

Address to Lambton Kent District School Board re Schools Consolidation

March 8th 2016

My name is Elizabeth Wood McDonald, I reside at 2080 Clarence Drive in Sarnia, have been a resident of Sarnia for 44 years and am speaking on my own behalf to-night.

I am here to support the closing of Sarnia St. Clair Secondary School; and the combining of the two student bodies into one at Sarnia Collegiate Institute and Technical School permanently.

SCITS is a heritage building. It is on both the city's and the county's heritage inventories, inventories that municipalities have been required to create and keep current by the province since 1983. SCITS has not been designated under the Ontario Heritage Act but then, to date, neither has any church in the city nor any large building unfortunately, except for the Imperial Theatre, the Lawrence House and parts of the north, curved, facade of the Lochiel Centre. We as a community are remarkably different from eastern Ontario with its pride in its United Empire Loyalist heritage; or Quebec, whose government for nearly a century, has generously funded the preservation of private and public buildings, particularly churches.

When it was built SCITS's received an architectural award and had the avant-garde distinction of being the first composite high school in the province. It housed all three streams – general, technical and commercial. That is why it has such a long name. The term 'high school' arose after 1922. The word 'collegiate' was defined by having a certain number of specialist teachers in the general stream.

St. Clair, built by Sarnia Township at the time – its first high school - is of poor construction. At that time when it opened in 1961, one trustee bragged that they built it for \$1.00 per square foot. I spent 13 years teaching in the building. It seemed every spring we would have the whiff of tar coming through my window, as they yet again retarred the roof of the offices. The drop-ceiling tiles in the corridors seemed to always be open somewhere for repairing the piping and wiring. Rooms 213 and 215 in the northern addition have one window for a 30-seat class, and the window has only a one-foot-by-three-foot levered opening at the bottom to bring in any fresh air, air from an enclosed courtyard. The whole building is stifling in June and September, and general ventilation throughout the building is very poor all the time.

The reduction in enrollment in our two counties requires the Board to consolidate and close schools as directed by the province, in order to save money, but also to balance a budget which, for the most part, is determined by dollars per student enrollment, thus reducing

transfers from the province. Yet, in reading the Lambton Kent District School Board Pupil Accommodation Report published on November 24th 2015, I find a continuous emphasis, after enrollment, on the age of buildings as the major criteria for consolidation. For instance on page 11 "The average age of schools in Ontario is 38 years ... (for) LKDSB secondary schools is 46 years". And the FCI, the Facility Condition Index is based/created on data referring only to Cost of Facility Work 2015-2024 as a ratio of Facility Replacement Value. For SCITS, replacement value is \$29,536,110 and maintenance for 2015-2024 an incredible \$17,695,459!! For St. Clair it is \$32,899,870 for replacement value and \$13,369,585 for maintenance.

Yet, despite these huge maintenance figures for a short 10 years, no one will tell me what they include. The reports done by the province are not public. Even the Trustees have not seen them I was told. All a Trustee could tell me last week was "Yes, they include bringing each building up to code". And the mantra I seem to get as rational everywhere is that 'we want a safe environment for our students'. I asked whether provincial civil servants created these 65 reports for our 65 schools or was the work contracted out, but as yet have not had an answer to the question. In my experience as a Sarnia City Councillor for six years, I know that consultants usually exaggerate costs. Is that true here? No one knows save the administration. Not the Trustees. Nor the Accommodation Review Committee of parent, student and community representatives.

Instead, on page 19, in its rationale for closing SCITS, administration lists just nine points in favour of closing. The closed pool is mentioned needing repair, but at the ARC meeting two weeks ago the committee was told that a new ventilation system would cost just/only \$20,000. It is noted that energy costs are double at SCITS than those of St. Clair, some \$200,000 more per year. But at the projected upgrading of St. Clair for \$14 million, it would take 70 years to recoup those costs. Putting everyone at SCITS as is, would continue to cost an average of ½ million per year giving the nine points listed. And these nine points do not indicate whether the \$539K in 2014 and the \$716K in 2015 for maintenance were repairs or upgrading to code - that is, discretionary. Well, not one building is 'up to code', not even the new P.E. McGibbon Public School, because code continually changes. Code is always-moving goal-posts. SCITS is a legal non-conforming building. It is safe. It has survived tornadoes. Another of the nine points mentions the lack of 100% accessibility of SCITS, but does not elaborate. But a new elevator put in to replace the one that was built to grant access for the community to the auditorium, could add access to the basement, which houses the library in the old girl's gym, in addition to the pool and the dressing-rooms. It's certainly a cheaper proposition than \$14 million to upgrade St. Clair.

