

**Dr. J. H. Gillis Regional Feeder System School Review
School Options Committee**

Public Meeting 3

Wednesday, February 22, 2017 – 7:00 p.m.

St. Andrew Junior School, Antigonish, Nova Scotia

Attendance

Committee Members:

Voting:

Deepak Prasad, Community Representative - Chair
Maria Fraser, AEC School Advisory Chair
Karla Chisholm, AEC School Advisory Council Parent Representative
John Blackwell, DJHG School Advisory Council Parent Representative
Amanda MacDonald, HMM School Advisory Council Chair
Beth Maloney, SACS School Advisory Council Chair Designate
Mary Anne Burke, SACS School Advisory Council Parent Representative
Minu Sharma, SAJS School Advisory Council Chair
Angela Penney, SAJS School Advisory Council Parent Representative

Non-Voting:

April Weaver, Principal AEC
Jason Dayman, Principal HMM
Kirk Johnstone, Principal SACS
Glenn Austen, Principal SAJS
Bob MacEachern, School Review Facilitator
Sherman England, SRSB Director of Operations
Kevin Walker, SRSB Coordinator
Leah Duggan, Recording Secretary

1. Call to Order (B. MacEachern, Facilitator)

The Public meeting was called to order at 7:00 p.m.

2. Record of Attendance

Regrets:

Allan Armsworthy, DJHG School Advisory Council, Chair
Jacqui Briand, HMM School Advisory Council Parent Representative and
Wanda Fougere, Principal at Dr. J. H. Gillis Regional High School

Bob MacEachern, School Options Committee Facilitator, introduced the voting and non-voting SOC members as well as Board members in attendance; Mary Jess MacDonald, Jamie Samson, Anne Peters, Paula Paul, Chelsea Burke, George Kehoe, Richelle MacLaughlin, Jim Austin, Barbara Quirk, Francine Boudreau along with Superintendent, Ford Rice and Antigonish Town and County Councillors.

Mr. MacEachern introduced and welcomed Deepak Prasad, School Options Committee Chair for opening comments.

Mr. Prasad opened the meeting by welcoming everyone to the third public School Options Committee meeting. He thanked the School Options Committee, who volunteer their time and offer their expertise. Mr. Prasad explained why he was involved in this process by telling a personal story, which is why he made a commitment when he joined the RCMP to do anything he could to help improve the school system.

D. Prasad stressed the importance of feedback during these meetings, welcomed any questions at the end of the presentation and thanked everyone for coming, showing their community involvement in this process.

3. Explanation of the Provincial School Review Process – Presentation attached as part of the public record.

B. MacEachern explained the Role of the Facilitator, which is someone who speaks on behalf of the Committee during public meetings, acts as a liaison between the Board and the Committee and with the Chair, will present the final recommendation to the elected board.

B. MacEachern reviewed the School Options Committee's mandate as laid out in the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development School Review Policy. He identified the Dr. JHG Feeder System School Review guiding documents, objectives and reference criteria for the School Review. Information on the process, policies and any minutes from previous meetings are posted on the Strait Regional School Board's website.

4. Summary of Work Conducted to Date

The School Options Committee has met on the following dates:

- Wednesday, October 26, 2016 (Dr. J. H. Gillis Regional High School)
- Monday, November 7, 2016 (Dr. J. H. Gillis Regional High School)
- November 22, 2016 (H. M. Macdonald Elementary School)
- November 28, 2016 (St. Andrew Junior School/Antigonish Education Centre)
- December 6, 2016 (Town Hall – Antigonish)
- January 9, 2017 (County of Antigonish – Meeting Room)
- February 6, 2017 (St. Andrew Junior School)
- February 13, 2017 (Conference Call)
- February 21, 2017 (Dr. J. H. Gillis Regional High School)

Public Meetings held to date:

- Public Meeting 1, November 15, 2016 at Dr. John Hugh Gillis Regional High School
 - Presenting process, objectives and receive feedback
- Public Meeting 2, January 26, 2017 at Antigonish Education Centre
 - Presenting draft scenarios and receive feedback
- Public Meeting 3, February 22, 2017 at St. Andrew Junior School
 - Presenting preferred review scenario and receive feedback

