

Advocacy group calls for long-term planning

By Cheryl Rossi-Staff writer

Parents and school trustees concerned about the seismic upgrading of B.C.'s public schools are growing anxious as they wait for the provincial government to announce this year's funding for projects.

In March 2005 the provincial government pledged \$1.5 billion for seismic upgrades at more than 700 vulnerable B.C. schools, to be carried out within the next 10 to 15 years. But as construction costs rise, parents, trustees and engineers wonder if the work can be done in time.

VSB trustee Allan Wong and Tracy Monk, director of the Families for School Seismic Safety, want a long-term plan that would measure the progress of the work and ensure the upgrades are completed within the next 14 years, now that more than a year has passed since the initial government funding announcement.

"It is my impression that everyone who is working on this program at both the district and ministry levels are trying extremely hard, but the planning infrastructure and integrated communication required to bring plans to fruition have not been put in place," said Monk, who has children at Jules Quesnel elementary.

In previous years, the school board's capital budget paid for seismic upgrades. The board submitted budget requests in October to the Ministry of Education and received approvals in May, Wong said. But it hasn't received word from the ministry about seismic funding this year.

Les King, the VSB director of facilities, said 16 Vancouver school upgrades were approved by the government last year with funding to come in 2007. The school board is concentrating on these projects. Kitsilano is the only secondary school on the list, while Strathcona, Secord and Quesnel top the list of elementary schools.

Seismic work approved before 2005 is underway at Vancouver Technical secondary, Kerrisdale elementary and Charles Dickens elementary, with plans developed for J.W. Sexsmith elementary and John Oliver secondary.

In 2004, the school board estimated the 16 upgrades would cost \$88 million. Those estimated costs have now risen to \$150 million.

"Next year it'll probably cost more. That's just the way that things are going," King said.

Wong has forwarded a notice of motion calling for long-term planning, annual reporting and consultation with Families for School Seismic Safety. He wants a resolution passed at the B.C. School Trustees Association's annual general meeting to request the provincial government to provide a firm plan, and he wants the school board's advocacy advisory committee to champion seismic upgrades.

Monk said similar upgrades were carried out in Seattle where citizens elected to pay higher taxes to ensure seismic upgrades would be completed in 10 years.

"We can't stop nature from unleashing her forces, but the ensuing disaster can often be prevented. In retrospect, \$1 billion to strengthen a levy in New Orleans begins to look like a pretty good investment," Monk said in an email to the Courier.

Quoting the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, an international organization that helps governments tackle the economic, social and governance challenges of a globalized economy, Monk argued requiring compulsory education while allowing the continued use of seismically unsafe buildings is an unjustifiable practice by government.

She wants see the Ministry of Education, the school board and engineers develop a practical long-term plan with project completion dates.

"The premier's commitment was wonderful, but the long-term plan and mechanisms by which to make the good intentions a reality must be in place for the citizens of B.C. to see," she said.

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