

TIME FOR SECOND THOUGHT: COMMENTS ON THE RENEWAL PLAN
SUBMITTED BY MEMBERS OF REALRENEWAL
MARCH 4, 2008

PLAN STRUCTURE AND FINANCES

Performance planning

The Renewal Plan does not clearly identify which problems it is trying to address. Is it the quality of education? Is it the huge backlog of maintenance that has been allowed to build up over the years?

It has become common practice for all levels of government to base their planning on performance measures and objectives. This form of planning is strongly recommended by the Provincial Auditor, because it provides better information to decision makers, administrators and to the public.

The Renewal Plan presented by the RPE does not contain any analytical measures to prove the case for the recommended actions, nor any objective criteria for measuring the success of the plan and its consequences.

For example, these measures could be literacy and numeracy, attendance rates, academic progress, graduation rates and progress to skills training and post-secondary education.

The Plan does not provide us with a cost benefit analysis, or an analysis of the risk. If we spend a hundred million dollars or more on building replacement, how do we know that the children involved will get a better education than they are getting already? Or will some of the most vulnerable children in our city be worse off?

Transparency

The Regina Public Board does not readily provide financial information to the public. It does not post financial statements, budgets and planning documents on the website, as other levels of government and other school boards do. The Renewal Plan refers directly to Capital Plans and other financial documents, but does not provide these as an appendix. Requests for financial information from the public have been met with lengthy delays.

Good planning requires openness and transparency.

Costing

The renewal plan does not provide for cost inflation. It does not explain how cost assumptions were calculated. The last new school in the system, Jack MacKenzie, was completed in 2000. Tenders have not been completed for the replacement of Douglas Park and Arcola schools, or the new Scott Collegiate project, which would all provide valuable information on current costs.

Capital cost inflation

Statistics Canada's most recent report on construction cost inflation was released on Feb 15, 2008.

The national index of cost inflation for institutional structures averaged 6.1% in the five years between 2003-2007, with 2007 inflation at 8.9%. The Calgary and Edmonton inflation rates for 2007 were over 10%.

If you apply these averages to the Renewal Plan, it results in an increase of overall capital costs of 17.6% at 6.1% annual inflation, and 29% at the 9% inflation. This increases the total capital expenditure from between \$113 to \$124.5 million.

The Alberta Government has recently increased its budget projections for 18 new schools to \$312 million, an average cost of \$17 million for each school. (Daily Commercial News – December 7, 2007)

Any increase in capital costs would be directly reflected in a greater mill rate increase over the term of the plan.

Transportation Costs

The Renewal Plan estimates a cost of \$1,000 for school busing over the 10 year life of the plan. 10 years ago the price of oil was \$25 per barrel, and in 2008 ranges over \$100. It is unrealistic to estimate future costs based on current prices. Given that an even higher percentage of students will be bused, this is a major financial risk.

Other costs

The Renewal Plan provides for an estimated annual mill rate increase of .87% over the life of the plan.

This estimate does not include mill rate increases for other cost increases, such as salaries, and operating costs which will also increase over the life of the plan.

It also does not account for new facilities that may be required in new subdivisions as Regina's population grows.

Deferred maintenance

Regina Board of Education estimated total deferred maintenance is over \$120 million dollars. The Renewal Plan will reduce this by total 44%, leaving some \$68 million in deferred maintenance to be dealt with.

The Plan does not provide specific measures to address this outstanding deficit. Not does it forecast any potential increase in costs outside of the Renewal Plan that would also require tax increases.

Contract management

The only new school constructed by the public board in the last 10 years was Jack MacKenzie. The last major capital expansion was in the 1970's. The Renewal Plan does not make provision for the internal capacity to manage the planning, tendering and contract supervision for an extensive capital expansion.

Conclusion

The Renewal Plan raises more financial questions than it answers.

It is not clear exactly what problems it has been designed to address, or how we are going to know if it is successfully addressing those problems as the plan unfolds.

It does not tell us how construction costs were estimated, or whether those estimates are realistic given the current economic climate.

It does not seem to account for cost inflation for construction and

capital.

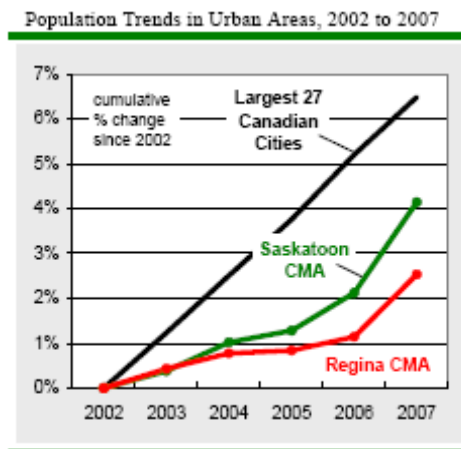
It does not address the majority of deferred maintenance that has built up over many years of underfunding school capital.

