

## **Provincial election shakes loose seismic money for city schools**

By Naoibh O'Connor-Staff writer

Monday was a good day for Tracy Monk. The Vancouver mother and spokeswoman for Families for School Seismic Safety learned the provincial government will spend \$254 million over three years to seismically upgrade 80 schools in the province. That's in addition to \$70 million promised last fall as part of an overall \$1.5 billion seismic plan, which will see more than 700 B.C. schools upgraded over 15 years.

"It's a marked increase in the pace [of improvements]. We've been going at less than one school per year for decades in Vancouver," said Monk, who attended Monday's pre-election press conference at Sir Guy Carleton elementary school, where Education Minister Tom Christensen outlined the Liberal government's financial commitment.

A province-wide seismic survey was completed over the summer to rank which schools should be fixed first based on risks related to soil type and proximity to fault zones.

Vancouver's share of the \$254 million amounts to \$87 million for 16 high-priority projects. They include Lord Strathcona, Laura Secord, Ecole Jules Quesnel, Sir Guy Carleton, General Gordon, Kitsilano, Lord Kitchener, Walter Moberly, Fleming, Lord Nelson, Trafalgar, Sir James Douglas, Captain James Cook, Queen Mary, L'Ecole Bilingue and Sir Matthew Begbie. Money for work at other district schools, such as Van Tech and John Oliver, along with several others, had already been approved.

Although Monk was pleased with Monday's news, she wants the project done more quickly.

"As a parent of course nothing ever feels fast enough and to be honest we're actually doing all this work for other people's children," she said. "It's going to take a long time. It may be that when it's time for my kids to go to high school that their high school will be done."

Monk believes federal government money would speed up the upgrades. But according to Monk, federal politicians lobbied by her group have not followed up on any commitments.

"I was alarmed to see our list of national critical infrastructure doesn't include schools. It includes banks, it includes national monuments, but it doesn't include schools," she said. "I think that's left parents thinking, 'Are the contents of these buildings not precious national treasures?'"

Although pleased by the latest progress, Monk wants to see binding legislation that would ensure successive governments taking power don't back away from the upgrading plan.

Vancouver School Board wants all seismic upgrading in the district to be completed in a decade.

Les King, director of facilities, said trustees recently submitted a five-year capital plan with that expectation in mind. The provincial government announcement will allow the VSB to complete the first chunk of the plan, which involved upgrading the 16 schools, at an accelerated pace, but details on funding commitments after that are not defined.

"The first part of the plan is exactly what we asked for and flows faster than we asked for, but there's a lot unsaid in this [announcement]," he said.

posted on 03/14/2005