

LOCAL

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School closures 'would cripple' small towns

By JUDY PARSONS
Of The Herald

TABER — The closure of a local school would be more than any community should have to handle, says Taber Public School Board Trustee Larry Van Orman.

The school board has decided to try to maintain a school in every community in the division by moving older students to larger centres, even though a complete school closure would result in a greater cost savings.

The board has decided to move Grades 9-12 from the K-12 Chamberlain School in Grassy Lake to Taber as of September, 1992. The move is technically a school closure, although Grades K-8 will remain.

The board has also decided to move the Grade 9 students in the K-9 schools in Hays, Enchant and Barnwell to Vauxhall and Taber for the 1992-93 school year.

Van Orman said the board recognizes the division is based on agriculture.

"We have large schools in Taber, but Taber is really a rural town," he said. "The rural economy is not good right now, and the outlook is not good."

He said the board does not want to see any community die. Closing a school could cause irreparable harm.

"We want to do everything possible to keep the schools open as long as possible," he said.

The board passed a balanced budget last week, which included an eight-per-cent increase in the local requisition, and the elimination of five teaching positions.

The changes planned for the 1992-93 school year will help balance that year's budget.

"We feel we have balanced budgets for the next two years, as long as our grants are increased," said Van Orman.

After that, it's unknown how long the board will be able to continue to operate all of its schools.

"Demographics will dictate a lot," he said. "Rural depopulation is a fact of life in Alberta."

According to the school division's policy, the board can decide to investigate school closure if one or more of three conditions are met:

- the average enrolment per grade in three consecutive grades is less than 13.
- the cost per pupil to offer an adequate program is much higher than the average.
- an amalgamation of schools could provide a significant financial advantage.

Both the schools in Hays and Enchant have average enrolments less than 13.

Van Orman said economics will dictate when the board will have to close any school.

He said the decision to move the Grade 9 students to high schools in Vauxhall and Taber was not simply a financial decision, although it will save some money.

He said the educational research seems to support the idea students have a better educational experience in a 9-12 school than in a 10-12 setting.

He also said across North America, 83 per cent of students attend a Grades 9-12 high school.

"Edmonton Public has just announced it will do the same," he said.

Van Orman said four grades were moved from Grassy Lake because the board wanted to treat all areas the same.

He said now the two larger centres will house the high schools, and all other communities will have K-8 schools.

There are problems associated with smaller schools and the resulting double and triple grading.

Van Orman said the school board recognizes that fact and has come up with a staffing formula which can vary the teacher to pupil ratio by as much as 25 per cent.



Howdy, pardner

Miss Rodeo Canada Trish Kostelansky, formerly of Lethbridge, helps Jimmy Dang try on a cowboy hat Wednesday at Galbraith School. Kostelansky and Greg Kesler, of rodeo stock fame, were visiting with

Grade 3 students at the school to teach them about cowboys and the pro-rodeo circuit, and to give away tickets to this weekend's indoor rodeo at the Exhibition Pavilion.

HERALD PHOTO BY DAVID HOSSITER

Library moves a step closer

A regional library system for southwest Alberta is a step closer to reality following a recent financial shot in the arm.

The provincial government presented the Chinook Arch Library Project with a cheque for \$37,000 as an advance on a 1991-92 development grant. The money will allow project staff to continue work on developing the system.

The goal of the regional library system is to ensure all rural and urban residents of the area have access to reading materials, essential information and other literary services.

Eighteen library boards have already signed resolutions of support for the regional system with several others to cast their votes soon. Four municipal councils have already signed resolutions of intent to join the system.

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Moving students has pros, cons

TABER — School officials say there are two sides to moving older students from smaller schools to Taber and Vauxhall.

The Taber Public School Board has decided it will close the high school portion of Chamberlain School in Grassy Lake as of September 1992, and move the students to Taber. At the same time, it will move the Grade 9 students in the K-9 schools in Barnwell, Hays and Enchant to Taber and Vauxhall.

Chamberlain principal Arij Langstraat said Wednesday advantages include the wider choice of courses open to students, as well as more extra-curricular and co-curricular activities.

He said disadvantages include increased travel time, a loss of across-the-grades interaction, and a loss "of the close personal contact that exists here."

According to division statistics, there were 25 students in Grades 9-12 at Chamberlain in March. The 1991 graduating class will have eight members.

Cheryl Racs, secretary of the Chamberlain parent association, said 90 per cent voted Monday in favor of trying to keep the high school intact.

It was decided to strike a committee to investigate alternatives to closing the high school, yet would satisfy the board's need to save money.

