

EDUCATION: Portables can be replaced with extra schools and additions under new funding formula

Portables on the way out, boards vow

BY JENNIFER BROWN
STAFF WRITER

York Region's school boards want to wage a war on portables, and the plan may mean more spacious school yards.

But public board chairperson Bill Crothers warns a debate will be waged over whether to build schools in new subdivisions where there are no schools, or in older neighbourhoods that have been stuck with portable classrooms since the mid-'80s.

Although both boards are already in the process of building a dozen new schools, part of the province's new capital funding formula allows the construction of additions or extra schools to replace portable classrooms.

"We will be working up a plan to get rid of portables," said Ralph Benson, the board's superintendent of corporate planning, although he added there is no timeframe yet, nor a target of how many portables will be cut.

"We hope to be able to bring that plan to the board in March. But we have yet to make the decision as to how we will distribute the resources we have."

Crothers said the plan will have to strike the right balance.

"The question will be, 'Is the emphasis on getting rid of portables or making sure there is accommodation in new communities?' We have

to balance off those two things."

York's separate school board is also looking at reducing its dependency on portables, according to spokesperson Chris Cable. "They won't vanish completely but we are already looking at a new addition at St. Thomas Aquinas in Keswick," she said, adding that four new elementary schools will also open this fall.

'If we have old portables, they are susceptible to all kinds of issues and they are expensive to operate. If we can clean them out, all the better.'

The Catholic board will also examine traditional planning methods, such as boundary changes, to reduce the 370 portables now in use.

"The key here is we're a growing board and, under the new funding formula, we will always be in a position to build new schools," Cable said.

The other factor motivating the public board to reduce its stock of 700 portables is that those that are now 12 years old are becoming structurally unsound.

Many have water damage and have prompted health concerns among students, parents and teachers. And even though many have been repaired, that process is considered expensive.

Over the Christmas holidays, an 18-pack of portables at Huron Heights Secondary School in Newmarket was deemed unfit for student use.

"They've got a given lifespan and we've been using portables for quite a time — we didn't have a choice. If we have old portables, they are susceptible to all kinds of issues and they are expensive to operate. If we can clean them out, all the better," Benson said.

More than 500 portables are used in the public board for classes, with another 200 being used for storage and administration.

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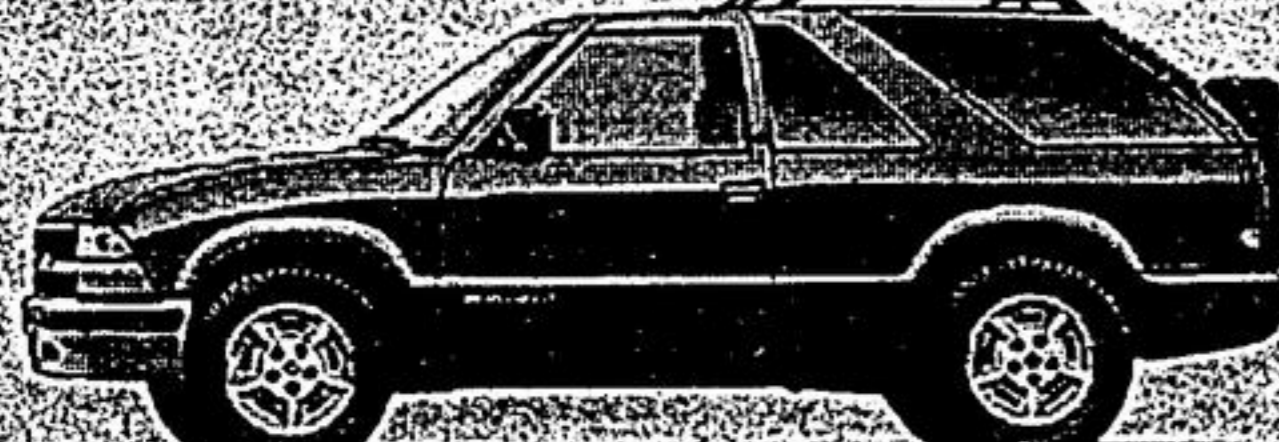

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