B. MacEachern reported on the Committee's work;

- Review of existing schools and school configurations;
 - AEC (P-4)
 - SAC (P-6)
 - HM MacDonald (P-6)
 - SAJS (5-8)
 - Dr. JH Gillis (9-12)
- Scenarios further reviewed in the Dr. J. H. Gillis Regional High School feeder system:
 1. Status Quo
 2. SAJS (P-6), SAC (P-6), HM MacDonald (P-6) and Dr. JH Gillis (7-12) - Closing AEC
 3. AEC (P-4), SAC (P-6), SAJS (5-8) and Dr. JH Gillis (9-12) - Closing HM MacDonald
 4. AEC (P-6), SAC (P-6), HM MacDonald (P-6) and SAJS (7-12) – Closing Dr. JH Gillis
- The preferred scenario of the SOC is option 1. Status Quo.

5. Purpose of the Meeting

The purpose of the Public Meeting is to present the SOC's preferred scenario and to receive public feedback.

6. Public Feedback

Facilitator, B. MacEachern, requested public feedback

1. Bill MacFarlane – Applauded the SOC in sticking with their decision of status quo, but wondered how much weight the committee's recommendation will carry with the Board? In the past, has committee recommendations been accepted?

B. MacEachern spoke about the SAERC Feeder System School Review and how, in the end, a report was filed with all data collected, but no recommendation was given. This School Review process is setup to inform the Board of feedback. The SOC engages the public to ask their opinion then take everything into consideration along with the information provided around schools, square footage, number of students and projections.

2. Carl Chisholm – Thanked the committee and also agrees with their recommendation. He would like to see figures, both purchase price and operational costs, to stay status quo and the cost.

Ford Rice responded by saying the Board will look at the recommendation from the School Options Committee and he and his staff will create a technical report containing items such as financials mentioned by Mr. Chisholm.

The cost to purchase AEC, which would be purchased by the Province of Nova Scotia from the private investor, would be approximately \$5.9 million, with the annual operating cost of approximately \$529,000.

Mr. Chisholm followed up by asking how much clout the Strait Regional School Board has with the Provincial Government that they would accept the \$5.9 million to purchase along with \$529,000 operational cost?

Mr. Rice responded by saying it's not about clout, it's about the decision of the Board. At the end of the day, when all documents are submitted and reviewed by the Board, including feedback received from the 3 public meetings, any online submissions or conversations with Board Members involved throughout this process. The Board will make a decision based on factors, including financial, and put their request in writing to the Minister who will then make the ultimate decision.

3. Matthew Boyd – Reiterated the point that it's not the School Board paying for the school, it is the Province. If you look back on the history of P-3 schools, in 2010 the Auditor General did a review and said having P-3 schools was a mistake and they should all be purchased by the Province. There was another independent recommendation by the Alternative Policies of Canada that believed all P-3 schools should be purchased by their Provincial Government, whether they give them to the School Boards or resell them. He proceeded to say there is a 43% market value on that \$5.9 million so to build a school like AEC, it would cost and be worth more than its purchase price. He also felt it was important to keep in mind that St. Andrews Consolidated cost \$4.1 million for their renovation.

Mr. Boyd then asked why Option #2 (closing AEC) wasn't ruled out. The projected number of students for 2021 shows students from AEC going to SAJS would be under its capacity (the projected number would be 650+ students where the capacity would be 700), but what isn't taken into consideration is the composition of those classes. If AEC were to close, the projected P-2 students would require 13 classrooms at SAJS, and in combination with grades 3-6, a total of 29 classrooms would be needed. When reviewing the data, only 25 classrooms were shown so the concern would be SAJS turning into an overcrowded school with no place to put students. Would portables be brought in? Was this discussed?

B. MacEachern responded that it was absolutely discussed. There was a clear understanding by all committee members as to what that meant in real terms from an operational point of view.

Sherman England added that there are program spaces available in a junior high school that you don't find in an elementary school, for example at SAJS you would find technology education and family studies. These spaces would could provide 5 additional program spaces allowing for approximately 125 more students.

Mr. Boyd asked for clarification that the classroom spaces would then go from 25-30?

