- NORTH GLENORA -
Coronation School Sustainability Review
Public Meeting of November 21, 2006

The meeting took place in the gymnasium. Participants signed in (name and address) and were requested to tick off one of a number of designations (parent, resident, organizations, staff, etc.) The colour of your nametag reflected the item you had checked. There was coffee and juice at the back of the room.

Staff and EPS officials stayed at the back and kept to themselves. There were tables of eight. Reserved tables were for people who pre-registered (but no one told you this) and there were tables for people who came without an RSVP. So basically you just figured out a table to sit at and did so. At each table, one chair was reserved for the facilitator who is an EPS employee.

Each table had the following resources: 1) one copy of the agenda, 2) a bunch of sheets with the scenarios developed by the school's Scenario Development Team on them (one per participant), 3) one large sheet for recording, 4) one large sheet called Parking Lot, where questions and other issues were to be written, and 5) a few copies of the flow chart outlining the sustainability review process.

The meeting was chaired by Jenise Bidulock, EPS Director of Planning, and began with introductions of all significant personnel and participants – the speaker, Trustees, MLA, Scenario Development Team, etc., followed by a PowerPoint presentation which included the process flow chart and a table of public participation. (More on that table, later.)

Following the presentation (by now over 30 minutes have elapsed), the groups were given about an hour to review the scenarios; critique the opportunities and challenges listed in each one; and time permitting, develop additional scenarios. The gym was so full that some of the participants had to be taken to the library with a facilitator because there were not enough tables and chairs.

The facilitator began by introducing himself and having everyone else introduce themselves. He then had to fill in a sheet indicating the affiliations of each person and became somewhat nonplussed when we responded with multiple affiliations (e.g., parent, resident and community league executive member). By now the noise level had risen, abetted by the acoustics of the gym, making it difficult to hear. Then we were to select a recorder and someone to document the questions and issues that would be "parked" on the large page. I suggested that one of the staff (who was seated with us) be recorder (since I understood that staff were not allowed to voice any views) and figured that would free the rest of us to participate. The staff member refused. So did we. So one of the EPS planning consultants filled the role. A participant agreed to take on the role of filling in the 'parking' page. And then we picked a spokesperson – the person who would speak for the group and share a few key points with the audience as a whole. I volunteered. (*We were lucky to have a spokesperson and the opportunity for sharing with everyone. Originally EPS had planned to end the meeting without this. In other words, people*

would work in small groups and then the meeting would end. We have Dave Beckman and perhaps others who objected strongly to that agenda, to thank for letting us have a sharing session at all.)

Then we focused on the tasks at hand:

- Read through the four scenarios presented, individually.

- Looked over the opportunities and challenges listed by each one.

- Brought forth comments.

  One of our scenarios was about an IB program. I don't know IB from a hole in the ground except that I understand it emphasizes academic excellence. It took a while to learn that at the elementary level IB was not as excellence- or competitive-oriented and thus would be able to accommodate kids with learning disabilities and behavioural problems (part of the student body at our school). We didn't know who else offered the IB program, whether there was a growing need for it, or whether that need was from students near our catchment area who could then be bussed in. We could identify some of the information we thought was needed but we couldn't do anything about it.

  It was very easy to take over the group just by being vocal and somewhat informed and not leave much opportunity for anyone else to get a word in edgewise. The facilitator did nothing to enable equal opportunity participation, so I just took over most of the airtime. The facilitator was more of a witness than anything else.

- Tried to make sure these comments were accurately recorded.

  This isn't easy because there is no flipchart; it's just a large piece of paper on which someone is trying to write as fast as you talk. It took several tries, for example, when I insisted that the recorder get my point right. I was making a point that one of the scenarios could offer the potential for a collaborative approach. This was recorded as "this scenario is collaborative." "Not so," said I. "Try again." And we went through this another two times before it resembled something I could live with. Now the recorder was trying her best – but she's not a trained recorder, she was nervous, it was noisy, and we were under time pressure.

- Document questions and issues.

  Meanwhile, a participant was making a record of outstanding questions and issues, as they arose. This was the page on which to put issues such as those about timing, time frame and process. It was important to make sure that these items were being documented, but it does keep that person from participating in the discussion as much as they might like.

