

DON'T DEMOLISH VIC HIGH



[Stephen Dorsey](#) started this petition to [Greater Victoria School District](#) and [1 other](#)
Open Opinion Letter to Greater Victoria School District (GVSD) - Stephen Dorsey VHS 84

How About a Little Respect for Historic Vic High? Tearing down historic Vic High is a terrible idea.

Over the past few weeks, Victorians, including current students and alumni, have been consulted about the future of Victoria High School and its historic building. Three options were presented as the “range of possibilities” by the Greater Victoria School District (GVSD). The least expensive, “New school for students (with increased capacity for 200 more students),” would see the 104-year old Vic High building demolished to make room for a new, seismically compliant building. Estimated cost: \$50M-\$60M.

Option two, the most expensive, is “Retain the exterior and rebuild interior.” Estimated cost: \$100M-\$110M. Could it be done more affordably? Perhaps. It’s unclear based on the limited information provided on available documents.

The third option, “Seismic with interior renovations and upgraded building systems,” comes in at an estimated \$60M-\$70M. Again, with only minimal information provided, could this option be achieved at an even lower cost than building new?

What if the actual costs of demolishing the school and rebuilding from the ground up rise significantly (as they often do) and end up to be close to the same as refurbishing? If that were to happen, we would have demolished a school with the objective of saving money and lost the historic building forever.

I expect it was just an un-intended omission that the non-demolish options did not include the words “for students.” Since it’s unclear in the GVSD documents, I was left to infer that the non-demolish options would not accommodate an additional 200 students.

It would be interesting to understand how Vic High has managed the fluctuations in student enrollment over the past 104 years. My guess is that the answer is, at least “adequately.”

It seems improbable to me that the three GVSD options are the entirety of “range of possibilities.” With all the recent technical innovations in design and architecture specific to historical building revitalization, I expect there are many possibilities for a creative solution.

I also believe that limiting the focus to only three options presents a false choice, seemingly intended to drive the consultation process and decision making in a pre-determined direction. The need to accommodate 200 more students appears to be a determinant in a go-forward decision. Vic High is a very spacious school. Is there no way to re-design room sizes and open spaces to make room for more students? Has this even been considered?

How about building an addition like the Fairey Technical Building that added 57,000 square feet of teaching space in 2011? Architects effectively juxtaposed modern architecture with the classic main building to deliver much needed technical learning requirements.

I returned home this past summer and stopped by Vic High to show my young kids my beautiful former school. I was struck by how much school grounds space there was for future use. Has this option been considered?

When I started Grade 11 at Vic High in 1983, school spirit was at an all-time low. The once proud sports programs were on life support, and we were often the brunt of jokes for students from other schools. But like the solid edifice that is Vic High, we built a tough skin, took strength in the fact that we were different and, with resilience, created the high school experience we needed and wanted. We wore the black and gold as a badge of honour.

Many of us went on to successful careers in fields ranging from sports to medicine, film and politics. Like my good friend Moe Elowonibi (VHS 83), arguably Vic High’s best all-around athlete, who went on to have a long professional football career in the NFL and CFL, including winning the 1991 Super Bowl. And this year’s Black and Gold honourees, including Dr. Wallace Chang (VHS 45), former Director of Surgery and medical researcher at UBC, David Anderson (VHS 55), former MP and federal Minister of the Environment, Carol Sabiston (VHS 57), a renowned fabric artist and recipient of the Order of BC, David Day (VHS 66), internationally acclaimed author, and my friend and neighbour here in Toronto, Sam Dunn (VHS 92), a Gemini and Grammy award-winning documentary film maker.

Vic High is also an important memorial to the more than 500 students who fought in the Great War starting in 1914, the year the current Vic High School building opened. Their names and those of the 85 who perished are on display on the school’s Roll of Honour.

Vic High’s Memorial Stadium was built in 1949 to honour the students that fought in the Second World War. Recently, Vic High students, alumni and supporters have been working tirelessly to

raise funds and support from various levels of government to revitalize and bring honour back to the stadium, which has been falling to pieces for more than half a century.

Revitalizing the current building is about the future but also about continuing to honour those that came before and those that sacrificed for our country. For them and current students, Vic High is not just a school. It's an integral part of our heritage passed on from one generation to another.

Another friend, Tak Niketas, graduated in 1983 and still lives in Victoria, working as a first responder with the Saanich Fire Department. Back then, Tak was Mr. Vic High. He was a catalyst for school spirit, organizing student rallies to support our sports teams and organizing memorable events and the best parties. His energy and efforts played a central role in creating the memorable Vic High School experience for many of us.

Last year, Tak's son Chris led the Totem basketball team to its first AAA-City Championship in more than 20 years, with his father on hand as the team's general manager. It was a proud moment for the Niketas family, for the entire school body and for the thousands of alumni near and far. That achievement formed a new bridge of sorts, connecting Vic High alumni and current students to the past Vic High athletic glories achieved and celebrated in the current building for more than a century.

As the oldest public high school west of Winnipeg and north of San Francisco, Vic High is central to the cultural heritage of Victoria, of British Columbia and Western Canada, no matter if you attended the school or not. It's a heritage that should be preserved, protected and celebrated. Not destroyed. Young minds need to be inspired, and beautiful buildings like Vic High serve as a place for inspired thinking and learning.

If money were the only factor, I expect replacing all schools with affordable trailers would be the best solution. Cheap, functional, disposable and easily replaceable. That sounds like a ludicrous idea, but tearing down Vic High is just as ridiculous.

In 1914, community leaders agreed that it was worth spending \$460,000 (approximately \$11M in today's money) to build a school that would encourage students to learn for many generations. A bargain for a building that has stood the test of time and served the community for 104 years.

Every city must make decisions about preserving the past while ensuring they are meeting their citizens' current needs. Great cities have put an importance on preserving history when possible to remain relevant and unique in a modern world.

Too many things in our modern life today are disposable – clothing, snapchat videos, buildings and, unfortunately sometimes, even facts. Permanence, such as found in beautiful heritage buildings, has intrinsic value.

There are times that spending a little more is worth it. When we mark important milestones and achievements in our personal lives, we often indulge to toast the event with a slightly more expensive bottle of wine or a nice bubbly. Sure, it may be a luxury, but the occasions call for it.

Vic High has been shaping amazing human beings for more than 100 years – boys and girls entering its halls of learning with many questions and aspirations and, just a few years later, moving onto the next stage in their lives with the knowledge, skills and desire to achieve. Ready to follow in the footsteps of other accomplished alumni to contribute positively to the world.

So instead of considering demolishing Vic High, it's time to toast the old bird and say thank you. Let's get the stadium fixed, the building seismically sound, update the interior and add some new infrastructure to accommodate growth. Yes, making the school safe by keeping the building as it is will probably cost more, but she's earned it. Preserving an important part of Victoria's cultural history will continue to enrich the Vic High student experience for generations to come.

Tradition and history matters. Vic High matters.

Go Totems!

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