Mr. England responded by saying when an analysis was done, they concluded that 35 program spaces would be available for grades P-6 at SAJS.

Mr. Boyd continued to say that when the same reviews were completed in PEI, they looked at cost per student rather than occupancy rate, using Georgetown school as an example. He then thanked everyone for all they did.

S. England mentioned that the Board uses the Hogg formula in relation to students.

4. Nicole Baden-Clay – Thanked the SOC for their time and stated her concern with the developmental needs of children and having very young children in the same learning environment as a 10+ year old.

Ford Rice answered by sharing the configurations of schools within the SRSB. Dr. J. H. Gillis Regional High School was proposed to be grades 7-12 so children who are 10 years old would be in a P-6 school system.

The SRSB has been very successful with their current school configurations, but there are a number of P-6 schools that can be found right across the province and are common across the country. It is more about the services provided as opposed to the configuration. There is a myriad of services the SRSB provides whether it's mental health, teen health centers, speech language pathologists, or school health nurses so the concern is more with the Board's ability to provide individual needs to our students as opposed to grade configurations.

Ms. Baden-Clay continued by stating that students at H.M. MacDonald have small class sizes and it is configured as a P-6 school. She went to a small school, which was completely appropriate, but when we're looking at putting more students in a small space, who is going to have gym time and what about the mental health services and school supports? Are those numbers going to stay the same or will they be lost?

Mr. Rice followed up by saying historically the class sizes at H.M. MacDonald were probably small, but this school has grown over the years and all class cap guidelines are followed within the SRSB (P-2=20 students, 3-6=25 students).

In 2021, a P-6 school would be around 670 students and the services available would be consistent with that number of students.

5. Nicole MacDonald – As a teacher who specializes in students with vision loss she was concerned with spacing for these students, such as quiet rooms and additional student service spaces. Even though there may be enough physical space in the school, will there be spaces for kids with special needs and will adjustments be made for the composition of kids within the class?

Ford Rice replied, if SAJS ended up with grades P-6 after the Board makes their decision, they would request an extension for potential programming spaces because at the end of the day we want to do the best we can for the children we serve.

MacDonald added when you look at the cost per student, if AEC closed and SAJS had to make adjustments, that would add to the cost.

Mr. Rice responded by saying the Board would have to go through a process to decide if the cost of purchasing AEC would outweigh adding an extension onto SAJS.

6. Heather Carson – Wanted clarification on what an extension would be. Would it be portables or an addition to the existing building?

B. MacEachern answered that it would most likely be an addition, but mentioned the SOC did not talk about this as it is not part of their mandate. Anything pertaining to add-ons would be discussed at the Board level.

Ms. Carson stated she was happy on the committee's recommendation, but once the Board completes their report and sends it to the Province, she is not convinced they are going to have the learning needs of all students at interest based on the last number of weeks. She feels the Minister will only be looking at the bottom dollar and wonders what the Board, the School Options Committee and parents will do to make sure we are heard and that they are considering the learning needs of the students.

Mr. MacEachern said from an SOC perspective, with the exception of one more working meeting, their job will be completed then it is handed off to the Board. If the Community would want to interact or make a presentation to the Board, that would be the place to do it.

7. Dave Maybee - Was happy with the SOC recommendation to stay status quo. He said there has been a lot of talk with the financial side of things and that's obviously an important consideration, but feels it is also important to talk about what happens to a community when a small rural school is closed. What makes these two schools in the feeder system special (referring to H. M. MacDonald and St. Andrew's Consolidated) is they are two of the only "gems" left in terms of a rural school. Rural schools offer a sense of community and it is hard to quantify that. As a parent and someone who went to a small rural school, he sees the benefit of maintaining that sense of community and not centralizing the whole system to save money. He then thanked the SOC for putting forth that recommendation.

8. Kulbir Singh - Asked if AEC closed, would SAJS be a two-wing school or would younger students be mixed in with the older students in terms of classrooms and washrooms?

B. MacEachern explained that the recommendation by the SOC was status quo, but if they went with Option 2, which closes AEC and move students to SAJS, grades 7 and 8 would move to Dr. John Hugh Gillis Regional High School. He also commented that SAJS is a well-designed school with "pods" of areas to separate those of a younger age from older students.

