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Edmonton

Alberta government to replace 11-year-old middle school in Drayton Valley

Government says replacement is more cost effective than repair

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The Alberta government is set to announce a \$36.4-million replacement for the H.W. Pickup School in Drayton Valley. (Wild Rose School Division/wrsd.ca)

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The Alberta government is poised to announce a \$36.4-million replacement for a Drayton Valley school building that is just 11 years old.

H.W. Pickup middle school has been shifting on the ground for years, according to the Wild Rose School Division.

Cracks keep appearing on the floors. Walls move so that doors can't close, and the uneven ground creates tripping hazards. The repair bills were adding up.

"It got to the point where we started to feel like this school was not going to last a normal lifespan," superintendent Brad Volkman said in an interview on Tuesday.

An evaluation of the \$16.8-million school building, which opened to students in 2010, found it was more cost effective to build a new school on a new site rather than try to repair the problems, he said.

Although the structure is currently safe for students, the division is preparing for the possibility that could change, he said.

"We've had five years to mourn this," Volkman said. "At first, you go through all the feelings. Like, at first we were just ticked. ... A brand new school, how could this happen, right? And your public and others are kind of thinking, who's to blame? In the end, I don't know that can be determined."

Although the school division received word months ago, Alberta's education and infrastructure ministers will formally announce Wednesday the province will construct a new building for H.W. Pickup on a different site.

It's the first major school construction project the provincial government has funded this year outside its usual annual budget cycle. Education Minister Adriana LaGrange's press secretary, Justin Marshall, says that's because of the government's concerns about the building's condition.



The Sinclair family from the Drayton Valley area has three daughters who all attend H.W. Pickup middle school in Drayton Valley. The 11-year-old building has such profound structural problems, the provincial government has agreed to replace the school and demolish the problematic building. (Submitted by Jen Sinclair)

Included in the cost will be the eventual demolition of the old school and another aging elementary school building the division will no longer need.

School division kept patching up problems

Construction is set to begin this spring or summer. By 2023, students in Grades 5 to 8 in Drayton Valley will stream into the third iteration of H.W. Pickup school, which will be across the field from the town's public high school.

Jen Sinclair has three daughters attending Pickup and is vice-chair of the school's parent advisory council.

Her oldest daughter was in the sixth grade when Sinclair first heard engineers were evaluating the structural integrity of the building.

"It's unfortunate that all of that money went into a property that really is not a long-term property," she said.

The flaws wouldn't be obvious to a visitor, she said. The school division has done a good job sealing cracks and applying temporary fixes, she said.

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But she says the land where the building was constructed is a swamp. She's disappointed in the way the division managed the project from the beginning. She can't understand why the companies that prepared the land and built the school haven't been held responsible.

Schools are typically built to last a minimum of 30 years.

Sinclair is relieved to see the new school will be rebuilt in an area where existing buildings are stable, rather than put money into further attempts to salvage the existing building.

Volkman said the school building was out of warranty before division leaders at the time realized how profound the problems were. Volkman said the division did its due diligence in evaluating the site and investigated possible remedies when it became clear the problems would be difficult to resolve.

"This is a fluke. It's a one off."

He didn't immediately know how much money the division had spent on repairs at H.W. Pickup during the last decade, but one repair alone cost around \$500,000.

The best course of action now is to start fresh and move on, he said.

Once complete, the new building will house about 525 middle schoolers and around 170 K-9 students enrolled in the Drayton Christian School.

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