

Abandoned school touted as university

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Now-empty Blanshard elementary will be transformed into the first campus of a new private university if a proposal before the Greater Victoria school board goes ahead.

Former University of Victoria president David Strong is the point man for the proposal, which is being reviewed in-camera by school board trustees.

"I can confirm that the board is in discussions with Dr. Strong through Colliers (the district's leasing agent)," board chairwoman Charley Beresford said Tuesday.

Few details about the specific proposal for the Blanshard site have been released. However, a formal intention to create a new university with the working title University Canada West or UCW is posted on the Web site of the provincial Ministry of Advanced Education.

Strong is the signatory on that application, by LearningWise Inc. (LINC), which outlines plans to begin the new university with two faculties—arts and science, and business and management.

One of the concepts behind the proposed institution is to help address a shortage of university seats in British Columbia. According to documents posted, "in its early years, UCW proposes to focus on only four undergraduate degrees"—bachelors of science, arts, commerce and management.

Besides the application to use the title "university" LINC also has separate applications posted with the ministry, seeking authorization to deliver masters of business administration and bachelor of commerce degrees.

Now 60, Strong served 10 years as UVic president before stepping down in 2000. Through an e-mail, he told the Times Colonist he was unable to comment on the proposal at this time. School board trustees, meanwhile, are prohibited from speaking about such proposals while they are in-camera.

LINC's government application to use the title "university" says it "does not propose to build a large campus on the model of public-sector universities in Canada, but rather to operate on more of a mixed model of distributed and on-site teaching and learning using 'mini-campuses.'

"Accordingly, we will seek to create a number of smaller campuses with the appropriate mix of teaching and office space in locations of highest demand," it continues. "For example, for our first campus, we are currently involved in discussions for the lease of one of the many elementary schools that have been closed in British Columbia during 2003-04."

Blanshard elementary, located at 950 Kings Rd., has been empty for the past year. It was one of three elementaries closed by the school district in June 2003 as part of a cost-cutting measure.

Before any plan to use Blanshard as a university can go ahead, the venture must also receive approval from the Advanced Education Ministry.

Meanwhile, it seems a university campus would fit into the guidelines set by the Greater Victoria school board for use of its closed facilities.

Under a framework adopted by the board, any successful proposal would have to ensure that "at minimum" costs to the district be recovered. Any money generated from short-term leases on empty buildings would be put into the district's operating budget.

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"Priority will be given to any future proposals which are community-based or help to build or enhance the public good, either locally or more widely in the community," the board's guideline says.

Downtown Blanshard Community Association executive director Leni Hoover said the surrounding community wants to know more about the proposal.

“I think it could be beneficial, but we don’t know all that much about it,” said Hoover, whose association runs the Blanshard Community Centre located across from the school. Hoover said concerns could include increased traffic, parking problems, development of the site and length of any lease.

Doug Rhodes, chairman of the Hillside-Quadra Neighbourhood Action Group said people he has talked to are generally “intrigued” by the idea. “At the same time, we’re very concerned that the attributes the neighbourhood already has be preserved . . . We’re basically neutral until we see what (the proponents) want to put in front of us.”

Rhodes said Strong has been in touch with him informally regarding the proposal and how the neighbourhood might feel about it. But he added that he hasn’t seen anything in detail.

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