Centre is needed is something on which all trustees can agree, she said.

The proposed campus is essentially a government office "supercentre" that involves the creation of a major, 540,000-square-foot multi-use campus on the Bronte Road property currently occupied by Halton Regional headquarters as well as adjacent land that's up for sale. If it comes to pass without the HCDSB, the site would be a central location that includes at least three distinct, stand-alone areas of office space for the Region, Halton Regional Police and the Halton District School Board, plus a shared facility housing about 1,900 staff.

Burlington Trustee Bob Van de Vrande agreed with Matters that some issues between the Catholic board and the other campus partners simply can't be resolved.

"There are still differences between the values of Catholic education and those espoused by some of the other partners that are simply not reconcilable with our own values," he said. "As Christians we are called to love our neighbour, but that doesn't necessarily mean accepting all that they do or stand for."

Rather than simply look outward for threats, Van de Vrande said some trustees are also looking inward.

"Many of us recognize that the threat — if there is one to Catholic education — is from within by weakening ourselves or opening ourselves too much to non-Catholic values that Catholic education will eventually implode," he said.

All too often, he continued, the board takes the path of least resistance or adopts a politically correct stance that's not always acceptable, so ultimately it comes down to effective leadership — or the lack thereof.

"Personally I feel that's where our board is lacking, both at the trustee level and with our (Education) Director (Lou Piovesan) and others," said Van de Vrande, who added that sometimes the board will "subvert our own policies" for expediency and that too much is done behind closed doors.

"My attitude is that if it can't see the light of day it's probably not good," he said.

Like Matters, Van de Vrande also had serious concerns

about the alleged cost savings to the board through the campus, which he said are a "10 year projection based on estimates and assumptions, most of which are not even identified in the (staff) report."

Van de Vrande also believes that "it is entirely possible that the future Catholic administration facility can be built for a lower cost per square foot and without some of the bells and whistles included in the joint proposal" that may be unnecessary to "delivering quality Catholic education" to students.

Van de Vrande characterized the notion that there's no funding available for a stand-alone facility as "misinformation at its worst" and that campus proponents fail to mention that there was no funding for the board's participation in the campus either.

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