

Banting Memorial High School replacement denied funding in latest announcements

The Ministry of Education finished announcing its second round of school repairs and replacements for the year last Friday, again leaving 70-year-old Banting Memorial High School out of the equation.

However, it wasn't all bad news for the Simcoe County District School Board (SCDSB): Lake Simcoe Public School in Innisfil received \$5.4 million for an addition of 190 new elementary student spaces and two new child care rooms.

Earlier in the year a new \$12.9 million Bradford South elementary school was announced to accommodate growth, along with a replacement for Shanty Bay Public School at \$7.9 million, due to its poor condition.

New Tecumseth Trustee Sarah Beitz said while she's happy that three of the projects on their list of priorities was funded, it was disheartening to see a replacement school for Banting left out again, as it's been needed for 20 years.

"Every day it goes longer, it becomes more critical. It is a facility caked in asbestos ? I just pray everyday nothing goes wrong there, because it would be very difficult ? very, very difficult ? for us to manage anything,?" she stressed.

"It's not just the condition of the building; the problem is compounded with the rapid growth New Tecumseth is experiencing,?"

As well, the contingency plans in place if the school's infrastructure failed are inadequate because there's simply no space to move roughly 2,000 students, Beitz noted.

She told The Times that Banting Memorial High School has not yet been deemed prohibited repair by the Ministry of Education, despite its condition, but was due for another assessment this year, which never took place because of COVID-19.

Although Beitz said she is hopeful the next round of capital funding in the spring of 2021 could include a replacement school for Banting.

"I did notice on the list [of announcements] there was quite a few replacement schools announced, even at the secondary level, so I do think our time is coming,?" she noted.

"I am hoping it's in the spring and I'm going to continue to advocate and work and try to get this Town getting vocal about it."

Simcoe-Grey MPP Jim Wilson, who first petitioned the school's replacement seven years ago, said getting vocal about the issue is exactly what's needed to motivate the Ministry of Education to get the project done.

"What I can say and what I've said to the trustees and I've said to the board as recently as last month is you're going to have to start a petition again, squeaky wheel gets the grease,?" he told The Times.

"This government seems particularly conscious of squeaky wheels. I've never had a school just given to us in the riding, every one of them, when it's the fight for a new Saint Paul's School in Alliston or the new Alliston Union Schools we'd done in the last 10 years,?" Wilson continued.

"They're going to have to get the parents and students wound up and lobbying the government that way because I've had no luck.?"

Wilson said he hasn't received any emails or letters about Banting and if he's not receiving them then neither is Queen's Park, so it's not on the Ministry of Education's radar.

The Banting replacement also costs \$35 million, which makes it less likely to receive funding due to the Ford government's strategy for funding capital projects.

"It seems to me the government? has told Ministers to spread what capital dollars they have widely, so they don't seem to be improving ? for the most part ?the large high school projects, not in small town areas anyway,? Wilson said.

?They've been spreading the money over repairs and spreading it thinly across several ridings.?

Nonetheless, he noted that he's ?greatly disappointed? about Banting not getting any repairs and its ?long overdue? for a replacement

Beitz said one of the main issues is the Province's five to ten-year backlog of projects for schools.

It's her hope that the Minister of Education can walk through Banting and have a tour to see the facility's condition firsthand.

?If we need to, we will put on the hazmat stuff and do the ?behind the walls tour' because I have no doubt that once they see it, they will understand the great need and it will be funded,? Beitz remarked.

In terms of the school's overcapacity, she said it isn't as ?glaring in our face? right now because of online learning but COVID-19 won't last forever and projects like the replacement school at Banting will offset its continued growth.

Going forward, Beitz told the Times she also hopes the board's new Alliston elementary school near the Treetops neighbourhood is funded as well as a new elementary school in Angus.

She said it's important for the community to get engaged if they want to receive funding for those much-needed projects.

?We were bypassed this time, we can't let them bypass us again,? Beitz stressed.