Catholic board won't close Thornhill high schools

BY GIANNI COLAVECCHIA
Staff Writer

Two Catholic high schools in Thornhill will stay open despite a prediction their student populations will fall, officials say.

School board administrators are wondering what to do about St. Elizabeth and St. Robert after dropping a plan to convert them to gender-based facilities.

Officials had hoped turning St. Elizabeth into an all-girls school and St. Robert into an all-boys facility would prevent student enrolment from falling too far.

But after thousands of parents voiced disapproval with that idea, board staff and school administrators are expected to thrash out new proposals.

Jack Cronin, associate director of instructional services, said there's no danger the schools will close.

"There's no doubt about it," he said. "There are lots of high schools that have less than 800 kids. In five years, our prediction of 800 kids may be inaccurate."

Projections put the population of St. Elizabeth, which has about 1,400 students, at less than 800 over the next five to 10 years. The population of St. Robert, with approximately 1,500 students, is to fall to less than 850.

The board's ultimate goal is to have enrolment at each school hover steadily around 1,000 students.

The enrolment drops are likely because a Richmond Hill high school, St. Therese, is scheduled to open in September 2001 and draw on elementary students who would ordinarily attend St. Elizabeth and St. Robert.

A big factor in deciding if a high school should close is whether there are enough elementary students in nearby communities, Cronin said.

Board policy states, "a review of student accommodations shall be undertaken in areas in which ... it is financially inefficient to continue operating a school facility or the educational program cannot be effectively and efficiently offered."

Spokesperson Chris Cable said officials haven't in recent memory seen the threat of a Thornhill high school closing.

"We have seen more construction in those areas, which may change our thinking entirely," she said. "There are lots of housing units going up around the St. Robert area. They will still remain very viable school centres."

Officials are considering a plan to bring the schools an advanced placement program, which would require higher standards from students and allow some courses to count as credits at post-secondary institutions.

After parents supported it, officials also retained a proposal to bring in the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, which would open up a more rigorous learning environment in key subject areas and give students an advantage when applying to universities.

Officials once hoped changes would be in place for September 2001 but Cronin said there is no timeline for putting the issue to rest.

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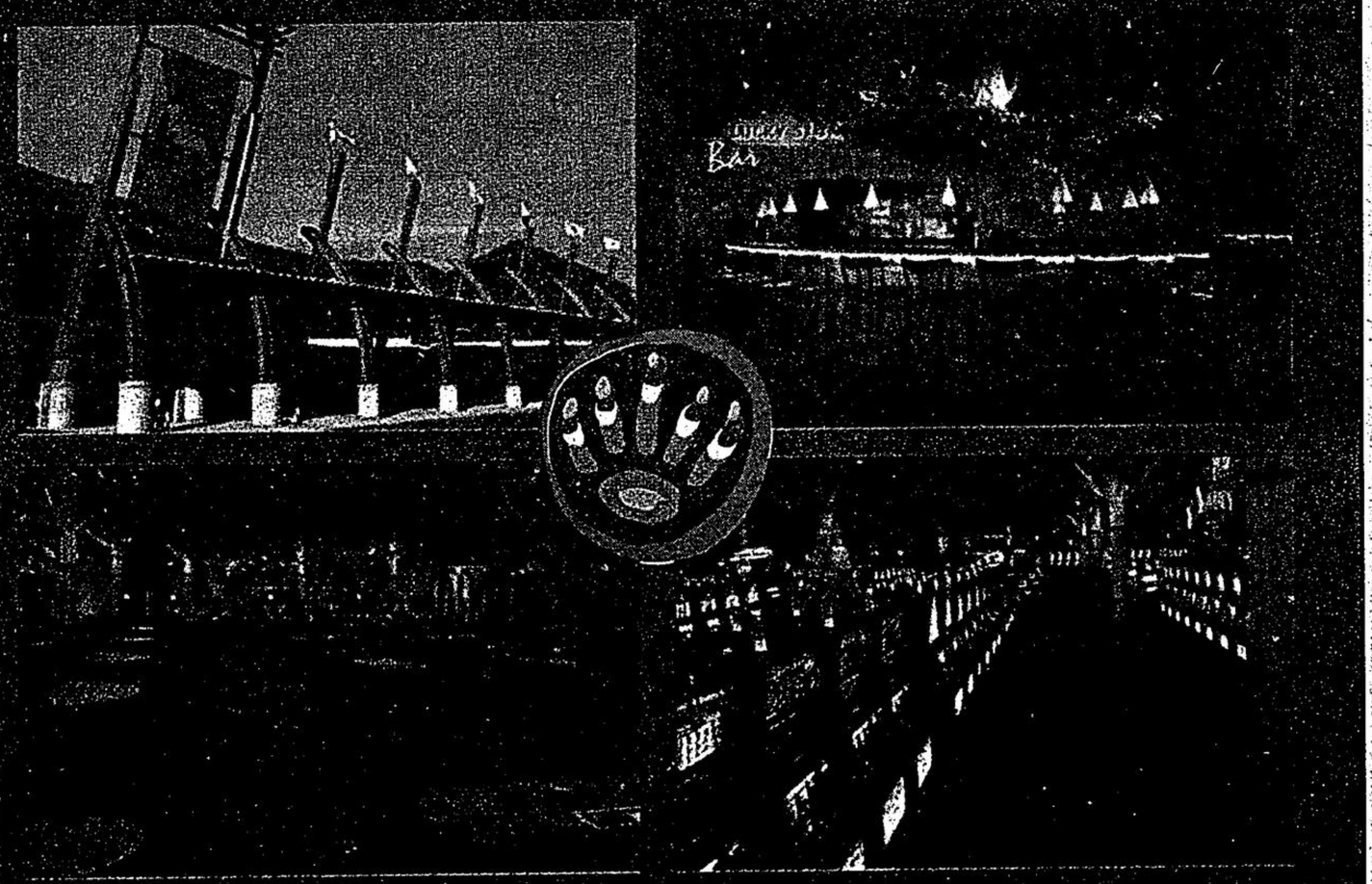

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