

Seismic upgrade advocates pleased with government plans for schools

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The provincial government's commitment to make all B.C. schools seismically safe within 15 years is a realistic time frame, says the spokeswoman for a grassroots group that has lobbied hard for such improvements.

Dr. Tracy Monk, a Burnaby physician who heads Families for School Seismic Safety, said her group would hold Premier Gordon Campbell to the promise he made during the B.C. Liberal Party convention last weekend in Whistler.

"We think the commitment is wonderful news because the current (pre-commitment) pace is a 60-year pace," Monk said in an interview.

"A 15-year time line is a realistic time frame. In Seattle, it took 12 years. If we start the clock now, and by November of 2019 all B.C. schools meet acceptable life safety standards, then I think we've done something important and wonderful."

The seismic safety group has been advocating for the province to develop a timely seismic upgrading plan for about 11/2 years but Monk said parents and educators have been voicing their concerns about the issue for more than a decade.

She credited the current government for taking the first important step in the process this past summer by conducting a \$2-million seismic assessment of all B.C. schools.

That study, done by the Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of B.C., rated 293 of the province's schools as "high" priority. That means these facilities now have major seismic deficiencies and would be expected to sustain extensive damage to structural elements in the event of a moderate earthquake.

The Vancouver school district has 74 schools with a high rating while the Greater Victoria district has 29.

Monk said her group hopes the most high-risk facilities will be addressed as quickly as possible. But she is satisfied with the commitment to complete the job within 15 years.

Andy Mill, chairman of the seismic risk task force for the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists, said 15 years "is a very realistic and an appropriate time

frame."

Education Minister Tom Christensen said now that the province has a global total for seismic upgrading and an assessment of all schools in B.C., it can consult with school boards on a schedule.

"We know the overall cost. We know the timeline and we'll work on the details over the next coming weeks in preparation for February's budget, and that will give us a better idea of what the annual allocation will be," he said.

Monk said her group is awaiting details of the province's seismic upgrading schedule. She also said she hopes safeguards are built into the plan to ensure that future governments don't "slacken" the effort.

NDP Leader Carole James, who pushed for seismic upgrades as a school board chairwoman in Greater Victoria, said if the NDP forms government it would honour the seismic commitment.

"We'd carry on and my hope is we could look at where the resources are to, in fact, move it along quicker (than 15 years)," James said.

James said government was making a good investment by committing to the seismic upgrades, but is sceptical about the timing.

"All of a sudden, these issues are important when we're next to an election and they haven't done anything for the last 31/2 years," she said. "So I worry about whether you can hold any weight to this promise. Is it another promise that they're going to make before the election and then not keep afterwards if they had another term?"

Monk called on the province to solicit federal help in funding the seismic work. While education is a provincial mandate, this is a safety issue, she said. As such, the federal government should contribute to improving the infrastructure.

Her group doesn't want to see educational needs competing for funding with seismic requirements.