

It's back to school board after fate of Vic High sparks flurry of feedback

Jeff Bell / Times Colonist

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Options for Vic High, which is considered to be at high risk seismically, include upgrading the school or demolishing it and building a new one, with estimated costs ranging from \$50 million to \$110 million. Photograph By BRUCE STOTESBURY, TIMES COLONIST

The fate of historic Victoria High School, which could be refurbished or demolished, is scheduled to be back on the Greater Victoria school board's agenda on Monday.

Keith McCallion, a former Vic High principal and a member of the school's alumni association, said his group will be speaking at the board's operations policy and planning committee meeting about its hopes for the building.

"Our Vic High alumni board met [this week] and everybody is in favour of retaining a part of this wonderful heritage building, but also getting the best of the new world."

Alumni members want to let trustees know what they have discovered as they've looked into the school's situation, McCallion said.

"We want to share with them our findings and our research into similar school revitalizations," he said.

"We think that we can meet the multiple objectives of providing an excellent educational environment for the Vic High students of today and into the future, but also honour what the school embodies.

“It’s just so much a part of the fabric of the city of Victoria.”

The prices of the district’s three options for the school, which has been a Fernwood landmark since 1914, range from \$50 million to \$110 million.

Here are the choices the district is considering:

- Remove the existing school and build a new 1,000-student facility — \$50 million to \$60 million.
- Do seismic upgrades to the existing school and make needed repairs to such things as the plumbing and electrical systems, resulting in an 850-student building — \$60 million to \$70 million.
- Keep the exterior of the existing school and redo the interior, resulting in an 850-student building — \$100 million to \$110 million.

Vic High will also be a topic of discussion at the trustees’ May 28 board meeting, where they will have about 1,000 public responses to look at, gathered from two open houses and an online survey

“Obviously a lot of people cared,” said board vice-chairman Tom Ferris.

All of the input has to be organized before it goes to trustees, Ferris said.

“We’ve done most of the consultation already,” he said.

“We just need to compile that information in a readable way, and once we’ve done that, then the board will come out with a recommendation.”

He said a decision has to be made since whatever happens with Vic High is time-sensitive.

That’s because the project has to go to the Ministry of Education so it can be put into the budget, Ferris said.

Along with that, he has said seismic issues in the aging school make the situation urgent, and Vic High has been well up on the list of schools in the district requiring seismic work for some time.

A final recommendation from the board is expected at the June 25 board meeting, while the ultimate decision rests with the provincial government.

Ferris said he is pleased with the level of response from people interested in what happens to Vic High, which is much-loved by former and current students and staff.

“I didn’t go to Vic High so my perspective is slightly different, although I worked quite a bit with the alumni association and I’ve always been interested in the school,” he said.

“I’ve been the [board] liaison representative a couple of times.”

Ferris said that like others, he thinks Vic High is “a very interesting-looking school.”

“A lot of good period-piece movies have been made at Vic High.”

Deciding on what happens won’t be easy, he said.

“It’s a difficult decision in the sense that that it’s a compromise issue. You want to save elements of the building but on the other hand you also want to provide a learning facility for students.”

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