

NVSD surplus property worth \$100M

Board asked to consider creating educational endowment fund

BY NIAMH SCALLAN NOVEMBER 8, 2010

It might not be a gold mine, but land values in North Vancouver mean that the North Vancouver school district is sitting on a resource worth upwards of \$100-million.

Members of the school district's finance and facilities standing committee were told at a meeting Tuesday evening that a total of 12 surplus properties -- mostly because of declining student enrolment -- represent an opportunity to plan for the future.

"We have a lot of land and we need to think about how it can be best used for the good of the school district and our community," said secretary treasurer Irene Young, calling on committee members to consider a "strategic surplus land plan."

According to Young, declining enrolment as well as the district's direction toward "fewer, newer schools" resulted in the closure and combining of more schools in recent years, including the consolidation of Ridgeway Annex into Ridgeway and Balmoral into Carson Graham.

Some North Vancouver school sites are leased to daycares and independent schools, but others -- like Fromme and Plymouth elementary schools -- are sitting vacant. And according to Young, empty properties cost the district up to \$20,000 each year.

"The school district has no money to upgrade or maintain these facilities, so this is a huge problem," she said.

Young's presentation about the need for a surplus land plan highlighted numerous options for the vacant sites, including reusing the sites for district programs and services, providing short-term and long-term leases under ministry approval to independent schools, or selling the sites -- which would also be subject to the ministry's approval.

For Young, the land value of the vacant lots -- if appropriately and wisely used, could provide the school district with a level of self-sufficiency and educational opportunities. She stressed that earnings from the land would not replace provincial funding, but would provide the board with the potential to create an endowment fund or support capital projects.

"We are very fortunate in North Vancouver that we have this incredibly valuable land base," she said, "and if it's used wisely with thinking for the future, perhaps we could create an endowment fund or educational opportunities that could benefit from our land today."

Members of the finance and facilities steering committee then discussed the potential fate of the 12 sites, considering the physical condition, seismic risk, capacity and potential for expansion on each site.

Steering committee members were also asked to consider a series of "guiding principles" that could be included in the surplus land plan. Committee members agreed that community needs (such as affordable housing), environmental concerns, educational opportunities and school district concerns must be considered in the debate over the future of the vacant school properties.

Some committee members suggested that, at some district properties in poor physical condition, the school district could partner with a developer to redevelop the land into affordable housing, for example, to generate revenue.

"We've never been in a situation where we've had the land before and with a declining population, I think it's a great opportunity for us to take our land and use it," said trustee Holly Back.

Young will take the steering committee's recommendations back to the drawing board and will return with a revised list of guiding principles for the strategic surplus land plan in January 2011.

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