

*Bigger is better says Ward 20 commissioner Angela Nolet*

## Activists seek off-island school board

by DOROTHY NIXON

There have been whispers for years about the need for a separate off-island English school board to better serve area parents, teachers and students; one responsive to the community's needs and nimble enough to plan ahead in times of madly fluctuating demographics.

Now, certain parent-activists are campaigning openly for a board which would take over control of off-island English schools from the Lester B. Pearson School Board.

The 100-year trend in Quebec has been towards consolidation and ever bigger school boards. Since 1997, when Quebec's confessional school boards were replaced by French and English boards, nine English boards took over control of approximately 340 elementary and secondary schools, with schools being closed down all the time due to dwindling numbers of students eligible for English-language education.

Big school boards just aren't effective, says Luke Horne, a local parent activist and LBPSB teacher. "These types of school boards are under scrutiny at all levels."

Horne believes big boards move

too slowly. That's why Westwood High's junior campus is overcrowded and Westwood Senior soon to be ground is not yet broken on St. Lazare's new elementary school promised for January 2006.

Horne believes in a return to community schools. "The old Hudson High was once a community school," he says.

Trudy Clarke, a former Westwood governing board member, is in full agreement. "Our community needs to take back control of our kids' education and their schools," she says. The LBPSB is run too much like a corporation, she feels, with money that should be earmarked for books and programs and vibrant learning spaces going to fuel the bureaucratic machine and perks for board bureaucrats.

"Historically, the LBPSB has not listened to us when we spoke," Clarke says. She worries about the prospect of children being bused to distant LBPSB schools to make way for a money-making adult education facility.

According to Horne, the board, which stretches from Verdun/LaSalle to the Ontario border, is in a kind of Catch-22 situation: "The Lester B is

losing population on island and is looking to its off-island population to survive, but is not responsive to our community." One reason: only three of the 21 commissioners represent off-island constituents.

Making the case for a separate new school board will take a groundswell of support, Horne admits, but says it will be worth the effort. He views the 1997 campaign by west-of-201 residents to place area schools under the LBPSB instead of the South Shore's New Frontiers Board as a kind of precedent, proving that people power can move ministries.

The Quebec Education Act, section 17, states: "At the request of a school board or of a majority of the electors living in that part of its territory affected by the request, the Government may, by order, divide the territory of that school board and either establish a new territory or annex part of its territory to that of another school board of the same category whose territory is contiguous and which consents thereto."

A new English board would be a major undertaking not without risks, says Ward 20 off-island commissioner Angela Nolet.

Nolet sees the 1997 campaign to

keep off-island schools under the LBPSB as a precedent. "It took many many meetings to state our case and convince them (the government)."

But she says there's a risk: "What if this time the government says 'they don't know what they want,' and sticks off-island schools in the New Frontiers Board?"

Nolet believes when it comes to school boards, large is good. "It's size that allows us to provide services," says Nolet. "That's why they've been reducing the number of boards."

As for area representation at the school board level, it is based on student numbers and is right where it should be.

And Nolet thinks it's time to see the positives about the situation. For example, Westwood's junior/senior school model is becoming a popular idea at the school board level, she added.

She agrees the Westwood overcrowding problem must be fixed: Last year their combined Governing Board drew up a unified expansion plan and presented it to government.

It is now before the Treasury Board, but these things take time, she added. "There are many hurdles to overcome."