The province has a Consolidation Fund that Boards can access to cover closing costs. But it seems that here in Sarnia, our elected representatives and our administrations continue to

prefer building a new building in order to close two – at huge costs. The hospital, P.E. McGibbon, St. Matthews, the three schools in The Rapids sub-division. Now Sherwood. Yet provincial money is still tax-payer money. And our province now has debt of \$308 billion dollars, the largest sub-national government debt in the world – a debt of \$22,000 per citizen.

Sherwood has existed as a subdivision for over 35 years. Now, because it has 300 students being bused to various schools, the staff recommendation is a new school in Sherwood. Our city's population is aging; we are becoming a retirement town. City projections estimate we could be reduced from 73,000 to as low as 65,000 population by 2030. What if 10 years from now that elementary-school population is reduced from 300 to 50? Will we not look wilfully foolish? The way we seem to regard the Consolidation Fund, is as a prize, to put 14 million dollars into St. Clair to upgrade and probably up to eight million to build in Sherwood.

To my mind it behoves the Board Trustees to demand to have a hard copy, of the full report from the province on what is included in the maintenance of St. Clair and SCITS from 2015 to 2024, all the inputs of upgrade and repair that created the FCI Index.

When I asked, the Trustee also said there was nothing in the written material to cover the cost of demolition of SCITS or of St. Clair. SCITS closed, could end up like the hospital and Devine Street School. It is the height of irresponsibility for successive hospital boards in the 1990's, not to put the cost of demolition into their public fund-raising efforts. But instead, now put the blame on the province for not covering the cost of their building's demolition and even having the audacity of taking the city (which owns only the land) to court to claim the building is its responsibility not theirs. The school board's experience with Devine Street Public School is not a good precedent. The provincial Consolidation Fund would be better put to demolitions rather than new creations.

Finally, the Board has gone to extraordinary efforts to keep rural high schools open. Putting Grades 7 and 8 into Ridgetown District High School is the latest example. The rationale is that it is the area's only high school, but from experience it is - that a school gets a community - so even high schools of less than 300 are left open. Just as the Board is determined to try all kinds of ways to maintain small schools for the sake of the community, it behoves the Board to have the same care and concern for the old heart of the city of Sarnia where, at a factor of at least 7 against small rural towns and farms, 73,000 people are impacted by the closing of SCITS. That there is another alternative is not good enough a reason - for the health of our city.

I have been told that it is tradition for Sarnia City Council and the school board, not to get involved in each other's business. There is a motion passed at City Council requesting a staff report on the effect of the closing of SCITS on the downtown and on Mitton Village, but given this tradition I am not optimistic about the rigor of the commitment to act on the report when

it comes. I hope I am wrong because we have a 15-20% commercial vacancy rate in the city when 5-6% is considered healthy; and for the first time in my life I see permanently boarded-up houses and many empty houses.

When I entered Grade Nine at SCITS it had 2000 students, and I spent my afternoons taking four classes down the street in the old Wellington Street School, where the Board building now sits. When I was in Grade 10 we had two student bodies in one building – SCITS in the morning and Northern in the afternoon. When I was in Grade 12 all of us in the general stream were given the opportunity to take Grade 13 in the new Central Collegiate or to stay at SCITS. I chose SCITS. Now I feel like part of two book-ends.

I say to the Trustees, as we closed Central in the early 1980's, now close St. Clair. Or use it to consolidate elementary schools – minus the \$14 million. Maintaining and thriving in this building, SCITS, a beautiful, well-built, heritage, beloved building, that is part of our psyche and our past and our future, as a city - keeps that other book-end upright.

Quality education and a safe environment for children are the mandate, and responsibility, of the Trustees, as representatives of the communities they serve. But there is also a responsibility to not be irresponsible in the consequences a closed school has on a community, whether it is Ridgeway or Sarnia. Thank you.

Elizabeth Wood McDonald.