

# Stakes raised in school review

South Bruce Peninsula offers financial support if Sauble school stays open

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By Rob Gowan

South Bruce Peninsula council has thrown its support to keep Amabel-Sauble Community School open in the form of a financial commitment.

At its meeting on Tuesday, the town council unanimously supported a recommendation to give 2013 pre-budget approval to a maximum of \$51,000 contingent on an accommodation review committee decision that the school remain open.

The Amabel-Sauble school is currently undergoing a joint ARC review with Hepworth Central Public School, with Bluewater District School Board staff recommending closing the Sauble school and retaining status quo at Hepworth.

Terry Arnold, who was at Tuesday's meeting representing Sauble Soccer, which uses the school grounds, and was making a presentation outlining the value of the school to the community, said receiving a financial commitment from the town was a huge step in keeping the school open.

"I am very pleased with the results today. That was the most positive result we could think of was that they come up with the money and they want to negotiate with the board and that puts the pressure on the board now," said Arnold, who has children at the school and is also the husband of the ARC co-chair Katherine Arnold.

Arnold added that the daycare has also committed to increase the amount of money it pays for space in the school from the current \$ 7,000 annually to about \$22,000 a year.

"With the money there, there is no reason for them to close our school," said Arnold.

The municipality will also enter into further talks with the school regarding their partnership. Under the current agreement between the town and the school board, which expires in 2014, the board is responsible for the operating costs of the school, while the town is responsible for maintaining the grounds including grass cutting and snow plowing. The municipality also provides water under a separate agreement. The municipality issues permits to community groups for use of the gymnasium and community room, while the daycare space is leased from the board.

The recommendation to council came on the heels of a report from Coun. Janice Jackson showing that the town contributes \$16,000 annually, but should in fact pay closer to \$67,000 based on it using 21% of the school. The school board uses 70% of the space while the daycare uses 9%. The Amabel-Sauble school was built 18 years ago as a partnership between the school board, the municipality and the daycare that operates in the school. But because of the partnership, the school was built bigger than necessary and is currently 147% larger than provincial grant funding supports, resulting in an annual operating deficit of about \$100,000. The school is about 40,000 square feet, while the ministry funding formula pegs the appropriate size of a school with 250 students at 26,000 sq. ft.

"I think the municipality did step up to the plate today and make a commitment to fund their portion," said Jackson, who also sits on the ARC. "Going forward now we will go to the ARC committee meeting on Monday with the endorsement of the municipality in hand and then wait for

the daycare centre to do the same."

Jackson said she is hopeful the town's commitment will make a substantial impact on the final decision that is made both on the ARC recommendation that comes out of the review and the final decision the board makes.

"The whole crux of it was that we were \$100,000 short on that school every year, so between our commitment and the school's daycare commitment, then we are only going to be short probably \$30,000 of the \$100,000.

"The school board does need to take responsibility as well. It can't just be two out of the three of us stepping up to the plate. The school board needs to do their share as well."

Bluewater trustee Terry Bell spoke at Tuesday's meeting where he stressed that no decision on the school has been made.

Bell said before council made its decision that if it supported the school and supported the community, it is a very big step because it shows how much the municipality cares.

Arnold said the community is continuing to look at other ways to help cover the operating shortfall and exploring other partnerships to keep the school open.

"It's a community setting here," said Arnold. "We are all working together to keep this open."

The next scheduled ARC meeting for Amabel-Sauble and Hepworth schools is Monday at Amabel-Sauble school at 7 p.m.