

## **Parents push for province to move up timetable on school seismic upgrades**

**Lindsay Kines**

Times Colonist

*Friday, February 20, 2004*

Anxious parents want the B.C. government to get on with its promised review of public schools, to see which buildings pose the highest risk to students during an earthquake.

They also want the Education Ministry to pick up the pace of school repairs now, rather than wait for the final report.

"We know an earthquake is expected in the region," said Dr. Tracy Monk, a Burnaby physician who founded Families For School Seismic Safety. "It's not a matter of if, but of when . . . Let's get on with this."

The Greater Victoria school district commissioned its own study last year and found six schools at very high risk, with Margaret Jenkins elementary school at the head of the list.

Finance Minister Gary Collins revealed in the budget this week that the government plans to boost money for minor seismic school upgrades from \$8 million to \$23 million in 2006-07.

A further \$50 million per year for major seismic upgrades is slated to kick in the same year.

Monk welcomed the new money, but worries that it won't arrive until after the next provincial election.

She said the government needs to get on with its provincewide review, and push ahead with more minor upgrades in the meantime.

"There's a lot left to do," she said.

"We're certainly pleased about a commitment down the road, but we'd be a lot happier with a commitment that starts now."

Seismic safety has increasingly become a concern for parents with children in B.C. schools, particularly in Greater Victoria and the Lower Mainland, where there are many unreinforced masonry structures. A total of 27 Greater Victoria district schools and 47 Vancouver schools are believed to pose an unacceptable safety risk in the event of a sizable quake.

In Greater Victoria's case, the assessment was modeled on a large crustal earthquake in the range of 6.8 to 7.2 on the Richter scale. A quake of that size hasn't hit Vancouver Island since 1946, when one registered 7.3 with an epicentre at Forbidden Plateau near Courtenay, making it the largest on-shore quake in Canadian history.

Former education minister Christy Clark promised last fall that the government would conduct a comprehensive seismic assessment of B.C.'s public schools. She said it would be completed within six months to a year.

Education Minister Tom Christensen reaffirmed the government's commitment to a provincewide review this week, but was unable to say when it will get underway.

"It's the review that really is the critical part, to really know exactly what needs to be done and set the priorities," he said. "But certainly I recognize it's a need. It's something that we're committed to focusing on, and we're working to put the resources into it.

"Over the next couple of years, what we've got to do is assess where we're at in terms of what the districts are telling us are priorities. There are some discussions that have to go on with the engineering folks. . . . We want to make sure we're working with the most recent information in terms of effectiveness of the type of upgrades that we're going to make."

Christensen noted that some seismic upgrades are underway already.

"Some of the money we're announcing in terms of capital upgrades now is actually money that's going for seismic work," she said. "So it's ongoing every year, but it's also lumped in there with additions and renovations."

The government invested more than \$30 million in school seismic upgrading last year. Premier Gordon Campbell also announced \$611 million in school capital projects -- \$13 million of which was specifically targeted at seismic upgrading.

Victoria school board chairwoman Charley Beresford welcomed the new money in the budget. "I'm glad that they've got a plan for seismic upgrading," she said.

But like Monk, she worries about the timing.

"We need to be getting on with getting these things addressed," she said. The money slated for 2006-07 is "beyond their mandate, so there's no certainty about these numbers."

A lot can happen in two years, she said. "Who knows? They may find that they have additional budget pressures and feel they need to revisit it."

In the meantime, the Victoria school board will apply through the regular process for school renovations. "We're hoping, of course, to see some projects approved through that process in the coming year," she said.

kines@island.net

© Copyright 2004 Times Colonist (Victoria)