

January 29, 2016

To the residents of Sherwood Park,

During the past few weeks, there has been a great deal of attention around the announcement that Elk Island Public Schools (EIPS) is planning to build a K–6 school in Davidson Creek. Unfortunately, there has been some misinformation presented by well-meaning individuals, and this has resulted in some misunderstandings as well. I would like to take this opportunity to provide our perspective regarding the decision to build a school in the Davidson Creek neighbourhood.

First and foremost, our priority is to provide high-quality learning environments for all our students in all areas of Elk Island. As a school board responsive to the needs of our communities, we recognized the need for a school in the northeast quadrant of Sherwood Park because of the increasing number of families in this area and the growing pressures of enrolment. As a result, we made application to Alberta Education and received approval for a K-9 school. In January 2015, Alberta Education advised us that we could move ahead with the planning and preliminary design of the project.

The greatest needs lie in the northeast quadrant of Sherwood Park, and further analysis indicated that a K-6 school is needed and not a K-9. Presently elementary students in the northeast quadrant go to a variety of schools. Lakeland Ridge is the closest school in the community, but other children are bused to Pine Street Elementary, Woodbridge Farms Elementary, and Mills Haven Elementary. As a result, some of our elementary schools are over capacity. This is definitely not an ideal situation. However, there is still available space for junior high students in Sherwood Park schools. We are aware there will be a need for more junior high space in the future, but it is not as pressing as the present need at the elementary level.

Some individuals have implied EIPS changed its original plans from a K-9 school to a K-6 school because an elementary school would fit better on the Davidson Creek site. Nothing could be further from the truth; the grade configuration of the new school was determined based on student enrolment pressures and community needs. As well, we have other schools on smaller sites in the Sherwood Park area.

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In the spring of 2015, the trustees and senior administration from EIPS, and senior administration from Strathcona County toured five sites: Cloverbar Ranch, Davidson Creek Park, Florian Park, Heritage Hills, and Summerwood. These five municipal reserve sites and neighbourhood locations were determined and selected by Strathcona County as being suitable and appropriate for the building of a school. We were very interested to see the entire inventory of sites available in Sherwood Park as considerations for all future school building projects in our capital plan. It is also important to note that these school sites are available to all three school boards for new schools: public, catholic, and francophone. Allocation of these sites is on a first come, first serve, basis when Strathcona County can confirm approved funding for the school.

There were only a few available sites in the northeast quadrant and the choice quickly came down to two sites: Summerwood and Davidson Creek. Clearly, making a decision in this area takes into account a number of variables including the safety of students, proximity to major transportation corridors, and arterial road access.

However, there were pros and cons with each of the sites. We were aware placing a school in an established neighbourhood such as Davidson Creek might create issues. People have become accustomed to having municipal reserve land in their neighbourhood, they appreciate the green space, and do not want disruption to their community. Placing a school in an area less developed (Summerwood) has advantages but unfortunately, there are also concerns. In this case it was primarily because of the proximity to the railroad tracks as well as a large storm water retention facility/pond.

The Board continued to weigh the pros and cons and before making a final decision, we brought in representatives from CN to provide more information. Unfortunately, no guarantees could be made hazardous materials would not be transported on tracks in very close proximity to the school site designated by the county.

Simply put, a train derailment right beside a school was not a risk we were willing to take.

It has also been suggested that we build in the Cambrian area. Unfortunately, this is not feasible at this time as the land is not available. If, and when, land does become available in this area and if EIPS requires a school at that time, we would most certainly welcome the opportunity to have a school there. However, we need a school now and cannot wait until the land opens up.

In August 2015, Strathcona County confirmed with EIPS that the Davidson Creek site could be used for the building of a school. At the public Board Meeting in late August, the three year capital plan was amended to indicate the requested K-9 school was now to be a K-6 school at Davidson Creek.

During the fall, we never lost sight of the school in the Davidson Creek area and we made an announcement in early January to inform the public. We employed Stantec Consulting to raise awareness of the Board's decision to the public with letters and door-to-door visits. Stantec Consulting heard the comments of the public who provided their concerns, but they also heard from an equal number of residents indicating their approval, or lack of concern about a school in this area.

In the next phase, Stantec Consulting will provide a high-level conceptual layout of the school and how it might be situated on the parcel of land. The actual school location on the site will not be determined until the design phase. In addition, Stantec will be recommending an attendance area for the school. This information will be made available for public feedback at community information sessions in February and March of this year. Once an architectural firm is in place, there will be further community sessions to engage and inform the public regarding site layout, school design, traffic flow, and student safety.

However, as we are still at the beginning of the building process we do not have all the answers. Presently, we cannot tell you exactly how many parking stalls there will be (it will not be 100) and we don't know exactly where the school will be placed. (Yes, we would like to keep as many of the current park features as possible, but we do not know that right now.) We can tell you that we will be working diligently with the architect to ensure that a new school in Davidson Creek will address safety concerns and will maintain as much green space as possible.

As for this being a neighbourhood school: that is our goal. Many of our schools are in the heart of established neighbourhoods where the playground and open space is a community space to be used by the community and our facilities are used after school hours. The demographic information that we have indicates that a school in the Davidson Creek area will relieve the enrolment pressure of other schools, allow many students in the immediate area to walk to school, and free up space at the closest school, Lakeland Ridge. Although attendance areas have not been established and redrawn, it is probable a new elementary school will create opportunities for growth in other schools when their enrolment pressures have decreased. That, however, is at least a year away and these decisions have not yet been made.

EIPS wants to work with its community and all levels of government. We have made a difficult decision given the site choices provided to us but we are prepared to move ahead as we are faced with the need to address increasing pressures of enrolment for our students.

As I began this letter, so I shall conclude. As the Board of Trustees we are charged with making decisions in the best interests of all students in EIPS and we feel that a new school in the Davidson Creek neighbourhood will address the learning needs of students not only within the northeast quadrant of Sherwood Park but also in a number of other schools within our Division.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "T. Boymook", with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

T. Boymook,
Board Chair