

Article rank 

Pleasant Hill gets cash for school

Province provides \$8.3 million toward construction of centre

By Darren Bernhardt of *The StarPhoenix*

The Pleasant Hill community is getting a multimillion-dollar makeover, which includes a new school. Premier Brad Wall on Tuesday committed \$8.3 million for the construction of a new St. Mary Community School, day care and wellness centre.

An additional \$8 million is earmarked for the development of affordable housing in co-operation with local community groups, while the City of Saskatoon is kicking in \$500,000 on top of the provincial funding to build a community centre within the new school. The space will serve as a central place for public meetings, community association programming and essentially a hub for the neighbourhood residents.

The announcement was made inside the gymnasium of the old castle-style school on Avenue O South, which was crammed with students, staff, municipal and provincial politicians, and school trustees from the Catholic and public divisions.

"If I'm grinning from ear to ear it's for good reason," St. Mary principal Owen Fortosky said before calling on Wall to make the announcement.

"This is a landmark day for St. Mary and the community of Pleasant Hill," added Catholic school board chair Jim Carriere.

The existing St. Mary is the oldest Catholic school in Saskatoon and has long been considered inadequate for its needs. Through its partnerships with the Saskatoon Tribal Council, the University of Saskatchewan and the Saskatoon Health Region, the school offers a clinic aimed at reducing obesity rates in students as well as various cultural and spiritual activities.

A new school has for years been at the top of the Catholic school division's priority list for capital projects. It appeared to be well on its way in the spring of 2007 when the city bought 29 rental houses on 20th Street and avenues N and O from a local landlord for \$1.4 million. The houses were demolished in the summer and the land cleared for new construction that was to include playgrounds, expanded park space, a new school and several types of affordable housing, services and retail space.

Last fall, however, when Saskatchewan Learning announced capital funding for repairs and expansions to schools around the province, St. Mary was nowhere on the list. And in an interview at the time with *The StarPhoenix*, a director with the government ministry confirmed there would be no funding for a new school in the low-income neighbourhood.

On Tuesday, Wall said "inconceivable additional revenue" from the province's resources has swelled the government coffers.

"There is prosperity and that means revenue. And that must be shared with those most vulnerable among us," he said. "There have been people working for a long time on this revitalization, for a school worthy of these kids. Thank you for your patience, perseverance and vision. You have brought it this far and together we are going to finish the job."

To celebrate, the school put on a spectacle with traditional dancing and drumming, the singing of O Canada in Cree and a prayer from an elder. A round dance in the park across the street, adjacent to where the new school will be built, was held after the speeches.

"Good things are happening in Pleasant Hill," said Mayor Don Atchison, who expects construction to begin on the new school within 12 to 18 months. "We are opening this whole area to be rejuvenated together."

The new construction means the old school will be razed but the city hasn't received much opposition to that, even when it was suggested last year.

"If you want to have progress, some things need to be left behind," said Atchison.

Residents tend to agree. Joseph Lorenzi has a 13-year-old son attending the school, which he says is just too small.

"This is all going to make Pleasant Hill a really fantastic area," he said.

"It's a big thing for everyone," added Mary Arnesen, who has three daughters working at the school, as well as two grandchildren and a great grandchild attending it.

"This school is crumbling. It's a good thing we don't have any tornadoes here or it would have fallen down."

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