

At the March 25th public board meeting, I requested

“that this Board set a date in April 2008 to have a public forum on a long overdue conversation about amalgamation and reduction of the Board.”

I thank Mr. Greenwood for his timely reply.

In his reply to me he states.....

“I am responding on behalf of the Board of Education to your request for a public forum on possible amalgamation and reduction in the number of publicly elected school trustees. The Board sees this issue as outside of their mandate and would not be inviting a discussion of this kind at this time. The Board is dedicated to a full and democratic representation as possible for the citizens of Langley”

His response includes a copy of a letter to the editor of a local paper in which Mr. Spence, Communications Manager, states the following.

“The number of trustees on Boards of Education is determined by the Minister of Education and cannot be altered by a vote of the Board. So is the organization of districts in at-large or ward systems of representation.

Clearly, the Board has misunderstood the point of my request and/or the Board does not have the same understanding of its mandate that I, and the many of the public do. What I have asked for, on numerous occasions, is simply for the Board to have a conversation to explore and understand what voters think, which I believe IS part of your mandate – to consult on matters brought to your attention.

Langley School District’s Policy #1000 – School Board Powers and Duties state the following about the Board....

It is in close contact with public opinion and is aware of provincial and federal educational policies. It is attentive to representation and recommendation emanating from its staff through the Langley Teachers' Association, the Canadian Union of Public Employees and the Langley Principals and Vice-Principals Association; from parents through the District Parent Advisory Council (DPAC), the Parent Advisory Councils (PACs), and the School Planning Councils (SPCs), and from delegations of concerned citizens.

Neither the Board, nor I, can presume to know what the outcome of any discussion might be. The constituents may or may not support a possible amalgamation of the trustee electoral areas. The constituents may or may not support a reduction of trustee seats.

The bottom line is that trustees have an obligation to have this kind of discussion with the public. I also believe that it is the expectation of the Ministry of Education that Boards have these kinds of public discussions. It has indicated so with respect to the Special Needs Inquiry and my communications with the Ministry support this as well.

In his email to me, Mr. Duerksen, of the Governance and Legislation Branch of the MoE states with respect to Trustee Variation Guidelines that...

*“ The purpose of these guidelines is to assist **any person or group** to provide the information the Minister of Education requires to make a decision regarding a request to change trustee electoral areas or the number of trustees in a school district.”*

He further explains that for consideration of any variation by the Minister of Education, any person or group should

“... provide the broad information the Minister will require to make a decision i.e., a resolution passed by the board... respecting the proposed change.”

CLEARLY, for the Ministry of Education this is NOT a question outside of a Board's mandate but rather public discussion is required and a resolution by a Board of Education in support of amalgamation of electoral areas and/or reduction of trustee seats would be entertained by the Minister.

Considering that the Board has consulted the public about flying the Canadian flag, singing of anthems in schools, naming of schools, etc. why would the Board not consult with its constituents about this fundamental issue regarding how those very trustees who put into place these so very important policies, are in fact elected by voters. Perhaps trustees should return to a grade 11 Social Studies class and ask those very students whose education they are entrusted to oversee, what voter parity is.

These are the facts:

- The Board has been asked for public discussion, which is within its mandate.
- The Board can move to request an amalgamation of areas and/or reduction of seats.
- The Minister will entertain a Board's request to go forward with amalgamation and/or reduction.

Voter parity

I see no logical reason to justify the fact that in the last elections, candidates who ran for City trustee seats were elected to the Board with as few as 1,144 votes while those candidates who chose to run for Township trustee seats required at least 5,075, which is more than 4 times as many votes.(see Slide) In fact, all 3 of the other candidates who ran for a trustee seat in the Township but were not elected – ALL of THEM - received more than the top candidate from the City.

Yet, each and every trustee has a mandate to work in the best interests of all students in the entire school district. There is absolutely no difference in their fiduciary duties as individual trustees.

Residency does not appear to be important if you are a trustee. We all know that both trustees elected by City residents live in the Township and one city resident was elected in Township. Why then, should residency matter for voters, especially when it denies them fair representation on a single Board?

Every voter, both City and Township should have the right to vote for all the seats on the Board as those trustees' decisions will affect their student regardless of where they live.

Township councillors, Jordan Bateman and Kim Richter; Langley Times editor, Frank Bucholtz; and numerous people have indicated that they would support amalgamation. I also had an interesting meeting with MLA, Rich Coleman, who provided some insight about using logic in politics. He noted that amalgamation would be a very interesting topic of debate and that he had not looked at amalgamation and reduction of seats in the way that I have presented it.

Reduction of Trustee Seats

At the last board meeting, a trustee commented about my proposal to reduce the number of trustee seats on the Langley Board of Education and tossed figures about implying that they were somehow more truthful because

district staff provided them. I contacted the trustee and asked for a copy of the figures stated so that I may determine their “**truth-i-ness.**” (see Slide) I am still awaiting a response.

First, with respect to the size of a Board, for school districts with small student enrolment but a large geographic area, the number of trustees may be greater for good reason. Langley is a geographically small school district. A trustee can travel from one side of the district to another in under 35 minutes. In some BC school districts, it takes over 2 hours and sometimes trustees need to fly.

Second, a comparison of funding is not appropriate with respect to the number of trustees on a Board because the funding formula takes into account a host of unique district conditions including heating, distance to board offices, number of special needs, ESL, etc. But then, if some trustees aren’t even aware of benefits that they vote for themselves, as we were informed at the last board meeting, then I suppose a clear understanding of the grant formula would be more than we could expect, never mind the funding nuances across districts.

Let us rather compare apples to apples.

Surrey school district is the largest in BC with 67,112 students. Its seven trustees oversee more than 126 schools. This would be a ratio of 9,588 students or 18 schools to each trustee.

Langley school district has 19,871 students. Its seven trustees oversee 47 schools. This would be a ratio of 2,839 students or 7 schools to each trustee.

The truth is that if Langley reduced the number of trustees by two then this is how representation would look. Langley would still not be as efficient as Surrey but would become on par with Burnaby and Richmond and in fact would be a leader in this area.

Third, district staff has informed this trustee that the cost of two trustees is about \$35,000 – that is their limited truth. Well, I guess that is true in as much as the cost of raising a child might include only gas to and from the hospital.

My calculations for trustees costs included the above (see slide) – all of which are real costs, invisible and un-attributable according to the district’s “academy of cost accounting” which I obviously would not pass.

I appreciate the conversations I have had with Mr. Coleman, community representatives, and the public. I believe that there is an understanding that each school district is different in many ways, including the make-up of a Board and structure of electoral areas. The Ministry supports the autonomy of a Board in meeting the unique needs of its community, and understands that solutions can and will be unique to each school district.

I am hopeful that unlike the Special Needs Inquiry, this public concern about amalgamation and reduction of trustee seats will not require extra attention of the Minister of Education and that the Board will take the initiative to engage in a thoughtful discussion – that is a mandate of this Board.

I expect that school trustees will not close their ears to the discussions that the public are **already having** about amalgamation, and to the input that we are providing to this Board. As role models, our students deserve no less from trustees.

If anyone has questions go to the above site (see slide) or email me at amalgamateschoolboard@shaw.ca

Thank you for your time.

Susan Semonick