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River East and urban portion of Transcona-Springfield to merge

By Wanda McConnell

While there is still much uncertainty about what the future holds in store for the River East and Transcona-Springfield school divisions, one thing is for sure - both boards have their work cut out for them.

The two divisions will be merging as a result of Education Minister Drew Caldwell's announcement last week that the number of school divisions is being slashed from 54 to 37.

In Winnipeg, the number is dropping from nine to six and in northeast Winnipeg, the urban part of Transcona-Springfield, and River East - which was left intact - are amalgamating. They have until March 1, 2002, to figure out the logistics of the merger. A new board will be chosen during municipal elections in October, 2002.

In Transcona-Springfield, Supt. Ken Bell was out of town on business on Nov. 9, the day following the announcement. Assistant Supt. Duane Brothers said his department would not comment until after a meeting with Caldwell this week.

What Brothers would say is that amalgamation "is only going to add tremendous value to this new organization."

Veteran trustee and current board chairperson Mary Andree agreed, but said she is concerned about the part of her division that will be lost to Agassiz School Division. "We are joining an urban area where a lot of it will be status quo, but when you get into the rural area, things are a little bit different. I don't want to pre-judge what will occur, but the rural people will have their hands full."

Meanwhile, there will be little opposition in Transcona because the two areas are already joined at the municipal government level,

Andree speculated. If anything, the merger could help River East because it needs classroom space and Transcona has it, she says.

It's too soon to say how employees could be affected, Andree says. "Wherever possible, we'll wait until contracts run out. We don't want to get into a legal entanglement with employee groups and that's what would happen if we try to tamper with them."

She hopes there will be no job cuts. "We'll still have the students so we need personnel to deal with them. And the numbers aren't going down. You need people to administer the division so I can't see anyone getting laid off at this moment. There may be some movement. There will have to be decisions made and I would hope they can be made most amicably and with the least amount of disruption as possible. We don't want to turn people's lives upside down."

Andree doesn't believe taxpayers will see lower taxes as a result of amalgamation.

"The demands (on the budget) will still be there and they are becoming more and more," she said, pointing out that Caldwell has told divisions they can't cut budgets for special needs students.

Meanwhile, in Transcona-Springfield, some students from the rural areas come to the city for vocational and language programs, with busing provided by the division. Whether busing will continue is something that

will have to be figured out, Andree says. "The division will have to bend in the first few years," she predicted.

The complications that

come with amalgamation will "add" to her grey hairs but, the senior citizen says, "it also keeps me motivated."

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