Mr. Rice commented that he and his staff have done some preliminary work in the event SAJS were to become P-6. In particular, washrooms and other learning spaces

would have to be reconfigured to facilitate a younger elementary school environment as opposed to the now junior high environment.

Mr. Singh asked if there would be separate stairs for the little kids.

Mr. Rice explained that this is not the recommendation the SOC is putting forth, but from his own perspective being a former Principal of a 4-9 school with 943 students, they reconfigured from grades 7-9 to 4-9. It was done in a way that operated with grades 4-6 together and 7-9 together. Since this is only preliminary and again, is not the recommendation from the SOC, a lot of research would be done before the Board made their decision. A lot of input will be considered from SAC members, the Principal of the school, etc. on how to organize a school so it can operate effectively and efficiently.

9. Danielle Gough-Beaton – Was also happy with the SOC recommendation to remain status quo. She came prepared to speak about grades 7-12 being in the same school. She believes it is a big mistake, and speaking from her experiences in one of these school configurations in NB, and said the grade 7-8's were living a much faster life than they should. She wanted to emphasize it would be a mistake having 7 and 8 students together with 9-12's.

Mr. Rice reassured Ms. Gough-Beaton that if the option were to make Dr. J. H. Gillis a 7-12 school, the same separation of spaces would apply as he spoke about regarding SAJS. There would be 7-9 on one level and 10-12 on another, basically schools operating within schools. Again, that is currently not the recommendation of the SOC.

10. Carl Chisholm – Said it was unfortunate no one from the Education Department, the Ministers Department or our MLA, Randy Delorey was present because approximately 2 years ago a joint council meeting was held when Mr. Chisholm was Mayor, and members of the SRSB were there to tell how their budget was decreased by \$250,000. Mr. Chisholm wanted everyone to know that as assessments continue to increase on our residences and commercial property, the Town of Antigonish and the Municipality of the County of Antigonish's assessment for education was increased by approximately \$700,000 (the municipalities pay a percentage based on the assessments). As taxes continue to go up, the School Board's budget continues to go down, but where is the money going? He feels because of this we should remain status quo.
11. Stephanie Spencer – Thanked the Committee for their work and appreciates their insight, opinion and recommendation, but is skeptical where the recommendation will end up. Her passion being physical education and physical literacy is fearful that if the recommendation didn't stay status quo and it went to option #2, the physical education space at SAJS would be more limited. She went over Participaction Canada statistics regarding high percentages of sedentary waking hours of youth and wants to know the Board's plan on increasing physical education or how they will at least maintain it in a larger populated school. Gymnasiums can't be portables and it's not easy to create an add-on for a gym, so what is the Board's plan?

Mr. MacEachern said as part of their deliberation the SOC talked about sharing of space if option 2 moved forward. They talked about gymnasiums and cafeterias.

Sherman England responded that AEC is equipped with a single gymnasium and SAJS is a double. This doubles your program space availability for physical education then what they would see at the P-4 level, but at the same time, not doubling your classroom size.

Ms. Spencer agreed, but stated it is still the same amount of space. Additional space is obviously much better for the children participating in sport and physical activity, but with more kids in the school, the availability becomes less for kids to have a cycle in their schedule.

Mr. England responded by saying that with the curtain down in the gym you operate as two separate classrooms and each one would get the program time they require.

Ms. Spencer added that they're not thinking what the best benefit is for the kids or how they can increase current standards, it's more that they're meeting the minimum requirement.

Mr. MacEachern ended by saying that programming requirements are outside of the SOC terms of reference, but said it was something she may want to follow up with to the Board.

12. Brigette Forrestall – Asked what we would be losing if we remained status quo.

B. MacEachern said the budget is the budget and the SRSB is funded by population. We've seen the latest decreases from Stats Canada released in the last 2 weeks and you're always impacted based on student population.

Mr. Rice used an analogy of household budgets being comparable to School Board budgets; you must be strategic with your limited resources. If schools remain status quo, by 2021, Dr. John Hugh Gillis Regional High School will be operating at less than 50% capacity and a declining enrolment means a declining budget. The Board has choices to make; use the declined budget on heating buildings that are under capacity or use it to provide services to children.

