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## Oxbow AARC Subcommittee Report

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Respectfully Submitted on behalf of  
the entire Oxbow AARC Subcommittee:



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Chairperson, Elizabeth Cake

March 11, 2019

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Oxbow Public School in Ilderton has strong rural roots dating back to 1960. It is at risk of losing those roots with the proposed school zone boundary revisions. Those revisions are universally disliked by the Oxbow school community. The community has spoken loudly on this subject and it is clear that the community favours a boundary revision that will allow Oxbow to retain its rural students while welcoming newcomers to the school.

Ilderton currently has two holding zones. The existence of those holding zones has proven to be divisive in the Ilderton and Oxbow school communities. Families in the holding zones live in Ilderton yet attend school and school functions in Coldstream. Those families report feeling ostracized.

The Thames Valley District School Board (“Board”) retained the firm of Watson and Associates to conduct a school area boundary review. Watson and Associates produced a report containing one single recommendation in respect of Oxbow. The recommendation is for the elimination of the holding zones and the redistribution of Oxbow’s current rural students to neighbouring under-populated schools, namely Valleyview and East Williams, to make room for the holding zone students.

Oxbow’s Attendance Area Review Committee (“Committee”) has presented the report and recommendation of Watson and Associates to the Oxbow school community. The school community does not accept the Watson and Associates recommendation. The idea that we would “kick out rural students” to make room for holding zone students did not sit well with the families of the rural students or the holding zone students. In other words, the proposal was universally panned.

The overwhelming consensus of the Oxbow community is for the elimination of the holding zones and the retention of our rural students. The Board and trustees may balk at this suggestion at first blush. After all, Oxbow is already over capacity. However, a close examination of the Watson and Associates data and projections reveals that this suggestion is actually achievable. The existing Oxbow student population is projected to decline over the coming years. The infusion of the holding zone students will not be instantaneous but will be gradual over time. The holding zone student increase will coincide with the natural school population decrease and over-capacity issues will be avoided.

The Committee recognizes that Valleyview and East Williams are under capacity. However, sending Oxbow’s current rural students to those schools will not solve that issue. The current Oxbow rural student population is projected to decline. At most, sending those students to Valleyview and East Williams will provide a very temporary population boost.

The Committee would also like to point out that development is anticipated for the current Valleyview and East Williams catchment areas. Development in those areas will help populate those schools without disrupting the lives of Oxbow’s rural student population by uprooting them in the midst of their elementary school careers.

## **BACKGROUND**

Oxbow Public School opened in 1960 as a county school to serve the children of the small village of Ilderton and the surrounding area. Its roots are unmistakably rural.

With the passage of time, Ilderton grew. That growth created a strain on Oxbow’s capacity and the school was renovated, most recently in 2000, to accommodate more students.

Ilderton has continued to grow and to test Oxbow's capacity. Oxbow is presently operating at approximately 111% capacity.

Two new neighbourhoods have been created in Ilderton – Timberwalk in the west and Clear Skies in the east. The creation of these new subdivisions resulted in the formation of holding zones for school-aged children residing in them. Although situate in Ilderton, children residing in the holding zones are bused to Valleyview in Coldstream. Valleyview happens to be under capacity and can therefore accommodate the holding zone students.

It must be pointed out that although Clear Skies is a holding zone, it is actually unpopulated at this point. No homes exist in the neighbourhood.

## **CRITICAL ASSUMPTIONS WITH RESPECT TO HOLDING ZONES AND UNDER-CAPACITY SCHOOLS**

The Committee makes the following assumptions:

1. From the perspective of the Thames Valley District School Board ("Board"), holding zones are temporary solutions that the Board seeks to extinguish as soon as a practicable long-term solution can be implemented; and
2. The Board does not wish to see under-populated schools.

## **DESIRED OUTCOMES OF THE BOARD**

The Committee is of the opinion that the Board has a desired outcome from the school area boundary review process. Specifically, the Committee is of the view that the Board entered into the process with the following preconceived goals:

1. Removing the holding zones; and
2. Increasing the student population at two under-populated schools, namely Valleyview and East Williams.

## **THE WATSON REPORT**

The Board retained the firm of Watson and Associates to review area school boundary issues and to make recommendations (the "Watson Report").

