

VOICE NEW WESTMINSTER
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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ASBESTOS INQUIRY AT RISK OF BECOMING A “WHITEWASH” – VOICE NEW WESTMINSTER

New Westminster, BC – *Voice New Westminster* is calling on the New Westminster School Board to expand the terms of reference for their “Independent Review” of the circumstances surrounding an April 26th, 2005 asbestos dust cloud incident. The asbestos cloud resulted from the improper demolition of Room 138 at New Westminster Secondary School.

The “Independent Review” is being conducted by Mr. Stewart Ladyman, a former School Superintendent and Ministry of Education Official, and it follows recent revelations that the April 26, 2005 asbestos incident was far more serious, and affected far more people, than was originally admitted by the School Board.

Blair Armitage, President of *Voice New Westminster*, says people in the community are extremely upset about this incident—now that they know about it— and many are accusing the School Board of having engaged in a cover-up. Many others are now saying the board is trying to ‘whitewash’ the whole affair with its limited scope inquiry.

Armitage casts no aspersions on Mr. Ladyman, but he is firm in his belief that the trustees must expand Mr. Ladyman’s terms of reference. “Personnel issues must not be ‘off the table’ which they are at present,” said Armitage. “Personnel issues are central to this whole incident.”

Sharon Kurtz, also a member of *Voice* and a former Constituency Assistant to MLA Anita Hagen, agreed with Armitage and added that “the issue people are most concerned about, right across the board, is the cover-up and the fact that the school board appealed a WorkSafeBC decision that condemned them for endangering the health and safety of both children and workers—that message has been coming through consistently from the community.”

Last Monday night (February 5th) the New Westminster School District held a public information meeting about the asbestos incident. It was attended by over 100 angry community members and school district workers. Kurtz says she was “dismayed” to hear workers involved in the incident say they had never been interviewed or even consulted by the district about the asbestos incident.

“I couldn’t believe what I was hearing Monday night,” said Kurtz, “one worker talked about patting down his jacket sleeve on April 26, 2005 and raising huge asbestos-filled dust clouds.”

Armitage says *Voice* is considering holding its own public investigation into the incident.

“Nothing prevents us from calling on workers, teachers and students and providing them with a forum to get their facts on record,” said Armitage. “There is a genuine fear in this community that the school trustees will try to sweep this asbestos issue under the rug and ‘whitewash’ everything, and we can’t let that happen.”

When asked if *Voice New Westminster* will participate in Mr. Ladyman’s inquiry, Armitage stated that it had not yet been decided. “We do not want to be part of a ‘cover-up’ or an inquiry with limited scope. The community wants a complete and unedited investigation into this incident, not a ‘whitewash,’ and that’s what we are calling for—that is what we will support.”

Voice New Westminster is a newly-formed New Westminster civic electors group comprised of residents from all parts of the city sharing a common vision for New Westminster.

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Attachments & Online References

- News Release
- January 20, 2007 Letter to the Board of School Trustees c/o Chair Michael Ewen
- *Voice New Westminster* Vision, Mission and Values Statement
- www.voicenewwestminster.org

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