

Glen Abbey braces for public school review

■ By David Lea
OAKVILLE BEAVER STAFF

An examination of the programming and accommodation issues in Glen Abbey's Ward 4 public schools has not even begun and already tension is beginning to mount between parents and the Halton District School Board.

At a board meeting held Wednesday night, trustees voted to move forward with a public consultation process that will commence in September 2008 and conclude by January 2009.

At the heart of the matter is overcrowding at the French immersion Ecole Forest Trail Public School, which is looking to offload around 400 students to the nearby schools.

As the transfer would result in the English-only schools possibly changing to dual track, there is considerable public interest in being part of the process.

Wednesday night, the board decided on the form that partic-

ipation would take.

In the first step, set to take place between Sept. 15 and Oct. 7, all public school supporters and parents in Ward 4 will receive a mail-out communication that will include a description of the accommodation and programs consultation process, a feedback sheet and a focus group invitation and information sheet.

The school councils of Abbey Lane, Captain R. Wilson, Emily Carr, Ecole Forest Trail, Heritage Glen, Pilgrim Wood and West Oaks public schools will also be asked to respond to the same mail out package.

With this feedback board staff will review and revise their work in an effort to develop options, which will be presented to the Program and Accommodation Committee in late October.

The board noted that focus groups will be selected by placing the mailed-in focus group forms in three piles (parents of children presently in a Ward 4 elementary school, parents of

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children not yet old enough to attend a Ward 4 elementary school and public school supporters, with no children attending) from which names will be drawn randomly.

A total of around 600 people will be chosen to participate in focus groups, which will meet in November.

An outside facilitator will be hired who will help the focus groups prepare, train a group of principals to facilitate approximately eight focus groups on each of five dates, facilitate the coordination and running of all of the focus groups, provide some data follow up and consider and advise on an approach that will include a larger portion of the public.

in the gaining of public feedback risks pushing the program and accommodation process back another school year, which is unacceptable given the overcrowding at Ecole Forest Trails, which is currently being dealt with through the use of 16 portables.

Puddifoot also took issue with school council members not being automatically included in the focus groups and how people who have no children attending Ward 4 public schools will have the same amount of representation on the focus groups as those who do.

"We have to wonder if the purpose of the random selection process in the weighing of these three groups is to minimize the input of existing parents," she said.

A spokesperson for OPENS (Oakville Parents Encouraging Neighbourhood Schools) also had problems with the makeup of the public consultation process.

"A true public consultation process does not simply provide the public with options for a course of action. Rather, it engages the public to devise the process itself, and then invites the public to help craft outcomes," he said.

"The proposed process does none of this."

Dyson cited problems with logistics and expense if focus groups were allowed to include all interested parties.

The decision that comes from the programs and accommodation process will come into effect for the 2009-2010 school year.

A Director's Report will be presented in December and posted on the board's website.

Delegations are slated for the first January board meeting with trustees voting on the Director's Report at the second January board meeting.

To accomplish all of this, the board has a budget of no more than \$26,000.

As a forerunner of potential controversy to come, three delegations approached the board to speak about the planned public consultation.

None spoke positively about it.

Greg Bowman and Sandi Puddifoot of Abbey Lane Public School questioned why the public consultation process was being rushed through, with an end date scheduled for January.

"We will not even have our parent council elected until the end of September and that will only give our school 11 weeks to address this process," said Bowman.

"This is a concern as this process may change the landscape of education in Ward 4."

Superintendent of Education Patricia Dyson later noted that to delay

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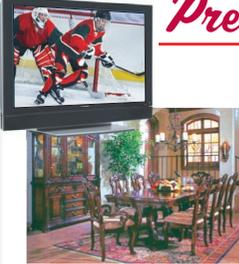
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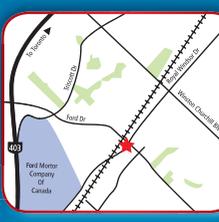







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