

## Where is the best place for Banting?

By Wendy Gabrek

The Simcoe Country District School Board held a public meeting at Alliston Union Public School to share information and gather community input regarding a potential replacement for Banting Memorial High School.

The purpose of the meeting was to share information about how the Ministry of Education funds new and replacement schools; share information about options for a replacement school; and gather feedback from the local community.

Three options were presented for Banting's future site: move the high school to the GA Wright Field, already owed by the board, and acquire the adjacent property to ensure adequate space for future expansion including a community hub ? \$35 million; move Banting to the Banting Homestead property, owned by the Town of New Tecumseth which has ample space for a new school building, an indoor pool, Georgian College campus, a YMCA and a community hub ? \$41.5 million; or renovate the existing Banting high school building, making changes to the hidden needs of the current school, while also giving the facade a face lift, over a two year period, utilizing 100 per cent of school board budget (\$15-17 million/year) in those years, with no room for expansion ? \$33.2 million. Roughly 100 community members turned out for the meeting, which began with a presentation from board superintendent Brian Jeffs, followed by questions and statements from the audience.

?We are looking for input from businesses in downtown Alliston as if they move the high school outside our downtown core, our data proves it will have a substantial negative impact on our local economy. There will also be negative impact on other stakeholders such as students, parents, teachers.? read a press release from the ABIA prior to the meeting. ?The Alliston downtown core is our community hub and the Banting Memorial High School is a part of that hub. Students learn to interact with business owners, earn respect and offer cooperation, as well as partake in community events daily. Taking pride and ownership of their community is a responsibility that cannot be thrust upon students, but rather a learned behavior through daily interaction.?

Some of the potential issues facing the ABIA, and the move of Banting, include (per their release):

? Substantial negative impact on the local economy.

? Students not being able to get to their part-time jobs after school.

? Loss of student jobs to adults.

? Walking along a road which is in an isolated, rural area (especially during winter with large snow banks and dark days).

? Students' tardiness to classes as they try to get downtown during their lunch breaks.

? Potential for damage to our Historic Landmark building the Banting Homestead from bored students.

? Potentially mixing both young adolescent high school students with adult college students in the same facility.

? Additional costs for busing students who could potentially walk if school was within downtown core.

At the meeting, Jeffs told the audience that renovating the existing building was ?the least likely option.?

Jeffs said that because there was no staging area, there would be an interruption to students, parking, and the athletic field.

?This option isn't terrific at the end of the day,? said Jeffs. ?And, it will cost more than a new school over time.?

With the board's plan to add a community hub to a new school, site space is an issue. The current Banting site is 12.8 acres, compared to the 14.8 acres at GA Wright plus the adjacent abandoned lot that would need to be purchased ? for 28.5 acres total. The Homestead sits on 115 acres.

Jeffs confirmed that the board was meeting with Town of New Tecumseth staff, the YMCA, Georgian College, and most recently with the County of Simcoe to collect data on what would be best for the community, now and into the future. He also said that a questionnaire would be distributed to current students to see what they want in a school building.

?We want as much information as we can get in advance to make a good decision,? said Jeffs.

As the current Banting building was erected in 1949, it is assumable that a new building would serve future generations, as town centre shifts north and east of its current boundaries, based on approved growth. Incorporating a community hub ? including social services ? has been the trend of late in most new high school builds.

Although from the exterior the current building looks workable, and ?shows well,? most of the immediate work required is behind the walls.

?The liability is a growing concern,? Jeffs admitted.

The Banting HS student population is currently 1,400, and the building will accommodate up to 1,500.

?'Predicting future enrollment is not an accurate science,?' said Jeffs. ?'We're trying to make it better than it is, not just a straight-up replacement.?'

?'The other issue is, where do we put 1,400 students for two years while we're under construction??' said Jeffs. ?'It's pretty clear that we believe there should be a community hub at the school.?'

?'This is a one time offer,?' said Superintendent Jeffs, on the opportunity to upgrade to a new building with full board support. ?'We're trying to do the right thing and find a balance.?'

To accommodate a move to either GA Wright or the Homestead, the current property Banting sits on would be sold. The value of the property is unknown at this time.

Beeton resident Doug Kowalinski took the mic, concerned about the ?'glaring issues?' created by moving Banting HS out of the downtown in order to create a community hub.

?'Essentially you're bringing community involvement in, by taking community involvement out,?' he said.

Lachlan McGurk spoke next, addressing the impact on current businesses for the betterment of tomorrow.

To McGurk's comments, Jeff's replied: ?'We all try and guess where the growth is going to be. It's like going to Vegas and rolling the dice. We have limited options.?'

?'You're talking about going to Vegas with \$35 million of the taxpayer's money??' replied McGurk. ?'What does your business case look like? Where is the cost benefit analysis on this??'

McGurk also spoke to the impending minimum wage increase, and referenced a recent survey conducted by the ABIA, to estimate the forecasted impact, from loss of student business.

?'Thirty-five per cent of the business owners we spoke to said that they could expect up to a 55% decrease in business if the students were unable to shop with them (if Banting moved out of town),?' said McGurk. ?'Another 12% said they expect a 30 to 35% decrease.?'

Distances from town, the impact on special needs students, impact to co-op students, and impact on working students was also brought up by concerned audience members.

Donna DaSilva, trustee for New Tecumseth Bradford West Gwillimbury was absent from the meeting.

For individuals unable to attend the meeting, feedback was shared heard through email (to [planning@scdsb.on.ca](mailto:planning@scdsb.on.ca)) until September 29.

At press time, no decision had been made.