

The Wembley Public School Accomodation Review – A Process Gone Wrong

For a process that has been, and continues to be touted as “open” and “transparent”, I can say that as a parent involved since the first public meeting in March, the perception is quite the opposite. Providing the bare minimum in terms of information and documentation does not correspond to openness and transparency. Refusing to answer questions, or not responding to public requests does not correspond to openness and transparency. Not providing background data on a report until 5 o’clock on the day that feedback to said report closes does not correspond to openness and transparency. Scheduling feedback on a critical report during the height of summer vacations for both staff (who provide answers to the public’s inquiries) and the general public does not correspond to openness and transparency.

This report is by no means exhaustive – it is merely an attempt to demonstrate that there has been a pattern of repeated behaviour throughout this review process, and I have chosen to highlight the issues that have concerned me the most over the last 8 months. I encourage any trustee who has questions to contact me.

Inconsistencies – The Wembley Data

Some would ask us to believe that the Ministry of Education data from 2003/04 is flawless. They would also have us believe that because the data was “validated” by a local firm in 2004, that there should be no reason to question the data.

I have no doubt that the firm hired by the Ministry of Education, nor the local firm hired by the RDSB to do the validation are not experts in their fields, nor that they did a fine job.

I do however have several issues with the data produced, and the fact that we seem unwilling to consider any creative solutions being provided for free by John Hamalainen and Edward Chiesa. Consider the following –

- 1) Why is there no ranking of importance – ie. Why is replacement of carpeting considered equally as important as fixing the bricks?
- 2) The data (and solutions presented) are 4 + YEARS OLD. I find it hard to believe that the construction industry has not developed new/alternate repair options worth considering in 4+ years.
- 3) If you were faced with major repairs to your home/vehicle/etc, would you not search out SEVERAL estimates from a variety of tradesmen? Would you not in all likelihood receive a range of repair options with a corresponding range of prices? With Wembley, we have basically been given ONE repair option and ONE price. If the Ministry is prepared to spend our tax dollars based on this logic, then we should ALL have serious concerns about the Ministry of

Education. If we at the local level are prepared to go along with this logic, then shame on us all.

- 4) Why was there no real movement on this process between the original Ministry study done in 2003/04 and the Accommodation Review process in 2008? Why was the public not made aware of the impending issues with Wembley back in 2003/04 so that we could have begun to deal with the issue in a timely fashion (ie. set up a capital campaign, draw on alumni/the community to develop creative solutions)?
- 5) Why did RDSB not apply for PTR funds for Wembley in 2006 when a significant sum of money was made available province-wide by the Ministry of Education – and yet RDSB DID apply for PTR money for Jessie Hamilton, George Vanier and Warren P.S. (all schools that have closed or are slated to close in the very near future)?
- 6) RDSB uses an ESCO (energy services company) for projects like this. Basically an ESCO is a third party firm that funds capital improvement projects and gets paid based on the long-term return on investments from the energy savings of the upgrades. Why are we not prepared to use this option to fund Wembley's repairs?

Inconsistencies – The Princess Anne Data (or Why I can't have my FCI)

Here's a time-line, and series of questions and answers all surrounding the issue of the state of Princess Anne Public School.

- 1) taken from public meeting 1 (March 5th)

Question – Parent

Is data available for other schools, like Princess Anne and MacLeod?

Answer – Superintendent Diane Cayen-Arnold

Data is updated annually and presented to the public when the Board establishes an Accommodation Review Committee for a school or school area. *Should the ARC decide to look at Princess Anne and MacLeod as possible options for students currently attending Wembley, appropriate data could be provided to the committee to inform the process.*

- 2) taken from public feedback (submitted to ARC May 7th, not posted to Board website till Aug. 15th)

Most importantly, *if we are to pursue either of the top two options (both including Princess Anne P.S.), then we need to know about the current status of Princess Anne in terms of its standing on maintenance issues, and when it is due for an accommodation review of its own.* This question has yet to be addressed. It would be pointless in pursuing this school as an option if it also is coming up for review in the near future (and has significant maintenance issues of its own).

No direct response received from ARC committee.

3) taken from public meeting 4 (June 16th)

Q: What is the condition of Princess Anne P.S.?

Princess Anne P.S. has high capital needs. The current plan for Princess Anne P.S. is to update the facility, at the same time as the addition is built to address the primary class size space pressures. What the Accommodation Review Committee is recommending is to build a bigger addition.