There were numerous questions related to the scenarios resulting in interruptions from other staff that circulated amongst the tables attempting to answer them. *Example*: We wanted to know the size of the transportation area for busing kids to our school. The EPS staff knew there is a transportation zone map. They knew the Principal has a map somewhere in her office. But no one could tell use what zone our school is in. And no one had access to the map. So no one could tell us the size and boundaries involved. So our question was not answered. I was told the map is on the website. I'm willing to offer a reward to whomever can navigate that byzantine labyrinth and find it, 'cuz I tried today without success.

- Figure out additional scenario(s).

We were told we had a few minutes left. We hadn't finished our tasks, but then the other tables were in the same situation. Some hadn't even gotten past the first scenario (of four).

The Meeting Chair handed a portable microphone to the spokespeople, in turn, beginning at the back of the room. Each gave one or two key points (all the time that the Chair would allow). A few took longer and the Chair attempted to cut them off. The audience protested and the Chair backed down. How long this tactic can work is anyone's guess.

Many people complained about the lack of time in the overall process and in that evening – having to assimilate so much information, being without adequate resources to assess the information or the further needs identified, etc. These concerns constituted one of the significant points the spokesperson made.

At the end of the meeting, the Chair wanted everyone to hand in their own scenario sheets, personally completed. No one had expected this (no one had been told) and there had been no time to complete them. Instead she agreed that we could take them home, fill them out and return them to the school within the next two weeks and they'd be added to the data. Someone at EPS is going to go through everything, summarize it, and post it on the website. This process is far from transparent and as such, I don't trust it. *Therefore I sincerely regret not having the foresight to demand that a community member go with the Principal and take all the recorded data and photocopy it right then – so that the community could have a copy by which to check and verify the accuracy of the summary to be posted on the website.*

The meeting adjourned.

Aside from the few comments I've already made, I want to stand on my soapbox for a moment and talk about the process.

Many people took exception to the table on public participation shown during the Power Point presentation (though that wasn't voiced at time, likely because everyone was polite and just listened). The table has five columns outlining a range of kinds of public consultation but the text was too dense to read, let alone grasp, in the time it was shown.

What the Chair did not mention was the nature of the range (from least participatory – just information given out to the public within nothing back, to most participatory – empowerment). The Chair said that the EPS process was within the bottom three (of the five) columns. Basically what this means is that the process allows for information to go out (from EPS) and information to come back in (from the public). Sorry, but I couldn't grab any more in the time it was on the screen. What the EPS process does NOT include is collaborative or empowering processes (the last two columns on the screen). However the Meeting Chair and, I believe, EPS, takes great comfort that its process has a place on this table because the table comes from the International Association for Public Participation. I believe EPS sees this as validation of its process.

So here we have the gap:

- EPS - a staid, conservative organization, used to making unilateral decisions, used to operating beneath the public radar, highly desirous of keeping things under control, not experienced in public consultation and likely equating any process flexibility as feeding an adversarial process (i.e., public forums which can become a focus for escalating emotion on a range of issues versus tightly controlled formats such as this meeting).

- Those of us who by profession, inclination, or other vested interest very much want a collaborative approach.

- The unsuspecting public who still thinks that there will be more public meetings at each school with time to go over the data and have further input.

Forget 'gap.' It looks like a chasm!

This process is a form of public participation that is highly controlled and strongly directed in the interests of the originating group (EPS). I don't doubt that EPS would assert that it subscribes to the core values of the International Association for Public Participation which are:
1. The public should have a say in decisions about actions that could affect their lives.
2. Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.
3 Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers.
4. Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.
5. Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.
6. Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.
7. Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.

I will not take up space by elaborating why and the ways in which they fall short of the mark. Instead I want to describe the kind of person who is best suited to participate in the kind of public meeting I attended:

- The speed reader who can take little time to read the printed material.
- The person who is already up to speed on some of the issues and aspects of the scenarios.
- The person who can quickly grasp the essence of what is and is not being said.
- The person who is comfortable speaking to strangers.

Will such a person influence the process? I have no idea. Will EPS ever demonstrate how the data we provided was actually used? I doubt it will do so to our satisfaction. And so the question is, what now?

I believe we need to head in three directions:

- Keep working in whatever way we can, to further the interests of our own school. Regardless of how slanted the playing field may be, it ain't over 'til it's over.

- Keep networking with the community leagues, school councils and/or scenario development teams of the other schools that are slated for this process but have yet to experience it. Hopefully, they can learn from our experiences and build on the momentum for change. We may be drops of water, but enough of us might cause some impressive erosion.

- Start thinking about the 2007 election and what we want to do about the current incumbents on the School Board. One thing I know for sure: I'll never look at a ballot for School Board Trustee in the same way, ever again!