

Latest options don't include demolishing Vic High

Jeff Bell / Times Colonist

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Victoria High School, which opened in 1914.

Photograph By BRUCE STOTESBURY, TIMES COLONIST

Greater Victoria school board trustees repeated Monday their emphasis on options that would keep Victoria High School from the wrecking ball, as seven members of the school's alumni association looked on.

Saving the school, opened in 1914, has gained considerable backing from the public, including former students and teachers, with most of them citing its heritage value. Vic High is the oldest high school west of Winnipeg and north of San Francisco, having begun in a log building in 1876 on the grounds of what is now Central Middle School.

Trustees originally had three options to consider for Vic High, one of which would involve tearing the old building down. Cost estimates ranged from \$50 million to \$110 million.

But trustees have since asked district superintendent Piet Langstraat for a detailed report on two revamped options that do not involve demolishing the historic Fernwood building. The report had already been supported by a board committee and was passed unanimously Monday at a full board meeting.

The two options being emphasized by trustees include one that upgrades the current facility, does a seismic refit and makes changes to the way the inside of the building is organized. The other option includes seismic work and likely a small addition to the school to add capacity.

In both, the exterior of the school would be retained and upgraded, and enhancement of internal heritage aspects could be included.

The most expensive option previously was \$100 million to \$110 million and involved saving the school facade, but it is now off the table.

Vic High has a seismic rating of H-1, the top level of priority for action to be taken.

Alumni association member and former Vic High principal Keith McCallion said he is happy with the direction the matter is taking.

“The way we see it, demolition is off the table.”

While the board’s recommended option is expected to be revealed at its June 25 meeting, the final word on the school goes to the provincial government.

In March and April, the district held a number of sessions for the public to give input on the Vic High issue. More than 1,700 people attended open houses and other events, or responded to an online survey.

Preserving the school has its detractors, as well, including the watchdog group known as the Grumpy Taxpayer\$ of Victoria. Chairman Stan Bartlett said the logical choice from the original three is the cheaper tear-down option, with some heritage features integrated into the new structure.

Last week, Vic High’s seismic condition and the possibility of its demise led the National Trust for Canada to place it on the country’s 2018 Top 10 Endangered Places List.

jwbell@timescolonist.com