4) taken from public meeting 4 (June 16th)

Q – Kirk Dopson - parent

Is Princess Anne Prohibitive To Repair?

A – Superintendent Cayen-Arnold

Princess Anne Public School has high capital needs and the FCI (Facility Condition Index) is projected to go above 65% in the next 5 years. Currently, the plan is to build an addition to Princess Anne Public School using Primary Class Size Capital funds. The Board will be spending money on the existing building.

5) taken from public feedback, submitted to ARC June 25th, answered directly by Superintendent Fred Law July 13th, not posted to board website till Aug. 15th

Is Princess Anne also a PTR school, and what is their FCI score?

A: Yes, as are a number of our schools. *The FCI for Princess Anne is predicted to go above 65% in the next 5 years.*

6) taken from the RDSB website (posted Aug 15th)

Q. If the capital costs for Princess Anne Public School are only \$1.1 million, how could Princess Anne be designated PTR (prohibitive to repair)? The \$1.1 million seems to be a small amount relative to the building value.

Would it be possible to get the same building facility information on Princess Anne that was presented regarding Wembley?

A. The 5-year cumulative capital projects for Princess Anne P.S. are \$3,490,892 creating an FCI of 119%.

7) taken from the Administrative Council report, RDSB meeting Sept.22/08

The Facility Condition Index at Princess Anne Public School is 90%.
The FCI at Princess Anne Public School will be 119% in five years.

So, did the board have the FCI data for Princess Anne since day one? If so, why not answer the question outright on March 5th? If so, why answer the question on June 3rd,

and again on June 16th by saying that the FCI was “projected to go above 65% in the next five years” when it quite clearly is ALREADY well above 65%?

And, why did it take until August 15th (almost 5 ½ months) for the board to provide half the concrete figures (119% FCI for 5 year cumulative capital projects), and then over another month (Sept.22nd) to provide the current concrete figures (90% FCI)?

If we have nothing to hide, why not address this issue head on when it was first asked – at the very first public meeting?

The Yallowega Belanger Architects Report

Yallowega Belanger Architects were hired by the Board to do background work on the Princess Anne expansions, and ultimately Wembley’s inclusion in those expansion plans. John Hamalainen and myself became aware of this background work during our meeting with Diane Cayen-Arnold and Sandi Ackroyd on June 3rd. Questions about the timing of this background work have gone, for the most part, unanswered.

The timeline as we know it (at the time of submission, Oct.10th) –

Date unknown (but sometime following the receipt of \$1.3 million in funding for primary class expansion for Princess Anne - Yallowega Belanger Architects is hired

Date unknown – Yallowega Belanger is asked to prepare a proposal to add four classrooms to Princess Anne.

March 2008 (exact date unknown) – the 4 classroom proposal is received by RDSB

Date unknown – Yallowega Belanger is asked to determine if Princess Anne can accommodate a second floor to house Wembley students, and to prepare preliminary sketch.

End of April 2008 (exact date unknown) – Yallowega Belanger prepares preliminary sketch.

Date unknown – Yallowega Belanger completes site plan of proposed expansion of Princess Anne.

August 20/08 – The Princess Anne 4 classroom expansion proposal and preliminary sketches for the Wembley expansion are posted to the RDSB website

Why should we care about these dates and these reports? First, any acknowledgement of questions raised regarding these dates has only been partially acknowledged at the Sept. 22nd meeting in the Administrative Council’s report. Similar to the issue surrounding Princess Anne’s FCI scores, why has this issue not been fully addressed?

Second, depending on when this process actually started (especially those parts dealing with the Wembley expansion), *it may be that the Board was actively pursuing one single option without advising the public nor the ARC.* A formal Freedom of Information Request has been submitted to RDSB in hopes of gaining clarity on this issue.

Third – the ARC. At the June 26th ARC meeting (which John Hamalainen and myself attended) the issue of the Yallowega Belanger work was brought up – and only because the committee was reviewing John’s comments, in which he had made reference to the Yallowega Belanger documents. It was made quite clear by several members of the ARC that they had no prior knowledge of the work being done by Yallowega Belanger, nor had they been provided with copies of the work completed to date. Why would the ARC committee, a committee whose job it is to review all relevant data related to the review process (and who made their recommendations to the public on May 7th), not be provided with or even made aware this important data existed until June 26th?

