

Commentary: Pay now for new Scarborough school or pay later as deferred costs come due

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By Todd Jepson

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Many misinformed people have been speaking out negatively about the concept of the Unified Elementary School in Scarborough, which goes to referendum on Nov. 7.

I've been managing the school facilities in Scarborough since 2010, when students still learned in the old Wentworth Intermediate School. This new building project is a K-8 solution and solves the space issues for nine grade levels that have existed since before my time here.

The new Wentworth solved the problem for three grade levels (grades 3 to 5). This new project solves the problem of pouring good money into outdated buildings that would be prohibitively expensive to renovate and structurally unsound to actually enlarge to modern educational standards, and the existing sites are too small anyway.

The Building Committee, working for over four years, researched the idea of building a fourth smaller school and renovating the existing schools. They learned it would cost millions more and result in continued inefficiency and additional staffing and would take many more years of additional time to complete – time Scarborough does not have. In 2027 the current schools will completely run out of room for the incoming K-2 class, and the school sites do not have space to add additional trailer classrooms. This committee is made up of intelligent community members – all parents, many of whom are professionals in the industry of managing and building commercial buildings.

The old Wentworth Intermediate School was a 1962 building with a 1974 addition and 18 temporary trailer classrooms. Scarborough replaced that building for good reason in 2014. Our current K-2 schools are 1957, 1959 and 1965 buildings that all had 1992 additions and now have 18 trailers added on to them. They need replacing for the exact same reasons. The middle school, overenrolled since the day the doors opened in 1996, has a 12-classroom trailer complex, which makes 30 “temporary” classrooms district-wide that are inadequate, inefficient and wasteful to maintain as well as a sorry solution for educating Scarborough children. This new building guarantees a solution for Scarborough students for decades to come.

Some folks think \$160 million is too much to spend on a school. It is a lot of money by any standard, but it is for an excellent investment – an investment in children, and in a building that will last 50 or more years and will serve thousands of Scarborough children and give them a leg up on a quality education at a price that a town like Scarborough can afford with minimal tax increases, according to town officials. How can this be bad?

What Scarborough can't afford is to waste good money on old, undersized and completely inefficient schools where everything is done in triplicate. The buildings cost 1.5 times as much to run as the modern Wentworth School. If this school referendum does not pass, many people think that the town will then spend no money on the schools, when, in actuality, I will have to ask for millions of dollars to waste on poor solutions patching together what can



An outdoor walkway connects one of the portable classrooms to the main building at Eight Corners Primary School in Scarborough. It's one of three crowded and outdated K-2 schools that would be replaced by the Unified Elementary School if that project is approved

Nov. 7. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer*

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be done to limp along for the short term, all the while, losing a good centralized location for a new school and watching as construction prices soar 8% or more per year. Invest now to avoid added costs by waiting.

I can't stand spending money on poor investments and Band-Aid solutions. It's a wasteful use of taxpayer dollars. It's not smart. It's not good for kids. It's not forward-thinking. Scarborough is better than that.

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