

# **Discussion Framework with CCRSB Regarding the River John Consolidated School**

March 2014

## **GENERAL**

This document is meant to set out the entire argument in favour of keeping the River John Consolidated School (RJCS) operating in River John permanently. It will outline various points of discussion and those requiring further decision before a final determination is made by the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board (CCRSB) to close it. We, the people of River John, feel it a serious and urgent matter to put this discussion before the Board and hope to find a workable solution for all stakeholders.

Before addressing the various topics provided below, however, we would like to be clear about our approach to this important subject. We are very aware that the CCRSB, like its equivalents across Nova Scotia, is mandated strictly to adhere to the Education Act. Its primary role is to deliver the public school curriculum to our students and to keep their safety in mind while adhering to a budget and keeping matters like social justice and continual change in view. For the most part, and appreciating the limitations placed on the efforts of staff and elected representatives, we feel the CCRSB does what it was created to do. Our comments below, therefore, should not be interpreted as being confrontational. Rather, we want to engage in the decision process to keep the school in River John open.

## **THE FORMULA**

Generally, River John feels frustrated by the calculation the CCRSB has had to use in ranking schools for review and closure. Measuring total cost against square-area-per-student stems from the 1920s and strikes us as a rather awkward way to rank buildings for potential closure. One commentator likened this measure as being akin to a meat-axe...not very refined at all.

Several factors seem to be in play here:

1. We do not agree with simply taking historical demographic decline and using it to plan for the future. Like the mutual fund industry often asserts, you cannot rely on the past to predict the future – there is the reality of competitive reaction and unanticipated local developments that need to be considered. There are also some game-changers in River John that will be described later in this document.
2. The number of students attending the RJCS in the Impact Assessment is wrong. Currently, there are 70 children under instruction. In addition to this – and really the subject of a different point, below – approximately 20 additional students

have been sent to other area schools by parents who – among other reasons - do not like the uncertainty of reviews discussing the closure of the RJCS.

3. What the historical-cost approach does not take into account at all is the true cost of busing students to other schools or the immediate and long-term economic effect on the life of the community as new families stop coming and others move closer to a surviving school.

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We would like to offer a more refined approach to ranking schools for review: Relevant Cost, a useful decision-making support methodology.

Relevant Cost measures the difference between changing revenues and changing costs among alternatives and informs the decision-maker which alternative is better. Relevant costs should be isolated and further identified as to being avoidable or not avoidable among alternatives.

Sunk costs like the purchase of land and construction of the building are by definition already incurred and therefore cannot be changed by any future decision – and are therefore not relevant. Neither are future costs or revenues that will not change by the decision at hand. Teacher salaries and burden, for instance, are not relevant because a paid teacher will continue to teach the children of River John wherever they attend school.

In the case of deciding whether to close the River John Consolidated School, relevant costs include:

- The loss of HOGG revenue allocation upon closure of the RJCS.
- Increases in total (capital and operating) busing costs.
- Decreases in operating costs of the school building.

This will bear some more study, but it is our feeling is that the loss of the HOGG allocation and increased (true) busing cost will far outweigh the decrease in operating cost of the building in River John. We think the CCRSB will actually be worse off by closing the school than by keeping it open.

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Other elements of the cost of operating the school include possible savings via solar and/or wind electricity generation and the return of direct furnace heating controls to River John from New Glasgow. Ample anecdotal evidence exists that heat is released outdoors on too many winter days.

## **THE PARENTS**

We believe there is such a level of uncertainty regarding the future of the RJCS that several families have already decided to send their children to other area schools, not including those choosing French Immersion. Although other reasons for choosing different schools exist, we expect some parents will return their children to the RJCS if the threat of closure is removed.

On a similar but not identical topic, we think there is a burden being placed on the school busing system by parents whose children attend other area schools instead of the RJCS. This will bear further study, but it appears some of the RJCS buses are going out of their way to connect students with buses serving other schools. This surely is already driving bus times and costs up while relieving parents from the obligation to transport their child(ren) to a non-RJCS school. Perhaps a study of the 'choose your school' policy should review the burden of transportation placed on families.

## **THE GAME-CHANGER(S)**

The people of River John are acutely aware of the decline in the village population and the ageing of those who remain and some feel defeated by the potential loss of the last of its infrastructure.

