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Students and parents take advantage of the federal election to push for faster seismic upgrading of B.C. schools

Group makes seismic safety a campaign issue for Liberal

By Naoibh O'Connor-Staff writer

Standing outside Gladstone secondary school, engineer Dirk Duivesteyn points to the columns running up the three-story concrete building. If an earthquake hits, the structure's frame will rock, weakening the joints and connections with each wave of motion.

"These columns aren't huge for the amount of school on them," he says.

The East Side school, opened in the 1940s, is one of many across the city and province in need of seismic upgrading. It currently ranks 12th on the Vancouver School District's priority list, which includes 47 schools in the high to moderate risk category of falling in the event of an earthquake. Based on the existing work schedule, it will take about 60 years to finish upgrading.

The slow pace is a troubling situation for Duivesteyn and other members of Families for School Seismic Safety, a grassroots organization campaigning to speed up the earthquake-proofing of all B.C. schools.

On Monday, Liberal David Emerson, who's seeking the Vancouver Kingsway seat, was invited by the group to tour Gladstone.

In a hot stuffy office, he listened as parents, students and staff pressed for more federal government money and involvement in solving the crisis.

The issue has long been considered a provincial matter, so the parents considered Emerson's presence a small victory.

"It's a safety issue, it's an infrastructure issue, it's a human rights issue," argued Tracy Monk, who heads up the family group.

Duivesteyn pointed out companies like B.C. Hydro are spending tens of millions upgrading buildings that aren't even occupied.

Schools, meanwhile, not only house children but will likely be needed to shelter people who become homeless if an earthquake strikes.

Emerson agreed a long-term solution must be sought by all levels of government and promised he'd be an advocate in Ottawa.

"It's on the radar screen. I guess we'll have to wait until the end of the election and make a plan when we know the election outcome," he said.

For Monk, it was a small step forward in the organization's goal to upgrade schools. Members have also attended every all-candidates meeting to raise the profile of the seismic issue, with a different parent asking a question of candidates each time.

There's been mixed reaction. Some brushed aside the question, insisting it's within the province's jurisdiction, while others have changed their opinion as the weeks have progressed.

Monk maintains the organization will accept help from wherever they can.

"We're a non-partisan organization. On the whole, the Liberals have been more [supportive] but we've had individual support from all parties," she said, citing NDPer Libby Davies, Conservative Gary Mitchell and Green Party candidate Doug Warkentin as among those from other parties who've shown particular concern.

As for Emerson, she's optimistic his interest will continue beyond June 28.

"I believe him, I do. I'll support anyone who supports the safety of children as a priority. It's an issue that transcends politics."