It is not clear that an ambitious plan of school closures and new construction is the best financial plan. If cost inflation continues at the rate of the last five years, the cost of building new facilities might equal the cost of eliminating all deferred maintenance. Renovation of existing school capital and avoidance of added busing costs may make the best financial sense.

We respectfully recommend that Trustees postpone any decision until this plan has been refined so that we know if the added expenditure is going to the areas that need it the most, and when we have better information on the projected costs of an ambitious capital expansion.

Respectfully submitted,
Duane Haave

Population



Sask Trends Monitor January 2008.

Figure A – City of Regina population

Regina's population is growing quickly, according to preliminary estimates released by Statistics Canada. From July 2006 to July 2007, Regina exceeded the national growth average, with a surge of 1.4 per

cent, increasing the city's residents to 201,500 (Sask Trends Monitor 2008, 8).

Other related indicators suggest this surge is part of a strong growth trend that includes double digit retail trade rates, low unemployment, and increased airport traffic. Rural areas also appear to be growing (Sask Trends Monitor 2008, 8).

This surge is not reflected in the Renewal Plan data, yet it is a very important piece of information that should give trustees pause before they move ahead with the plan.

Case Study: Cathedral Area population

Beyond Regina's population surge, there are compelling reasons to rethink some of the base assumptions regarding school enrolments.

At a micro level, for example, we may consider Census data for the Cathedral Area.

Ages 5 - 14
 1996 = 795
 2001 = 795
 2006 = 686
 2011 = 705
 2015 = 780

The above numbers follows the 0-4 age group through the system, and you can see, even without the surge factored in, we can see a trough that bottomed out in 2006 and is now steadily climbing toward 2015, which is the latest year statisticians assisting RealRenewal say they can reliably track this age group (Larry Elliott 2008).

As urban theorist Clive Doucette points out, this trough is a very typical pattern that illustrates the natural aging and rejuvenation of a neighbourhood, as older people move out, making room for new families (Doucette 2007, 31).

Some things can accelerate this process, such as rising house prices, which makes older neighbourhoods more attractive to young families. Certainly we have these conditions in Regina.

Between surging population and rising housing prices, it is not illogical

to suggest that older neighbourhoods will begin rising out of these troughs perhaps even more steeply than the natural population progression indicates.

But some things can severely impede this process.

Neighbourhood cycles

In his book *Urban Meltdown: Crisis, Climate Change and Politics as Usual*, Doucette specifically points to the problem of urban school boards that don't take natural neighbourhood population cycles into account. He identifies this as a leading cause of neighbourhood rot. He describes a "just in time" market mentality, in which school boards develop policy around the theory that all schools should be at full capacity all the time. Yet this approach tends to make the system less efficient rather than more efficient (Doucette 2007, 31).

The problem is that you begin introducing new or larger schools to neighbourhoods just as they are entering their aging phase, and taking schools out of neighbourhoods that are just entering their rejuvenation phase.

In Toronto, the just in time market mentality led to a number of schools in established neighbourhoods being threatened with closure. Neighbourhoods that managed to fight off the closures have since rejuvenated and now have schools operating at full capacity and in some cases even spilling over into portables (Doucette 2007, 31).

Application to Renewal Plan

We can see the above possibility at Herchmer, where the school enrolment is 180 and climbing, and at Usher, which is about to have a new housing development nearby.

As well, the example of the Cathedral Area rejuvenation leads one to conclude that a merger of Connaught and Davin schools will inevitably put these school enrolments above the program delivery model that the RBE has stated is central to the Renewal Plan. While the plan anticipates that this will be avoided by removing the French Immersion students, our survey of parent choices indicates that the demand for French spaces will simply transform into a demand for English spaces.

Process

While the plan states that the situation will be reviewed every two years, three schools and their surrounding neighbourhoods will be denied that process, which is unfair.

Given the potential impact on neighbourhoods and at-risk populations, it is very disturbing that the trustees have scheduled their meeting with city councillors for March 18, one week after this body has made a decision. In other words, the trustees plan to simply tell city councillors what they intend to do, rather than working with them to ensure Regina remains a liveable city. Yet this plan impacts everything about Regina – from traffic flow to which neighbourhoods will rot.

This is one more compelling reason to postpone your decision-making, so that there is time for these more detailed and very necessary conversations that are of interest to all citizens.

Conclusion

Since you began this process, the landscape has changed markedly. Instead of steaming ahead, you need to be willing to make a major course adjustment – and you can't do that on the fly.

In that respect, the Minister's plea for a moratorium and the motion before you this evening are very wise.

Respectfully submitted,
Patricia Elliott

BUSING

Busing has become a pervasive part of the Regina Public School system. According to the School Profile information, 3900 Public Elementary School students, out of total of 12286 were being bused in 2006. That is 31.7% of all Public Elementary School Children.

