



December 12, 2014

Mr. Allan Wong, Trustee
Vancouver School Board
1580 West Broadway
Vancouver, BC V6J 5K8

Dear Mr. Wong,

Thank you for your time the other day on the phone and for giving us an opportunity to present our concerns with regards to the Queen Mary Elementary school seismic upgrade project, given the fact that the Committee II meeting, originally scheduled for December 17th, has been cancelled.

The parents of Queen Mary, through the PAC, have been becoming more and more concerned about a number of items related to our seismic project which we would like to bring to your attention. We have been told on an ongoing basis that items that were originally planned for our project have been eliminated or changed due to increasing costs to construction and complications related to services to and within the building. The current plan is very different from the originally approved plan and seems to be a moving target with respect to cuts. With this letter I would like to outline for you the issues that we would like you to be aware of and to ask that you inform us as to what the VSB is able to do to address them. We will also be sending a letter next week to the Provincial Government, specifically Christy Clark and Peter Fassbender, to ask for additional funding for this project as outlined to follow.

The areas of concern in general are:

1. The current cost of construction compared with what was budgeted.
2. The change in the amount of funds available to spend on the project given the change in the tax system from HST to PST/GST and what has been done to recover this shortfall?
3. We are very concerned that the windows in the red building are not being replaced.
4. The foot print of our school has been reduce from what was originally planned for.
5. Elimination of neighbourhood (early) learning space.
6. Relocation of the music room to a space originally deemed not suitable for a classroom.
7. Loss of millwork that would provide storage required in already smaller classroom spaces.
8. Inconsistent communication on what PAC can fund; furniture, balcony, etc.
9. Inconsistent communication with all stake holders of changes being made during the project.
10. Will handicap access be provided from 6th Ave onto the school property?

Cost of Construction

It appears that the cost of construction is much higher than what was budgeted for originally. We have also been told that 100% of our contingency has already been spent even though we are not even a year into construction. This concerns us greatly. We have been told that the cost overages are due to the services retained in the bottom of our original gym building that was supposed to save us money versus complete new services. Has the province provided us with additional funds to cover the increasing costs of construction from the date of the original budget submission compared with when we went to tender and began construction? If not have we requested these additional funds as constructions costs in Vancouver tend to increase significantly each year and given the long delays between first approval and construction we feel this need to be readdressed.

Queen Mary Elementary PAC

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Change in Provincial Tax System

We understand the change back from HST to a PST/GST system has had a significant impact on the amount of funds available for our project because we now have to pay PST on almost everything which was originally exempt. Although we do not know the exact number we assume it is impacting us to the tune of almost a million dollars. We feel that a change in taxation by the province should not be detrimental to our project and we will be asking the province for relief from this tax. We are hopeful that the VSB is also making this request.

Windows in Red Building

We were very surprised and a bit shocked of the fact that replacing the windows in the red building was not part of this project. As it is, at least 50% of these windows have been broken and will have to be replaced. The glass in these windows is treacherous. It is extremely thin and when broken very sharp and in an earthquake it would definitely be a safety hazard as they would break and potentially fall on children. As well, the windows do not open which is also a safety concern for parents and we are certain that the paint that is on the window frames, which are in poor shape and flaking off from all the disruption, are sure to contain lead. We are also surprised that given how energy inefficient the windows are that the school board would not want to take this opportunity to make the future costs of heating the school significantly lower by replacing the windows similar to what was done at Kitchener. The historic look of the building could be maintained while at the same time reducing future heating costs for decades to come.

Reduction of Footprint, Elimination of Neighbourhood (Early) Learning Space and Music Room Location

The foot print of our school was reduced from what the original plans allowed for and we are concerned about how this will impact not only the existing children within its catchment but whatever growth is planned for the area, especially in light of the development that will be happening just down the hill from the school in the Queen Mary catchment. The neighbourhood (early) learning space that was to be in the basement of the red building (a space that had been originally deemed not suitable for a classroom) has been eliminated and this space is now going to be a music room. The original music room, some resource space, a washroom in the red building and potentially other areas were eliminated from the original plans. Our concern is that if the catchment were to see any growth in the numbers of children we have zero excess space. I do not believe this is consistent with other schools with seismic projects. Also our music classroom has been moved into a space that had been originally deemed not suitable for a classroom. We do not feel that the footprint of the school should be altered from the original Ministry approved plan and would ask that consideration be made to restore the phase 1 and phase 2 building plan to their original footprint.

Loss of Millwork

The classroom sizes and storage spaces in the new buildings are much smaller than the old original ones so when we were told that some of the planned millwork had recently been eliminated from the project in the way of storage closets in classrooms, benches and storage under benches in classrooms etc. we were very concerned. Without storage in smaller spaces it is difficult to organize your classroom and make the teaching environment supportive for learning. We have been told that if possible they will try to add some of the missed storage in after the children are already in the classrooms which again does not make a lot of sense to us in terms of cost efficiency and what is best for the students.

Communication

Our first point in this areas is to stress how important it is for all stakeholders related to this project to be made aware of all broad changes that impact the general completion of our school's project as they occur. We would also greatly appreciate it if we could get consistent reporting from the VSB in terms of what PAC's are able to fund. We began our fundraising for landscaping and playground equipment over a year ago and will continue to make up for the fact that no landscaping is being provided as part of the seismic project however when we were told that there is no budget for any enhancements, white boards, furniture, water bottle filling station etc. we thought we would try to raise some money for these items. I have been told that this cannot be done and yet as one off considerations it has been done in the past for other schools. So if we could have some consistent information on what we can do we would greatly appreciate it. Given the amount of funding that is put into furniture and landscaping for new schools, like Norma Rose Point, we feel as a PAC we should be allowed to assist our school by providing what we can and what is needed. The furniture used in the larger classrooms in the old schools is not going to work as well in the new schools given the smaller size so whatever we can do we would like the opportunity to try.

Handicap Access from 6th Ave

We were told that most of the funding for the 6th Ave improvements are being done by the city of Vancouver however there are a few things that are part of our seismic project. We are concerned that there might not be any handicap access to the school from 6th Ave.

Again thank you for the opportunity to bring forward our concerns to the VSB and the VSB Trustees prior to year end as we believe these items need to be addressed sooner rather than later given the project is moving along. After numerous conversation with individuals familiar with seismic upgrades, we feel that we as parents need to do more to try to secure additional funding for our school. There are other schools in the VSB who have been able to secure more funding for their projects and we are concerned that our silence could be detrimental to a successful completion of the Queen Mary seismic project. We believe our school's project should be completed as closely to the original plan as possible without a reduction in the size of our school and with new, safe, energy efficient windows. We look forward to your response to our concerns and would be very happy to come and present this information in person in January once a meeting has been set. In the meantime, however we believe that the Trustees need to be made aware of the changes that have occurred on our project since the last time you reviewed the plans and sent it for approval to the Ministry.

We will be sending a letter to the Ministry next week to request additional funding for our project and outlining our concerns as they relate to them. We believe time is of the essence and we want to make sure that we are doing all that we can to ensure that this project is done in a way that will support our children and future generations of children in our catchment for the next 50 plus years.

Thank you for your time and consideration of our concerns. Please feel free to contact me at any time.

Sincerely,

Kathy Findlay, PAC Chair
Queen Mary Elementary School
604 897-8905

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