

SURPLUS SCHOOL STRATEGY

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The City of Burlington is set to acquire a former city high school which it intends to re-purpose for a variety of community uses. Once the acquisition is finalized in September, it will be the first successful transaction to inform a proposed new city infrastructure strategy that would see the city acquire surplus school properties all over Burlington to ensure they remain in public hands.

At its meeting July 5, the City of Burlington community planning, regulation and mobility committee approved a recommendation to continue work on establishing a multi-year investment plan to locate, acquire and eventually adapt for public uses various surplus school sites in the city. As part of the approval, city staff are directed to report back to the committee in 2023 with an implementation plan for the surplus school strategy. School sites become available to the city when they are declared by their school boards to be surplus, and according to provincial law, the properties must be offered to public agencies, including municipalities, first before being put to market. The committee decision needs to be ratified by City of Burlington council as a whole, which is expected to occur during a council meet-

ing scheduled for July 21. Total costs for the property purchase are not expected to be made public until after the deal has closed.

The July 5 vote comes on the heels of another decision taken by City of Burlington council last month, that approved the city's acquisition of the former Robert Bateman High School, which closed in 2020. As part of that deal with the **Halton District School Board (HDSB)**, once the sale closes in September 2022, the city will formally take over Robert Bateman's operation and establish the city's largest community hub.

As part of the arrangement, the HDSB as well as **Brock University** will lease portions of the former school for educational uses. As a community hub, the school, which currently contains a public swimming pool, will be adapted for a variety of recreational and educational uses, including a public library branch, gym space and other uses, according to Burlington mayor **Marianne Meed Ward**.

"When you just add the space that will be devoted to community uses, the pool, the gym, the library, there's still extra meeting room space available," Meed Ward told *NRU*

prior to the committee vote. "This will become the largest community centre in the city."

According to Burlington ward 5 city councillor **Paul Sharman**, there's an urgent need for more community space city-wide due to recent residential growth and years of city infrastructure underfunding. In addition, there is a shortage of land available for the city to purchase for building a new community centre.

"Fundamentally, we're built out, and so this gives us the opportunity to get some land and some building space that we wouldn't otherwise get," Sharman told *NRU*."

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Aerial map showing the former Robert Bateman High School, located at 5151 New Street in southeastern Burlington. The City of Burlington is expecting to finalize acquisition of the former school site in September to re-purpose it for community uses. The property houses the Burlington Centennial indoor swimming pool, which will continue to operate following the City of Burlington's acquisition of the property.

SOURCE: CITY OF BURLINGTON



Photograph showing the former Robert Bateman High School, which closed in 2020. The City of Burlington is finalizing acquisition of the former school property to establish an expanded community centre, which after a short renovation is expected to include a new gym, public library branch and other public recreational amenities.

SOURCE: CITY OF BURLINGTON

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Sharman said there was significant community disappointment when the school was closed, and he's already heard from area residents about their hopes for how to use the additional community space. The acquisition details entail the city also acquiring a running track and football field belonging to a neighbouring high school. The city intends to hold community consultations to determine what exactly should happen with those lands, as well as any available space within the existing buildings.

"My preference is to wait for the formal public engagement [so that] we know what the community demand is," Sharman told *NRU*.

The process for acquiring a former school property is mandated by provincial legislation and involves a detailed process that dictates exactly how a school board can dispose of properties it no longer requires, **Toronto Lands Corporation** (TLC) chief executive officer **Daryl Sage** told *NRU*. TLC is tasked with managing the **Toronto District School Board's** (TDSB) vast real estate portfolio.

According to Sage, before any Ontario school board can declare a property surplus, the site must undergo a thorough planning assessment, as re-

quired by the province, to justify that decision. The evaluation looks at enrolment growth, the area context and several other factors to determine whether it makes sense for the board to sell off the property. Once the evaluation is completed, and the school board's trustees have approved the decision to dispose of the site, the property is then first offered to public agencies — Sage notes that the TDSB in particular can offer up a surplus site to any one of 64 different public agencies — at all levels of government. Agencies then have 90 days to express an interest in acquiring a property.

"All that [requires] is putting up your hand, or sending us a letter saying 'we are interested in acquiring the site,'" Sage told *NRU*.

Just indicating an interest in a former school site is not enough to acquire the property, according to Sage. The school board must determine a "priority of sequence" to determine which agency gets a chance to negotiate a deal first. Most crucially, it must be demonstrated by each party seeking to acquire the property that its proposed re-use of the property represents the "highest and best" use of the site. Simply looking to acquire a property for another use is not sufficient for making a case.

"It's not what the intended use [of the surplus site] is going to be, it's what is most possible to put on that site," Sage told *NRU*.

While TLC and equivalent GTHA municipal property managers are bound by strict provincial legislation mandating the conditions around surplus school acquisitions, it's still possible to come up with creative solutions, such as allowing for increased community access to the former school site in exchange for a lowered purchase price, provided that the province gives its assent to the deal.

Sage suggests such arrangements could help municipalities with the building of affordable housing which would be much steeper in property acquisition costs if a municipality wanted to purchase land for a new facility outright at market rates and in competition with private developers with deeper pockets. Sage believes that school sites are ideal for locating several complementary community services within one building, as is proposed with the Robert Bateman deal.

"It would be so much better to bring as many of these types of agencies, including for seniors care and those types of things, and bring them all together on a school public asset, where you've now made a community destination," Sage told *NRU*.

People for Education executive director **Annie Kidder** has long called for surplus school sites to be offered to public and non-governmental (NGO)

agencies for specific community uses. She says a significant barrier towards acquiring those sites is the heavy purchase price of land, which is determined by market rates for the area.

Kidder — who was chair of a 2015 provincial advisory committee examining the establishment of community hubs on provincially owned properties — would like to see the province extend more pricing flexibility when it comes to the purchase of school sites by governmental agencies. She thinks public and NGO agencies should not be required to pay market rates for surplus school sites, particularly since former school sites were originally constructed using public money.

"We end up with this problematic scenario, one could argue, where taxpayers who have already paid for a building have to buy it again because it's a different level of government or even a different school board," Kidder told *NRU*.

Burlington Mayor Meed Ward hopes the Robert Bateman acquisition will be the first of many former school sites the city can acquire when the new surplus school strategy takes effect. Currently, one other site in Burlington, the former Lester B. Pearson High School, is on the city's radar for potential schools to acquire. Lester B. Pearson H.S. closed in 2018.

"My view is we as a city should be buying every school site that is declared surplus," Meed Ward told *NRU*. 🌱