According to the Regina Public School document **Renewing Regina Public Schools - A 10-Year Plan** (page 9, under Operations (Appendix F) - 1. Transportation Costs) up to 1684 additional students could be transported as a result of the 10-Year Plan. The 10-Year Plan also notes that the estimated annual cost of transporting each student

is \$1,000. Using the 2006 busing numbers as a base, and adding the potential of 1684 additional students being bused; if the proposals of the 10-Year Plan had been in effect in 2006, then up to 5584 students out of a total of 12286 or: 45.5% of all Public Elementary School students would have been bused.

A percentage this high puts Regina on par or above many rural communities, and as such is worthy of serious reconsideration.

IMPACT ON FIRST NATIONS STUDENTS

When RealRenewal asked the RBE if they had investigated the potential impact on First Nations students, we received the reply that students are not identified by origin and therefore no such research has been done. However, there are other indicators available to give us a picture of the closures, the foremost being census data, which provides breakdowns of Regina's aboriginal population.

In total 18 schools have been targeted for potential program-based closure or merger, with 14 fewer schools as the final outcome.

Looking at the catchment areas for these schools:

- 14 (78 per cent) include census dissemination areas (neighbourhoods) where the aboriginal population is 15 per cent or more.
- 3 (16 per cent) include neighbourhoods where the aboriginal population is 9 – 14.9 per cent.
- 1 (6 per cent) includes neighbourhoods where the aboriginal population is 3.9 – 8.9 per cent.
- Zero closures or mergers will occur in school catchment areas where the aboriginal population is uniformly less than 3 per cent.

We note that the two schools considered for facility-based closures also serve higher than average First Nations populations.

Regina is made up of a number of different communities, and these communities have different needs. Smaller classrooms and smaller schools were noted to be vastly better for youth at risk in the Leithwood Report that was used in formulating the plan, while students in more comfortable and less racially diverse situations were less likely to be adversely affected by larger school and class sizes.

Respectfully submitted,

Leslea Mair

PROCESS

We recognize that much time, effort and money has been invested in preparing the current 10-year plan. We recognize that the Trustees face some difficult choices in light of current challenges. We however, continue to have serious concerns about the process used to formulate and disseminate the plan.

We are calling on our Trustees to insist on a process similar to, and as democratic, transparent, and accountable as the process detailed in the as the Ontario's Education Act.

The consultation process we have just been through has often felt like an exercise in public relations rather than a genuine attempt at seeking meaningful input and from communities. Communities have been left without a participatory role in decision-making.

Under Ontario's legislation, School Boards are required to develop a generic "School Valuation Framework". This framework is designed assess each school under review, specifically the school's:

- Value to the student
- Value to the community
- Value to the school board
- Value to the local economy

It is important to note that the value of the school to the student is to be weighed "*above the other considerations*". (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006).

In Ontario, once a school has been proposed for review a committee comprised of members from the school community and the larger community is formed. These committees oversee the whole review process.

- A minimum of 210 days must pass from the time a school is put up for review until its fate is voted upon by the trustees.
- This includes 60 days notice given *prior* to the start of the consultation period, a 90 day public consultation process, and 60

days for public review and input into the valuation report that follows the consultation period.

Next week, you will be asked to vote on the first round of program and facility closures, only 103 days (Christmas holidays included) after initial notice was given.

- At the end of Ontario's consultation process, the joint committee prepares a valuation report on *each* of the schools under review.
- The public meetings held in Ontario's are structured to foster an "open and informed exchange of views".
- All relevant information relevant to the review of the school(s) is to be made public by posting it prominently on the Board's web-site and making it available in print. All information is to be presented in plain language and well in advance of public meetings.

During the current process, we have found information difficult to access. Requests for planning and budgetary documents have been met with lengthy delays. Questions we have raised publicly and in writing have largely gone unanswered. Where we have received answers, the information has often been vague and incomplete or presented without sufficient time to review them. Interim reports on busing, lunch programs and French Immersion are not due to be presented until tonight, which will leave little time for review much less thoughtful consideration.

- It is also worth noting that in Ontario, schools can only to be subject to review once in a 5-year period. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006)

Usher Collegiate has been slated for closure twice in the span of two years. This has significantly hampered the ability of the school to attract students, thus creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The provincial government has asked School Boards to halt school closures in light of the current economic boom and population surge. They also have signalled their intent to make changes to Saskatchewan's Education Act.

We recognize that the provincial government needs to play a greater role in K-12 funding in the province. We would like to work with you to lobby the province for adequate funding and a school review process that is inclusive and responsive to the needs of communities and

Boards.

The current process has not worked. It has failed to respond to the current economic, demographic and environmental situation in Regina. Rapid growth and inflation in the past year have rendered inaccurate much of the data upon which the plan is predicated.

The 10-year plan runs counter to initiatives aimed at strengthening the inner city. It stands to cause too much damage to vulnerable students and the communities that they live in. Once a school has been closed, it is almost impossible to get it back.

Please reconsider. Please support a moratorium on school closures.

Respectfully submitted,
Carla Beck