Only one recommendation was made in respect of Oxbow: remove the holding zones and split Oxbow's rural students between Valleyview and East Williams.

Coincidentally, that sole recommendation happens to achieve the desired outcomes of the Board described above.

## **THE NON-MONETARY COST OF WATSON REPORT RECOMMENDATION**

The Committee understands why the Watson Report recommendation would appeal to the Board. After all, the recommendation specifically alleviates concerns that the Board has about holding zones and school populations.

However, it comes at a cost. Approximately 85 rural students would be displaced from the only school that they have ever known. For many of them, it is the same school that their parents

attended. The displacement of these students will cause distress. Disrupting friendships and social circles during the critical formative years may impact these children for many years.

Losing our rural students will also adversely impact the community at large. The historic and current mix of rural and town students at Oxbow is beneficial to both demographics and provides the school with a measure of diversity. Without the rural students, Oxbow will lose its identity as a rural school and will host a more homogenous student population.

In the Committee's opinion, solutions that dramatically disrupt the lives of children of tender years should be an absolute last resort.

In the Committee's opinion, it is disappointing that the Watson Report did not offer a single recommendation for Oxbow that would avoid the displacement of existing students.

### **ORGANIC DECLINE**

The Watson Report makes an important projection worth noting. The Watson report projects an organic decline in the Oxbow student population absent an infusion of new students from the current holding zones. It is projected that both the Oxbow rural student population and town student population will decline in the coming years.

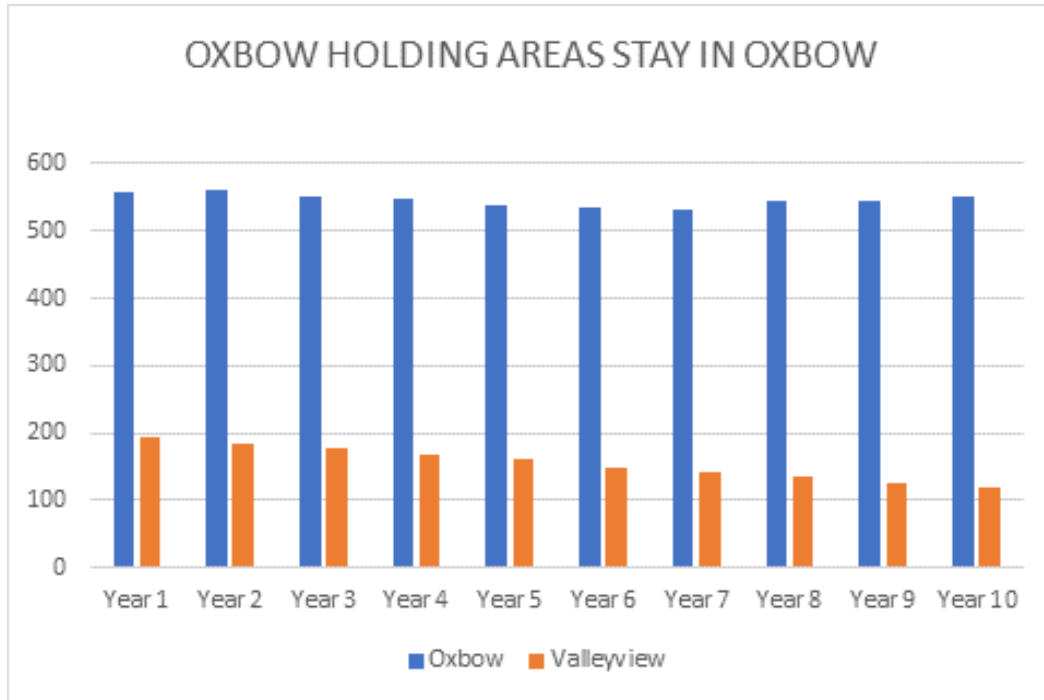
By maintaining the status quo, Oxbow's population would naturally decrease to 100% (or less) capacity by 2021. In other words, the overcrowding issue will organically resolve without intervention in relatively short order.

However, maintaining the status quo is not the recommendation of the Committee. We are simply highlighting the organic decline of the student population, according to the Watson report, as it is relevant to our ultimate recommendation described below.