Fourth, the ARC committee initially looked at several options – a) keeping Wembley open, b) splitting Wembley students between Copper Cliff P.S. and Lansdowne P.S., c) sending all Wembley students to Princess Anne. We know the option to keep Wembley open was investigated prior to the ARC process beginning. We know the Princess Anne option was investigated either prior to or during the ARC process. Why was there no investigation of the Copper Cliff/Lansdowne option, especially since this option wasn’t formally dismissed until the May 7th public meeting? Copper Cliff and Lansdowne may not have required any major building additions or revisions, but certainly dealing with the increased student load should have warranted at least a cursory study. Was there any study done, or was this just a red herring option?

Communication Breakdown

There has been an ongoing lag between when information is produced and when it is actually made available to the public.

Here are some examples:

- 1) The minutes from the May 7th public meeting were not publicly posted until sometime during the week of June 9th - just days before the next public meeting on June 16th. Over a month lag time.
- 2) The minutes from the June 16th public meeting were not publically posted until late in the day on Aug. 15th - the same day that all responses were required to be submitted for the ARC draft report on the status of Wembley. Two months lag time.
- 3) I personally submitted feedback and questions on May 8th (to the ARC email address), June 25th (to the ARC email address), and July 14th (in follow up to an email by Superintendent Fred Law). I received an official response (complete

with answers) to my June 25th submission from Fred on July 13th. I received no direct response to my May 8th submission (other than acknowledgement from Nicole Charette that they were received), nor my July 14th submission. On July 17th I received an email from Heather Thirkill asking permission to post comments from my May and June submissions (which I agreed to). All of this information (questions only - all comments were deleted) was posted on the RDSB website late in the day on Aug.15th. My full comments (and those of the everyone else who submitted comments) were finally posted on the website starting on August 20.

- 4) Issuing the draft ARC report in late July, at a time when many people (including Board staff who answer the bulk of the questions regarding the Wembley review) are on holidays, closing submissions to said report on Aug. 15th (eventually extended to the 22nd) again, while many folks are still on holidays, and not posting important parts of the background information until the day submissions originally CLOSED (Aug.15th) is a great dis-service to the general public. Let us remember, this review process was scheduled and set in motion MONTHS before the public was actively involved. So, someone either made a gross error in judgement in developing the schedule, or it was done purposely. Neither option sits well with me. If, as I believe, there is a serious push from the ARC (and ultimately the Administrative Council) to close Wembley no matter what arguments the public brings forward, all of this delay in producing information/posting edited public comments/following a terrible summer timeline, etc does nothing but enforce that belief

While I can understand people were likely on vacation for part of this time and have other work to do, how long does it realistically take to post information that has been submitted to the review process ELECTRONICALLY (in the case of my own submissions), or recorded by board officials (in the case of the meeting minutes)?

I've been fortunate in that I have been able to attend all the public meetings (and one ARC meeting) to date - but not everyone has that flexibility. Many people rely on the board website to receive their information, or as in my case it is a way to confirm what was supposedly said at each meeting. This is critical if anyone is to provide half-way decent feedback on the process.

The Big Picture

Overall, as a parent participating in these meetings, it has been very frustrating. Public input and public meetings are only useful if the questions that are asked are actually answered. How can the public be expected to provide input on the options if the regular response is "I don't know" or "we haven't considered that option yet"? The reliance on a Ministry study that appears to have been blatantly skewed in a worst case scenario (and its results seemingly not questioned too deeply by anyone at the Board level), an overall lack of information being presented by the ARC and the Administration, the continual delay in providing answers to key questions, the flip-flopping on important details by

Board officials when pressed by the public – all these and more lead me to feel that this is NOT an open and transparent process and that there is a definite agenda being pushed that is NOT in the best interests of the public or the students. I have struggled to find even one example where the RDSB has taken proactive steps during this process to keep Wembley open (above and beyond what is automatically required by the Ministry of Education or RDSB’s own guidelines); however there is amply evidence that indicates RDSB has given up on Wembley without a fight. How sad.

If the process is flawed, as I truly believe it is, then can the results be trusted? My greatest fear is not based on what I have learned over the last 8 months – it’s what I fear we have NOT been told. There has been little if any CRITICAL information that has been volunteered by the ARC or Administration. We the public have had to fight for clarification on the simplest of issues.

“Open” and “transparent”? I think not. Did Wembley ever have a honest chance at redemption with this review process? I highly doubt it.

The fate of Wembley now rests with you the trustees.

The overall review process is severely flawed, and I sincerely hope that it will be revisited by the Board and corrections made before the next school has to undergo an accommodation review.

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