Racz said statistics show students writing provincial exams in Grassy Lake score higher than the division and provincial averages.

She said closing the high school would save only a minimal amount of money.

It's also uncertain if all the stu-

dents now attending high school in Grassy Lake would make the move to Taber.

"Quite a number of parents stated that should the school close, they would definitely not be sending their kids to W.R. Myers (high school in Taber)," said Racz.

The parents would instead send their children to the Taber Separate School system, or to the County of 40 Mile to the east.

Racz said some students would face a one-way bus ride of about 60 kilometres if they were to go to Taber.

She said there are many young children in the area not yet in school, which will increase the school's population in the future.

Enchant School principal Bob Peters said Wednesday his school will see a reduction in staff, but "I know we offer a solid program and we can continue to do so."

Dale Cummings, principal at the Hays School, said the community isn't as upset as others may be.

"We're just trying to keep our school open," he said.

There are 78 students in K-9 in Hays with two and three grades in each classroom.

Cummings said he has had no phone calls from concerned parents.

He said while a community liaison committee studied the possibility of school closure during the winter, it looked as though losing the entire junior high portion of the school was possible.

He said the board has had to make some tough decisions in order to balance its budget.

"I'm happy the decision is made," he said. "The unknown is difficult to deal with."

School board operates with budget deficit

CARDSTON — Cardston School Division will operate the 1991-92 school year at a \$63,200 deficit.

Secretary Treasurer Ron Hunt said Wednesday it's the first time the division will operate with a deficit, but it was a necessary measure to avoid a large tax increase.

The school board raised the mill rate from 9.67 last year to 11.4 mills last month.

The division gets most of its money from three sources: government grants, native funding through the federal government and taxpayers.

"Most of the school divisions

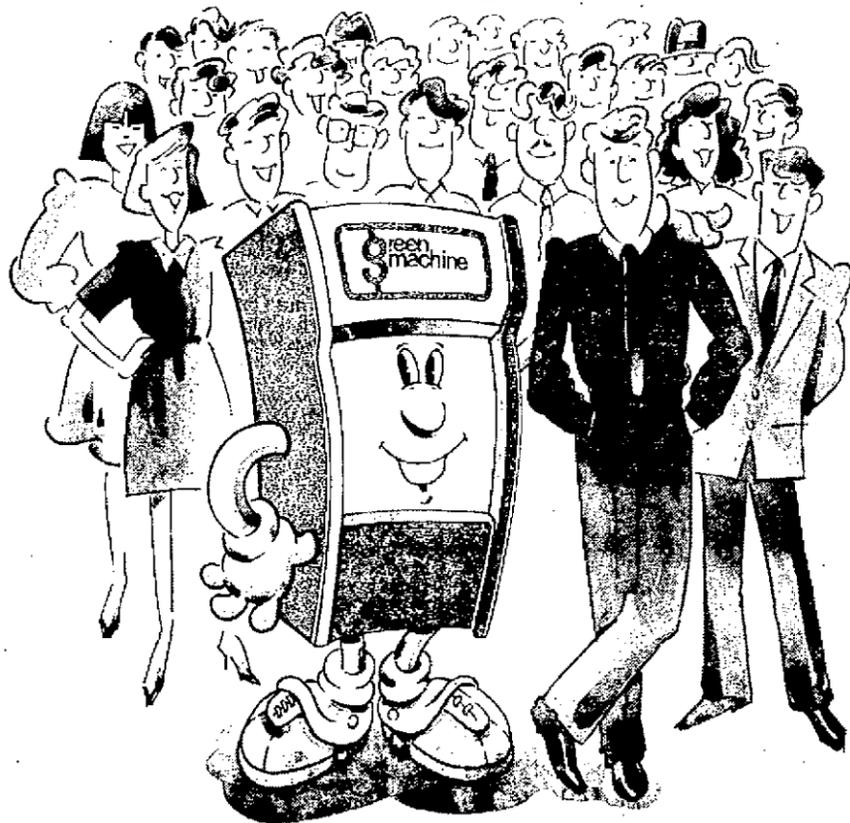
have had to go to the tax base and it's getting tough," said Hunt.

Hunt has set the budget at \$16.9 million for the 1991-91 year, an increase of \$24,700, or 5.1 per cent from last year.

"It's not any tougher to work the budget out. It's just tougher to make it balance," said Hunt. "The expenses are going up faster than the revenue."

Hunt said the biggest loss of revenue this year is debenture support from the provincial government. Last year the government handed over \$1.8 million, much of it going to the construction of the Magrath School.

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