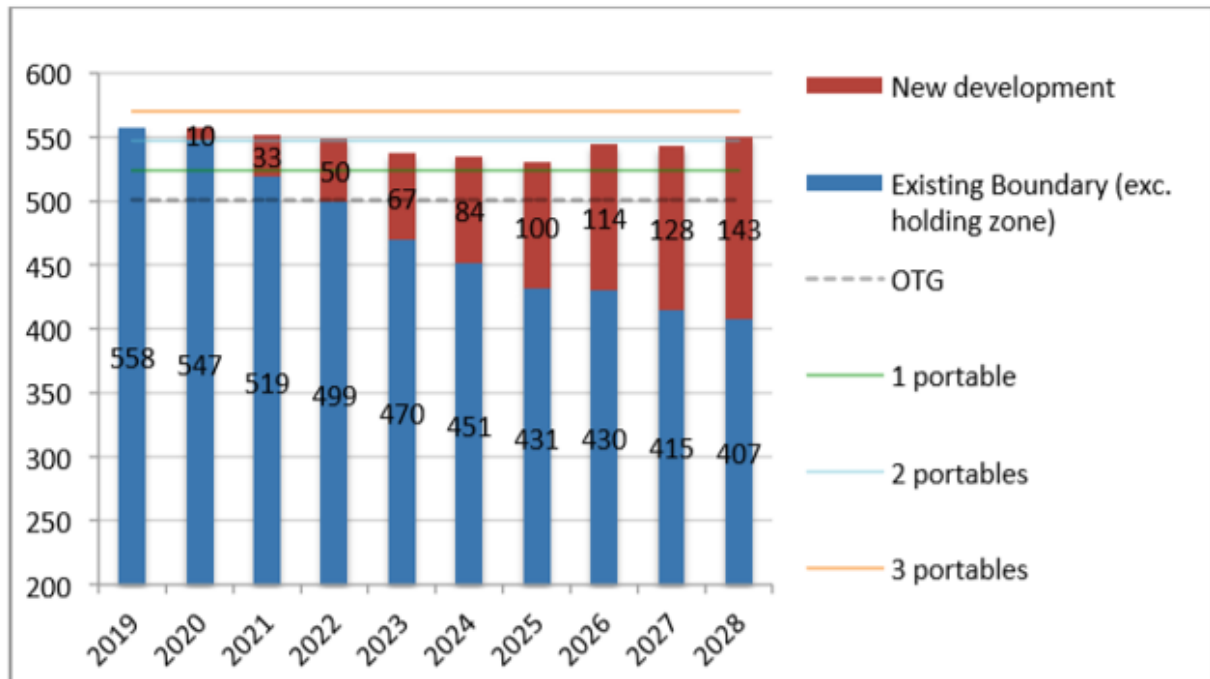
### **THE PERFECT STORM IGNORED BY THE WATSON REPORT**

The Watson Report did not present a more inclusive solution. A close examination of the projections reveals that the combination of (a) organic population decline and (b) the timing of new residential development will result in Oxbow being able to accommodate students in its current boundary and students from the holding zones. This is true, based on the most recent data, from the 2016 census, namely Watson Report's .499 yield. The Committee recognizes the Watson Report projection of a declining yield. See below:

The Board's Graph



Oxbow Committee's Representation of Watson's Projections



In the Committee's representation of Watson's projection, we have graphed the population forecast and how the school can accommodate with the current capacity. As illustrated, the graph forecasted population does not exceed the existing 3 portables. In the recent past Oxbow has utilized 4 portables.

The reality is that neighbourhoods are not built and populated overnight. It will take some time for Timberwalk and Clear Skies to develop to the point where they are contributing a noticeable number of students to Oxbow's population. In the short term, the numbers will be negligible.

As Timberwalk and Clear Skies develop, the organic decline of the remaining population will occur, one offsetting the other, according to the data contained within the Watson Report.

### **COMMITTEE'S RECOMMENDATION**

Based on the information provided immediately above and other reasons described below, it is the recommendation of the Committee that the current holding zones be removed and that no further alterations be made to Oxbow's boundary.

We further recommend that students in the holding zone who are currently attending Valleyview ought to be provided with the option of continuing at that school despite the removal of the holding zone. Again, the Committee feels that disrupting the lives of students forcing them to switch schools ought to be avoided.