The majority, however, is determined to reverse the slide.

1. In 2014-5, construction will begin on the Caldera Micro-Distillery. By the time it is built and begins operating, as many as 10-15 new jobs will have been created in River John and surrounding support businesses (farms, transport, etc.) will have a new, year-round customer. In future years, the owner of Caldera intends to add cottages, a year-round highway coffee shop and a small hotel, bringing the total of new jobs to 25-30.
2. River John First! is a commercial and trade development/marketing group supported by the Municipality via the River John Community Action Society and is aimed at introducing River John as a great place for employers to come and set up shop. Industries that do not require city infrastructure to operate, like IT, consultancy of all kinds, small specialty manufacturing, film production, etc., are our targets and will, in the coming 2-4 years provide other new employment for people to come, live and work in the River John area.

If the CCRSB decides to stick to inaccurate and historical estimates to predict the near-term future, we believe it will have made a serious mistake by closing the RJCS in 2015.

## **THE BUILDING**

Beyond the importance of operating the school building in River John lies the matter of its capital upkeep – and the need for restoration. In the case of the River John Consolidated School, we are concerned that the CCRSB has treated the building as a wasting asset and has not taken seriously the need to maintain its structural integrity so as to assure its usefulness in the long term.

We understand the Municipality of the County of Pictou retains title to the building and property regardless of its use by the CCRSB as a school. This means that if the school were to close, the Municipality would have to decide whether to operate it, abandon it or tear it down. Further study of viable alternatives is imperative here, including a decision on whether to undertake new capital project/refurbishment at some level of government.

Despite the good overall condition of the building, there are several areas that require immediate work – partly to honour the Board's existing policy regarding student safety and security, and partly to make the building available for other use in the coming years.

First, the roof needs to be replaced. Its original flat design was the least costly to build, but has proven to be very costly to keep tight. Frequent internal damage has been done (and mostly repaired) in classrooms and the gymnasium floor and students' personal safety has frequently been threatened by waterlogged, falling ceiling tiles. The Board has estimated redesign and replacement of the roof at a potential cost of \$3-500,000.

Secondly, the parking lot/playground is in serious need of repaving. It has been a very long time since it was last cared for and now contains many deep potholes and broken areas.

The perimeter of the school playground has never been fenced since the school was built in the late 1960's. We believe, however, that some thought should be given to protecting our students from the dangers of the surrounding woods as well as unwelcome human interference during the school day.

Finally, the building no longer meets the current fire code regulations. With the potential of change of use in part of the building, some interior walls will need to be built and other work done as fire safety is important to everyone who uses the building both day and night.

In summary, we believe capital refurbishment is required before we as a community can offer alternative users a safe, secure and tight environment for which they would be asked to pay commercial rent. We feel that to try and offer for commercial use a building that is not roof-tight and secure will not be successful. This, we believe, is a serious shortcoming that the CCRSB and Municipality need to address before any substantial post-closure use can proceed. For the reason the building is today not tight and secure and no agency or government has come forward to take responsibility for these necessary projects, neither is any serious work under way to attract potential new tenants in the manner of a Community Hub or such like. This issue alone is of utmost importance to the continuation of the RJCS and the subsequent well-being of tomorrow's River John.

### **THE CLOCK**

At the time of confirmation by the CCRSB that the River John School would be reviewed for closure in June 2015, a clock started ticking. At the end of June 2013, we entered the summer while the Board took six weeks' vacation. Then, as schools opened in September, a provincial election was called for early October. By the time the new government was elected and installed into new portfolios, there was only a brief time for legislative communication and work before the government rose for Christmas.

In late January our committee met with Mr. Bob Fowler to discuss the Review Process; has since appeared in front of the Municipality of the County of Pictou and locally with the press and on radio and has been actively engaging the local population throughout the entire time. In short, we have been doing all we can, but are losing time due to events and decision timing beyond our control. We feel pressurized by the loss of time since the end of June 2013 and are concerned that any further delay in reaching consensus and commitment by our various partners (CCRSB, County of Pictou and Department of Education) may undo our best efforts.

We would therefore ask that the two-year planning envelope be vacated – the clock stopped – until we have some firmer ground upon which to make necessary progress.

Respectfully submitted,

Gregory Dickson  
The River John Community Association