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# Construction ban close

LISA QUEEN  
Staff Reporter

Greater Toronto Area mayors are one step away from banning the construction of new homes in an escalating battle with the province over new schools.

"I think we're very close. I think we're very, very close," said Vaughan Mayor Lorna Jackson, a member of the mayors' task force on the issue.

The mayors agreed to present the province with a list of demands approved at their monthly meeting in Pickering Friday. If the government doesn't agree, Jackson said, municipalities will refuse to approve new subdivisions.

"We feel that is essential. The province has said we not only have the power, but the responsibility, to have all facilities in place before we approve new homes,"

she said.

"We're going to take that responsibility seriously and say no. Then they'll have the UDI (Urban Development Institute) and everybody else knocking on their (the province's) door downtown."

Provincial officials, normally on hand for the mayors' meetings, did not attend Friday's gathering.

The mayors and school board officials are upset about the province's education funding formula.

Under the new process, school boards in high-growth areas would have to prove they have filled every classroom in the region before they qualify for new schools.

The board would have to bus students from one end of the region to the other to fill empty desks before it could justify asking for a new school.

The mayors are demanding the

province lower the threshold, so boards have to prove they have used 90 per cent of their existing capacity, rather than 100 per cent.

"This will go a long way to address certain problems of defining capacity. Split grades, special subjects such as French or music, and special rooms such as computer labs, science or tech rooms are rarely used 100 per cent of the day," Ajax Mayor Steve Parrish said.

"If every room must be fully occupied for the entire day, the school will be overcrowded and will require portables."

The mayors want the school boards to be able to define smaller growth areas so the boards wouldn't have to look at capacity in the region overall.

"UDI has apparently had a great deal of input into education development charges and school funding issues generally while municipalities have had virtually none," Parrish complained.

"This is totally inappropriate and growth municipalities must be at the table to ensure that their needs are met. This is not simply an educational issue."

The problem of delayed school construction has been a thorn in the sides of councils and boards for years.

But, in addition to the new funding formula, there are several issues exacerbating the problem.

The regions around Toronto are undergoing a construction boom, increasing the demand for new schools.

Municipal Affairs Minister Al Leach told mayors this spring they have the power to stop new home construction until they can guarantee new schools are built.

In the past, new subdivisions had to be three-quarters full before new schools were built.

At last month's mayors' meeting in Richmond Hill, Tory MPP Steve Gilchrist blamed school boards for failing to build new schools quickly enough in the past.

The Scarborough MPP, who is also parliamentary assistant to Leach, insisted the province had always provided boards with adequate funding.

But, he said, it was school officials who delayed construction until the majority of residents who had moved into their new homes.

"It's one of the reasons why school boards were not, in some cases, the best vehicle for making spending decisions."

The statement infuriated board officials and mayors, who blamed the delays on provincial policy.

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