

Provost residents scramble to raise dollars for larger gym at Catholic school

A small town has a big fundraising goal.

The good news is Provost is getting a \$12-million replacement for the aging St. Thomas Aquinas School.

The only drawback for some is that the gym planned for the new building isn't big enough, so parents, the school district, businesses and supporters in the central Alberta town are raising \$500,000 for a larger gym with a deadline just two months away. As of Feb. 13, \$143,900 was raised.

But they're confident it will happen.



Sherry Parsons

"Pounding the steps, talking to businesses and alumni and families, we're hoping it all comes together," said Sherry Parsons, chair of the St. Thomas Aquinas Building Fund Committee, a group of about a dozen people, established last month.

"I think it will come. I hope it comes."

The existing St. Thomas Aquinas, a kindergarten-to-Grade 12 school built in 1958, will be replaced with a new building to open in September 2021.

The Alberta government made the announcement in last year's budget along with 19 other new schools and modernizations. But it was only in January that parents and residents learned the 430-square-metre gym planned by the province is smaller than the 600-square-metre gym in the current building. The existing gym was built about 20 years ago.

A new school building is "awesome news," said Parsons, whose three kids attend at St. Thomas Aquinas. But "a small gym just doesn't work."

"Everything else being equal, senior high students are going to want to play on a full-sized court, so they may decide to go to the public school, which is their prerogative, if you take away some of their sports."

Beyond sports events, Parsons and St. Thomas Aquinas needs a bigger gym because it's a hub for Provost, a town of some 2,000 people about 300 kilometres southeast of Edmonton. The space is a venue for youth groups, music festivals, a bazaar, and other events.

"It's not just our school that uses it. The public school, when they're hosting tournaments, you need two full-sized gymnasiums. It affects everybody in the community."

Alberta Education allocated the smaller gym size to St. Thomas Aquinas based in part on school population – St. Thomas Aquinas has 256 students.

Under government guidelines, the community would need to fundraise for any additions, including a bigger gym. Other schools in rural Alberta, including Paradise Valley, Irma and Bashaw, have also had to raise money for additions to their schools.

"We know that schools are hubs for the entire community and that is why it is important to include a gymnasium," Education Minister David Eggen said in a statement. "In this case, the community would like one that is larger than the standard reflected in the *School Capital Manual*, and that is why the community will have to fundraise for a larger space."

The total cost of a 600-square-metre gym is an additional \$500,000. The St. Thomas Aquinas fundraising committee hopes to raise half that, with the remainder matched by the East Central Alberta Catholic School District.

The Alberta government originally set a March deadline to come up with the extra money, but that has been extended to April 15. The East Central Catholic school board is expected to choose a design for the new school next week.



Charlie McCormack

“It’s an emotional thing,” said schools superintendent Charlie McCormack.

“When they (the local fundraisers) say it’s not a full-sized gym, it creates the impression that we’ve got a little box instead of gym. This is a gym that you’ll be able to play volleyball or basketball or anything in, but it’s not as big as the gym that they have now.

“But I don’t want the extra 100-and-some-odd square metres of gym space to undermine the fact that we’re getting brand-spanking-new K-to-12 school in Provost. I’m pretty excited about that.”

McCormack said he’s “absolutely” convinced that the committee will raise enough money.

STA Fundraiser Letter

Individual, business and alumni donations have come in, some as high as \$10,000. The Grade 6 class at St. Thomas Aquinas will also donate from its bottle drive, forgoing an end-of-year field trip.

“The cheques are slowly coming in, but it’s really tough right now with the economy the way it is,” Parsons said. “A business may have given \$20,000 five years ago, and this year they can give \$1,000.”

The gym at the existing St. Thomas Aquinas couldn’t be salvaged as part of a new building. The school was built in 1958 and has had several additions up to the 1970s.

“A lot of people say, ‘Oh you’re only concerned about sports.’ No. But it’s the only thing we won’t be getting in the new school building. That’s why we’re

concentrating on it," Parsons said.

Supporters say having two big school gyms – Catholic and public – helps all of Provost.

"When large events are held in our community all businesses and individuals in our town reap the benefits," Parsons said. "Hotels get booked, restaurants are filled, and stores are visited. We are able to proudly showcase our town when more people and groups are brought in due to social and athletic events."