

Feds see light on school quake risks

By Naoibh O'Connor-Staff writer

A group of parents who want B.C. schools earthquake-proofed faster is closer to that goal, thanks to a government commitment to help pay for an assessment tool to rank buildings by risk.

The promise of \$360,000 in funding was made Friday at Gladstone Secondary, where students were performing a play illustrating the dangers students face in an earthquake.

Vancouver-Quadra MP Stephen Owen, minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, was in the audience for the production, intended to mark earthquake awareness week.

"The hardest dollar for any government to spend is the preventative dollar," Owen told the Courier Friday morning. "And clearly, it's the most important in terms of avoiding tragedy but also saving costs."

The federal government's department of Western Diversification is kicking in \$150,000, Public Works and CMHC are each contributing \$15,000 and the education ministry is providing \$140,000. Another \$25,000 will come from local consulting engineering firms, while the Masonry Institute of B.C. is contributing \$15,000.

Dr. Tracy Monk, spokeswoman for Families for School Seismic Safety, was pleased by the decision, saying the combined government effort is a sign politicians see the seismic threat as a health issue-not just an education one. Parents seeking more money to fix schools resented having to compete for money meant for students' education.

"But it'll be interesting to see if there will be federal participation in the fixing of the buildings," said Monk, noting the school assessments should be completed by November.

By then, the public will know the magnitude of the problem and costs associated with mitigating the risks. Owen said the efforts of the parent group, which formed less than a year ago, likely helped push the initiative forward. "This is one of the best examples of community activism, which brings knowledge and concern, then awareness and pressure, on government, professional groups and academic research institutes to come together to make something happen," he said.

Owen added that some of the foremost experts in seismic engineering work for the federal Public Works department.

Monk said her group will encourage parents to continue lobbying federal politicians for more assistance, especially considering an election is expected in June. "[The financial commitment] certainly seems like a change in approach for the federal government," she said.

Two former Vancouver Technical Secondary students-Alvin Singh and Nathan Lusignan-who were instrumental in launching a student seismic group called The Lizards were also recognized for their efforts at Gladstone Friday.