

REPORT ON THE SPECIAL FORUM ON OVERCROWDING IN OUR WILLOWDALE SCHOOLS, HELD ON FEBRUARY 22, 2017 AT McKEE PUBLIC SCHOOL

Ontario MPP David Zimmer, Willowdale Councillor John Filion and Trustee Alexander Brown agree on how to solve a growing crisis hurting kids' education in North York



From l to r: Councillor John Filion, MPP David Zimmer and Trustee Alexander Brown

A three-way political debate on February 22, 2017 at a Special Forum led to a clear consensus on how to solve the growing crisis in Toronto's North York: insufficient classroom space for students triggered by the area's explosive growth.

REPORT PREPARED BY
McKee Student Advisory Council, Host of the Special Forum
Feb. 23, 2017

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At a Special Forum on February 22, 2017 organized by the McKee Public School parent council (the Student Advisory Council or SAC), the **Honourable David Zimmer** (MPP for Willowdale), North York **Councillor John Filion**, and Willowdale School **Trustee Alexander Brown** reached a strong three-way consensus on how to urgently solve a problem that has many parents increasingly up in arms.

The problem? Developers have built new condos and houses in Willowdale at an alarming pace in the last ten years. However, the government bodies have been blocked from using what are called ‘Education Development Charges’ (or EDCs) for new school space. When available, the EDCs enable a school board to collect money from the developers to buy new land for new school sites. Under the current rules, Toronto as a whole is blocked from using this source of funding – because of the rule that says student numbers must first exceed capacity across the *whole* of Toronto. That’s not the case – as a whole. The overcrowding is in places like Willowdale, North York. And in any event the school board doesn’t need to buy new *land* in Willowdale, it needs to construct new *classrooms and buildings*.



Who’s feeling the pain? Overcrowding in Willowdale’s schools has reached chronic proportions, and a growing number of young kids spend the year in portables, not classrooms. Worse, the experts predict that the problem is only getting worse if not solved *now*.

The solution? After debating the options available, MPP David Zimmer, Councillor John Filion and Trustee Alexander Brown emerged in complete agreement on the needed solution, building on an initial idea put forward by Councillor Filion.



From l to r: Councillor John Filion, MPP David Zimmer and Trustee Alexander Brown

The solution involves having the Ontario Government recognize a *limited exception for high growth centres* like North York Centre, which is in fact *an area targeted for growth* under the province's own legislation. That legislation, called Ontario's *Places to Grow Act*, designates about 25 such centres across Ontario, and North York Centre is one of them.

As Councillor Filion explained, North York Centre has seen explosive growth and has already reached its growth targets set for the year 2041. But the development of schools in Willowdale has not kept pace.

"I'm very attracted by this idea of recognizing the local reality," said MPP David Zimmer, adding that the solution is in realizing that "one size does not fit all."

The change to the law would be relatively simple. The minor amendment, Councillor Filion said, would consist of "1 – in growth target areas that have exceeded or achieved their growth targets, such areas are exempt from the general rule on Education Development Charges, and 2 – they [the charges] need to be for new construction, not just new land."

The amendment would mean that in the designated high growth zones like North York Centre, the school board would be able to collect charges from the developers on new development and use this money to build the needed new school classrooms and buildings.

Trustee Alexander Brown confirmed he was delighted the constructive debate had focused on this realistic solution: "I think at this table tonight, we have a consensus," he said. He then stressed that to move this forward, we need to show that how there is this mounting pressure from parents to get the solution adopted.

Many parents attending asked what the speakers would need from parents to get this adopted at Queen's Park.

All three speakers said it's essential to communicate this strong desire of the parents to see change here.

MPP David Zimmer added that “one of my responsibilities is to convey the strength of the emotion here, and I will commit here to speak to the Ministry of Education and the Premier.”

Councillor Filion added that the upcoming year is a good time to get this done. He said “Kathleen Wynne does understand education. The more David (Zimmer) can speak on behalf of local residents, the more likely this will get adopted – especially as there are other MPPs who have this problem” in their districts.

About the McKee SAC The Student Advisory Council (SAC) is the provincially-mandated parent council of McKee Public School, Willowdale. It has long enjoyed a record of active participation by parents in the school as well as the local community in North York. Its current Co-Chairs are: Ali Youssefi and Afsaneh Shahsavar.

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