Ms. Forrestall then asked why status quo was recommended by the SOC?

Mr. Rice is not a member of the SOC so Mr. MacEachern commented that some of the Committee were uncomfortable closing the newest school in the feeder system, but mainly it was about operational flow, in particular, around Dr. J. H. Gillis Regional High School. This is why status quo was recommended.

Ms. Forrestall asked since we are spending so much on electricity, why do you think the minister is going to agree with spending 5.9 million on the purchase of AEC?

Mr. MacEachern said the SOC's recommendation is part of the fact finding that the Board is doing. This technical report will go to the board so they can review and make a determination based on budget, needs and projections and determine as a group how they would vote in relation to this feeder system. The Board's recommendation

would then be put forward to the Minister, containing any arguments to enlighten the Minister on the needs of this feeder system.

Ms. Forrestall asked what the backup plan would be if she says no.

Mr. MacEachern said at the end of the day, the Minister has the final say.

Ms. Forrestall asked if the minister says no to status quo then what will happen.

Mr. MacEachern said you can't second guess the minister, but our process as an SOC is to make a recommendation and at this point it is status quo.

Recommendations could change based on discussions here, but encouraged everyone to stay engaged with the SRSB so they know what the final recommendation will be.

Bob mentioned that in 1996, when the Board was formed, there were 11,400 students in the system. 20 years later we have more than a 40% decrease with a little over 6,200 students.

13. Tammy Anderson – Grew up in Antigonish and went to Braemore Elementary. At that time Braemore was P-6 and Dr. J. H. Gillis Regional High School was 7-12. If it didn't work then, why are we going back to that and how can she ensure her child, and easily led children in grade 7, wouldn't be interacting with grade 12 students?

Bob said he doesn't think it was because 7-12 didn't work at the Regional, it was more that the Province had enough money to build a new facility at that time and moved the grade 7-8 students out.

Mr. Rice responded with the following statistics:

In 2000, a lot of reconfiguring occurred to set up the school system for the next 20 years. At that time, the SRSB closed 15 schools and opened 7 P-3 schools. In 2000, the population at Dr. J. H. Gillis was 1130 and is now 740 in 2016. All schools in the Dr. J. H. Gillis Regional High School Feeder System from 2000-2016, lost 805 students; this is more than the enrolment at Dr. J. H. Gillis presently.

Although we are governed by the P-3 leases, it is the Board's hope through this process, to set up our current school system for success for the next 20 years.

14. Lindsey King – Wondered if the French Immersion Program would still continue to be offered.

Mr. MacEachern said yes, no programming would be removed.

15. Matthew Boyd – Pointed out that it was mentioned that we are setting up for the next 20 years, but if the Board chooses option 2 (close AEC), our average school age would be 49 years old. If we are going forward, in 20 year's time, our schools will be almost 70 years old. We are moving back to 1996 if we lose AEC by losing our newest school. Investing in the future would be keeping what is new as much as we can.

16. Heather Carson – Questioned the decision to not close Dr. J. H. Gillis Regional High School because of spacing, but can make additions at other schools. If we are moving forward with a 20 year plan, I have a problem with keeping the Regional, calling it a “sick school” with no windows or ventilation.

Mr. MacEachern said expansion wasn’t part of the SOC mandate, but in terms of high schools, they have very specialized spaces (ie: labs) and are very expensive to recreate so there would be a significant expense if the high school were to close. Many windows have since been added during past number of renovations to the school.

Mr. MacEachern thanked the Board members, Committee members and all who were in attendance at the third public meeting. The job of the SOC will be completed within the next couple of weeks and a decision by the Board will be done by the end of April.

Mr. MacEachern also wanted to remind everyone that there is a 5 year window before the lease is up at Antigonish Education Centre so any possible changes would not take place until September, 2021.

17. Future Meetings

- a. Working Meeting, TBA

18. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 8:20 p.m.

**BOB MACEACHERN
SCHOOL REVIEW FACILITATOR**

**LEAH DUGGAN
RECORDING SECRETARY**