**Brooks Rd. P.S. – A school Closing Story**

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Brooks Rd. P.S., due to close permanently at the end of June 2013, has been posted as a property for sale on the Toronto Lands Corporation website for several months. It was a sacrificial lamb in the rash of Accommodation Reviews in 2009- 2010 in Toronto. That year saw the closing of 9 schools, which brought the Toronto District School Board’s total to 12 school closures in two years- 8 of them in Scarborough.

The majority of school closings had taken place in low-income, high-needs communities. Brooks Rd. P.S., however, was located in a middle -income neighbourhood and number 239 on the Learning Opportunities Index. That put its community’s rating a little above the midway mark- neither rich nor poor.

This school closing was bitterly contested by the community. Parents fought throughout the Accommodation Review and right up to the school’s closing date. They had packed the public meetings during the Accommodation Review. At the final public meeting, the gymnasium was packed. Acrimonious accusations of a flawed vote were flung at the meeting facilitators. The meeting was adjourned even though there was still a line up at the microphone.

Parents issued a minority report defending the validity of their neighbourhood school in face of the Board’s assertions about declining enrollment. They wrote appeals to school trustees, made deputations to school trustees at standing committee meetings. They met with their school trustee and the then Director of Education, Chris Spence. They held a demonstration in front of their school before the CTV cameras. They organized a mass letter signing campaign, sending dozens of letters to school trustees beseeching them to keep their school open. All to no avail. The decision to close Brooks Rd. had been made long ago.

Trustee Jerry Chadwick was principal of Highcastle P.S. prior to his retirement and subsequent election to the position of school trustee for Ward 22 in the TDSB in 2010. Some years before the 2009-2010 Accommodation Review. which grouped the four elementary schools- Highcastle, Brooks Rd., Chief Dan George P.S. and John G. Diefenbaker P.S.- Jerry Chadwick had done a brief stint as a substitute principal at Brooks Rd. Parents later remembered their dismay and amazement when, in casual conversation with Chadwick, he informed them that their school was going to close in a few years. The rumour spread among the parents. Clearly Chadwick knew something they didn’t, but he didn’t supply any details.

The Accommodation Review Committee ( A.R.C.) which closed Brooks Rd., was an unusual one. It grouped four elementary schools, all in Ward 22 but not all in adjoining neighbourhoods. Two schools were south of Highway 401 located on either side of Neilson Rd. The other two schools were north of the 401 on either side of Meadowvale Ave. Not only were the two pairs of schools separated by a major freeway, they were 3.4 km apart from east to west. It was baffling to see how these neighbourhood schools could be seen as interchangeable. Then, included in some peripheral way, was the Meadowvale/Sheppard site. The site was barely mentioned in the A.R.C. documents and never discussed or debated in the public meetings. It was also in a different ward from the other four schools.

The Meadowvale/Sheppard site, located in Ward 21, was purchased by the TDSB in 2004 as a site for a new school. A new subdivision was going up and the developer pointed to the empty field promising home buyers that a new school was imminent. But five years passed and no school materialized. Kids were bussed from the community to Chief Dan George P.S. and Highcastle P.S. at the cost of $212,000 per year. Shawn Chen, trustee for Ward 22, made the new school a plank in his election platform and worked hard to ensure the money for the building got approval.

How was a new school in Ward 21 connected to the closing of a school in Ward 22? According to an article in the *Toronto Star* of May 4th 2010, reporter Louise Brown stated that “Trustee Shaun Chen explained the province only gives capital funds for a new school after the board sheds unused space.“ **The Board approved $15,970,000 to build the new school at Meadowvale/Sheppard on June 23rd, 2011.** The TDSB trustees voted to close Brooks Rd. P.S. the same day. Trustee Chen had taken some interest in the Brooks Rd. Accommodation Review and had attended many of the committee meetings and well as the public meetings, as had Trustee Chadwick.

Brooks Rd. was built in 1971 as an ‘open concept’ school- an experiment that was hailed as the latest and best in educational environments in theory but quickly proved to be unpopular and unworkable in practice. Many ‘open concept’ schools were later renovated and classrooms partitioned but the changes played havoc with the original HVAC system. Some classrooms were too cold while others overheated. Yet, the operating costs at Brooks Rd. P.S. were shown to be less than that of neighbouring Highcastle P.S.

In other respects, Brooks Rd. P.S. was a very viable school. It was built to accommodate 417 students and its enrolment was at 400 putting its utilization rate at over 96%. Further, it showed no signs of declining enrolment. Registration for 2012/13 showed signs that a slight increase was expected for the following year- without calculating for full-day kindergarten still waiting in the wings. The school’s size was close to the TDSB’s stated “ideal size” for elementary school of 450 and it could hardly be called “half-empty.” In addition, Brooks Rd. was a dual track JK to grade 8 English/French program- a rare bird in Scarborough where French Immersion programs are not so plentiful.

So Brooks Rd. P.S. is to be dismembered on the alter of a balanced budget. Students in its English speaking program will be marched over to Highcastle across Neilson Rd. -busy with fast moving local traffic at rush hour. The school’s French Immersion population will be split between Highcastle and Alexander Stirling P.S.- on the other side of Highway 401- in Ward 21- and never part of the original A.R.C. process.

Then it seemed as though the money was going to flow. **In May 2012, trustees voted to approve a major $11,995,000 rebuild for Highcastle** to accommodate a school population of 654. Originally Highcastle had been designed as a small school to hold 320. Now it’s to be a mega JK to grade 8**. Alexander Stirling was approved for a facilities upgrade worth $2,275,210. Brooks Rd. is expected to sell for not much more than $5,000,000.**

However, the money got stuck in the pipeline. The Province turned off the tap. Angered that school construction had run way over budget, the province is now withholding its promised share of the reconstruction money. Highcastle will likely have to add more portables to the eight already in place there. If the plan is to squeeze over 600 children onto that site, then there will be as many children accommodated in portables as classrooms. A similar fate has hit D.A. Morrison in former East York. A small school was closed and consolidated with D.A. Morrison. An expensive addition was promised. But there will be no shovels in the ground this summer. Accommodation Reviews emphatically promised parents their children would not be accommodated in portables but until the province loosens the purse strings, the Board will have to come up with some explanations.