

Families group pressing gov't to speed up seismic upgrades

By Naoibh O'Connor-Staff writer

Dr. Tracy Monk describes herself as quiet and bookish, but she's been anything but since launching an ambitious, parent-led campaign to get B.C. schools seismically upgraded.

Last June, the mother of two formed Families for School Seismic Safety with a group of like-minded parents.

Now, in between doing pap smears and prostate exams, Monk fields calls from the media and meets with politicians, including Vancouver-Quadra MP Stephen Owen, Premier Gordon Campbell, Education Minister Christy Clark, Finance Minister Gary Collins and Health Services Minister Colin Hansen.

The goal is to speed up efforts to earthquake-proof schools throughout B.C.

In Vancouver alone, 47 schools remain in the high-to-moderate-risk category, according to a 1989-90 risk assessment study, known as the Transit Bridge report, that's still used by the school district.

Monk noted the out-of-date report doesn't take into account soil mechanics or new understanding about masonry buildings, among other things.

Based on the current work schedule, Monk estimates it will take 60 years to finish upgrading city schools. Families for School Seismic Safety wants that sped up to 10 to 15 years, pointing out Seattle will complete work on its schools by 2008.

Funding should come from the federal government's natural disaster mitigation budget, as well as the province-as long as it's not only from the education ministry, Monk said. "We don't think our children's education should be competing with money for their lives' safety."

The parent group has already managed to secure endorsements from Dr. John Blatherwick, chief medical health officer for the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, and the B.C. Association for Professional Engineers and Geoscientists.

The latter, with assistance from UBC, pitched a \$760,000 building-assessment proposal that would ultimately rank schools' seismic risk across the province. The proposal has been presented to the Ministry of Education and Owen-Monk plans to make seismic upgrading a federal election issue.

Even Monk, a family doctor who lives in Kitsilano and works at Royal Columbian Hospital, is surprised by the momentum the campaign's taken on in a few short months.

"I don't even go to meetings, let alone [work as] an activist or write letters to

government."

Monk cites two main reasons for her sudden leap into public life-her daughters, Samantha, 6, and Allie, 9.

Although officials have known for years that some older schools might topple in the event of an earthquake, they cite money problems for not addressing the concerns more quickly. Monk is convinced parents are largely unaware of the problem.

She wasn't even aware herself until the collapse of schools in other cities during earthquakes prompted her to check out her children's buildings.

Samantha is registered at Queen Elizabeth Annex, which is theoretically a solid building, although Monk isn't convinced. Allie attends Jules Quesnel, which is ranked the 18th highest-risk school on the Transit Bridge report.

Monk is convinced parents' new understanding of the issues, coupled with information from professional bodies, will finally convince politicians to act on an issue that's been on the back burner for too long.

"Little by little, it feels like were getting to the tipping point. Everyone's feeling empowered."