### **BENEFITS OF THE COMMITTEE'S RECOMMENDATION**

The Committee's recommendation has four primary benefits:

1. It will avoid the displacement of a significant number of rural students;
2. It will unite the community, alleviating ostracization, and restoring inclusivity;
3. It reflects the overwhelming and seemingly unanimous desire of the school community; and
4. It will allow Oxbow to maintain its roots by retaining its rural students.

### **POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS OF COMMITTEE'S RECOMMENDATION**

The Committee's recommendation will not assist the Board with its desire to invigorate the school populations of Valleyview and East Williams. The Committee has three comments in response to this point:

1. The population of school-aged children in Oxbow's rural catchment is declining. Sending those students to East Williams and Valleyview will result in a temporary population infusion only, while dramatically impacting those displaced children;
2. Ilderton is not the only community experiencing growth. Bedroom communities are appearing further and further afield from London. Residential developments are in the works for Coldstream, Poplar Hill, Nairn, Parkhill and Ailsa Craig, to name a few. Those developments will potentially add organically to the school populations of East Williams and Valleyview, thereby alleviating the Board's concerns about the under-capacity issues at those schools; and
3. Based on comments received during the public consultation process, it is believed that some of the displaced rural students would leave the public school system and opt instead

for French, private or Catholic schools if they are forced to leave Oxbow. Students departing the public system would obviously undermine the Board's objective of increasing student populations at Valleyview and East Williams.

4. If the infusion of the holding zone students coupled with the retention of the county students results in untenable overcrowding at Oxbow, the overcrowding would not be immediate.

Realistically, the overcrowding would be felt in five years or more. At that time, there would be nothing preventing the Board from implementing the current Watson Report recommendation or undertaking an additional boundary review. The Oxbow rural population will have decreased organically by that time and fewer children will need to be displaced. In the Committee's view, displacing even one less child is a worthy aim. If we can displace 20 less children, for example, all the better. Periodic school boundary reviews are customary. Having another one in five to ten years if necessary, would not create an undue hardship for the Board. Having said that, the Committee is confident based on the data that Oxbow can accommodate students from the holding zones while retaining its current rural student population.

## **CONTINGENCY REQUESTS**

Should our recommendation be turned down and the Watson Report recommendations be accepted by the trustees, the Committee recommends that all rural students be allowed to attend Valleyview together, or another Medway-serviced school. This would lessen the impact caused by uprooting them from Oxbow.

We would also request a grandfathering provision that would allow current rural Oxbow students the option of completing their primary schooling at Oxbow. We would also ask that holding zone students currently attending Valleyview be given the option of remaining at that school through to the end of their primary schooling notwithstanding the elimination of the holding zone.

## **JUSTIFICATION FOR CONTINGENCY REQUESTS**

- 1) Oxbow zone rural students use the same amenities and services (clubs and sports teams, for example) as the students attending Valleyview. East Williams students typically use amenities and services in the Parkhill area. Allowing all Oxbow rural students to attend Valleyview together would make for an easier transition as it would provide a familiarity for the students being displaced. It will allow them to have a more comfortable transition into areas as a group and with people who have commonalities;
- 2) Grandfathering will allow students to finish out their elementary years at their school, and will allow other families the time to arrange and prepare for transitioning to Valleyview;

## **OTHER POSSIBILITIES**

Some members of the community suggested integrating both the Valleyview and Oxbow communities together, creating a split school zone, with Valleyview housing a portion of students (grades 6-8) and Oxbow housing the other portion (grades JK-5), for example.

Another idea forwarded by the community would see students in the Oxbow catchment being given the option of attending Valleyview or East Williams instead of Oxbow. Anecdotally there is

support for the argument that a surprising number of families might avail themselves of this option if it existed and overcrowding concerns at Oxbow might be alleviated.

## **CONCLUSION**

The overwhelming mandate received by the Committee through the public consultation process was to propose a solution that would allow Oxbow to retain its rural students while uniting a community that has been divided by the presence of holding zones.

The Committee is of the view that the Watson Report data supports a solution that would see the elimination of the holding zones and the retention of rural students without creating an untenable capacity scenario at Oxbow. This is the firmly expressed desire of the community and the Committee implores the trustees and the Board to give the proposal thorough consideration.