

## **EDITORIAL**

### **Replacing our aging public infrastructure**

The danger earthquakes pose for our children in their schools is one chilling symptom of our deteriorating physical systems

Vancouver Sun

*Saturday, August 07, 2004*

Anyone who doubts the validity of concerns regarding the seismic vulnerability of British Columbia's school buildings need only spend a few moments perusing the recent earthquake lists kept current by the Geological Survey of Canada.

In the past six weeks, B.C. has experienced 50 tremors, the majority of them in the active seismic zones along the coast. Among them were quakes strong enough to be felt in half a dozen cities and small towns.

On June 28, a powerful earthquake off the Queen Charlotte Islands registered 6.8 on the Richter scale used to measure the magnitude of energy released. On July 15 and again on July 19, the outer coast of Vancouver Island was shaken by earthquakes of 5.8 and 6.4. In the past week or so there have been lesser tremors near Port Alberni, Nanaimo, Gold River, Sechelt and in the Strait of Georgia.

Canada's largest recorded on-shore earthquake took place on Vancouver Island on June 23, 1946, causing masonry in schools to collapse into classrooms and showering streets in Port Alberni and Courtenay with bricks and other debris.

Nor is the Lower Mainland immune. On Dec. 14, 1872, an earthquake near Hope was of sufficient strength that it caused people to flee buildings in Victoria, New Westminster and Yale.

It must be remembered that these events had little immediate impact because they occurred in relatively uninhabited regions and at times in our history when infrastructure was small compared to the dense populations and complex urban footprints of today.

So, when Andy Mill, chair of the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of B.C.'s Seismic Risk Task Force, reported at the 13th World Conference on Earthquake Engineering that 800 schools in a province prone to severe temblors included the buildings most likely to collapse, it was a sobering reminder of how much needs to be done.

Mr. Mill estimates the total bill for upgrading all the schools to better withstand a major seismic shock at around \$1 billion. By comparison, the provincial government announced

in June a budget of \$89 million for upgrading schools. Even that money won't be available until 2006.

Who knows whether we have that long? As Mr. Mill points out and the region's seismic history indicates, we've been lucky to date.

And it's difficult not to sympathize with Dr. Tracy Monk, a director of the parent group, Families for School Seismic Safety, when she notes that while Seattle will complete upgrading all its schools by 2008, only 11 of 58 Vancouver schools have been retrofitted over the past 14 years. If we continue at the present rate we won't complete the task until 2064.

And yet the gap between estimated costs and available funds creates a profound dilemma for policy makers. The predictable response, the easy response, will be for various factions to begin pointing the finger of blame. The province can blame school boards, school boards the province and parents of school children will be tempted to say "a pox on both their houses."

Useful action, not useless blame, is what's needed.

Mr. Mill's warning presents a challenge to all parties to work together to find a solution. A \$1-billion price tag is large but it's what we expect to spend on a secondary highway like the one serving Vancouver Island, or outfitting the ferry fleet with new vessels.

So when the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development says that school children everywhere are vulnerable to death and injury during earthquakes because of unsafe design and construction, and we then discover that 450,000 school kids in B.C. are in that category, the issue certainly qualifies for a high place on the political agenda at every level.

Obviously, B.C. deserves federal assistance, at very least to help retrofit installations that are strategically vital. School boards and municipalities deserve adequate provincial support.

All of which raises an important question -- how did we come to be in this financial bind in the first place and how can we ensure that we never again find ourselves behind such an eight ball?

Businesses allow for the depreciation of assets in its financial planning and accounting. Governments across the country, for some reason, seem never to have grasped this nettlesome fact. That is why we are faced with deteriorating bridges, highways, sewer and water filtration systems and other infrastructure -- like seismic retrofitting of school buildings -- that now burden school boards.

The provincial government changed its budgeting to include capital costs in the overall budgeting process and to bring itself into line with generally accepted accounting

procedures.

It should now as a general practice move to budget for depreciation of public assets and their eventual upgrade or replacement .

Then, when we've done what we must to resolve this thorny problem of structurally unsafe schools, our children's great-grandchildren won't have to repeat the same costly exercise in another 100 years.

© The Vancouver Sun 2004