

Parents step up the fight for student safety

By Mark Pavilons

Parents in Schomberg are stepping up their fight with the York District Separate School Board, to ensure their kids are safe walking to St. Patrick's School.

Changes to the board's busing policies have meant students have to walk to the school, along Western and Main Streets, neither of which are safe, parents contend.

A committee of parents was formed and they've been working diligently, in preparation for a new school year. The group is meeting this week to assess the situation and step up their game plan.

And they're encouraging other parents to get involved, too.

The trio of active moms - Nada Venuti, Amanda Brodie and Stella Barbieri - are not giving up.

Brodie said they're working on the next step, reaching out to other parents and contacting local politicians.

Until now, all they've received are reasons why some of their children can't be picked up by the bus in their unassumed subdivision that includes Dufferin Vista Court.

Some 60 children who attend St. Patrick's, from JK to Grade 8, are no longer eligible to ride the bus. Parents believe Western can be dangerous given its winding nature and lack of sidewalks. The board has suggested kids use Main Street, but parents don't like the idea of the little ones walking through a high-traffic commercial area.

Brodie said the board has impressed upon them the rules and guidelines and it seems they want the parents to see their point. But they wonder why board officials won't see their point.

The policy also seems to split up kids on the same household. For these three moms, they have children who are both eligible and ineligible to ride the bus. Some parents opt to drive their kids to school, while others have older siblings take responsibility.

"We're asking the board works with us to get kids to school safely," Brodie stressed. "Until a permanent solution is found, why not just keep the kids on the bus?"

No one is complaining about walking - it all comes down to safety.

"As a parent, I owe it to my children to protect them," Venuti said.

She has asked York Regional Police for statistics on traffic tickets given out on Western, rumoured to be as high as one per day. This will indicate driver behaviour on this road.

Older subdivisions in Schomberg are not affected, so it only involves roughly 60 children in the newer section. For those currently being picked up, they would suggest a couple of extra stops to avoid congestion at the two current locales. The parents also contend that since the buses are not full, there is room to handle the children.

A tangible, long-term solution is the installation of sidewalks on Western, something that has caused mixed reaction among existing homeowners.

As well, building sidewalks is not a priority for King Township.

Mayor Steve Pellegrini noted that they may consider sidewalks in the vicinity of Osin-Lions Park, but that will be a 2015 budget item.

The mayor pointed out the Township and Transitional Care Communities Corporation have a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that will see a new care facility on the old Schomberg arena property. The new facility, King Institute of Home and Community Care Complex, is transitional housing and will consist of a main building surrounded by some 32 small units or cabins that range between 700 and 800 square feet.

When this development takes place, the Township will make sidewalks along Western part of the package.

While that comes as good news, that will take some time and parents are even more concerned about the impacts of construction on traffic on Western.

Councillor Bill Cober noted the school board determines the criteria for students who are eligible for transportation. The Township has added an additional crossing guard at Main Street and Western Avenue to support student safety.

The board has offered a "test crossing guard" during the first couple of weeks in September, but the parents want something more permanent.

Board chair Elizabeth Crowe said originally the older children were bused while the subdivision was under construction and then they were notified that they no longer qualified. But that was three years ago. When the policy change came down, parents still put their kids on the buses.

But parents stress their situation is different than other communities and subdivisions need to be looked at individually. All encompassing policies don't always work.

An audit was undertaken and included all the routes, and for September several stops are being removed to streamline service and some routes are totally changing to reduce ride times for students.

?Since the community was notified in the spring, I have not received a phone call,? she said.

?To be honest, I do not have the power to change the situation. Student Transportation Services, work on behalf of both boards to do routing and bus stops and to ensure a consistent application of board policy. I cannot judge whether or not this situation deserves an exception more than another situation in another part of the region.

?If I receive a concern regarding a bus stop location or any other transportation concern I forward it on to our senior manager responsible for transportation and he reviews the matter with STS to see whether or not the concern is valid. This matter has been reviewed and it was determined that there are no exceptional circumstances.?

As to the question of room on the buses, the cost to the board for transporting students is a complicated formula based on ridership, the ability to do multiple runs with the same bus, and the proportion of public vs. Catholic students.

Crowe said in essence the board pays per pupil, therefore every additional child who rides the bus costs the board money.

?It does not seem logical and is hard to explain to parents when there are empty seats on a bus, but that is why the board discontinued its Empty Seat Policy years ago,? she said.

?Are kids part of the board's business plan??Brodie asked.