

C-Train threatens high school's heritage

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The Ernest Manning High School class of 1998 had its 10-year reunion at the Westgate Community Hall last month and, by all reports, the hangovers were worth the effort.

High school reunions, those ritualistic gatherings of former nerds, jocks, friends, flames and band geeks, are a chance to reconnect with the shared experiences of past -- the bad hair, the goofy clothes, the glory, pride, embarrassment and joy of a peculiar universe from which most people emerge with fond memories, given enough time.

But what happens when your high school no longer exists? Greg Clayton, who organized the Ernest Manning Class of '98's recent shindig, has mixed feelings about the Calgary Board of Education's decision Tuesday night to close and demolish the 45-year-old west-end institution.

"When I drive by and look at the building, you remember moments you had outside certain doors or hallways. That's the memory for me."

Clayton realizes, though, that his old school site is needed for the expansion of the west leg of the LRT. What concerns him more is the potential loss of the school's name when a replacement facility opens at 69th Street and 17th Avenue S.W. in 2010.

"Keeping the name retains that lineage," says Clayton, who works for a commercial mortgage finance company.

"No matter where the building is located, a Manning graduate would still be a Manning graduate. The name is the reference point for whoever went to the school," said Clayton.

A decision to retain or change the school name will not be made until the new school is built, at which time a recommendation will be made by a special advisory committee.

"The community likes the name of Ernest Manning, and the current board is very predisposed to keeping the Ernest Manning name," said Barb Kuester, a spokeswoman for the CBE.

Manning, Alberta's longest-serving premier, left an indelible impression on the province, shepherding it through the postwar period. His Social Credit government ruled from 1943 to 1968.

The school is one of 96 in the CBE system named after a historical figure. Another 112 are named for the communities in which they are located. Ten others have generic names.

Should the name Ernest Manning be abandoned, it would be relegated to the CBE's historical dustbin.

According to the board's Administrative Regulation 8000, a 15-page facility-naming policy, a school's name is permanently withdrawn when a building is not retained by the CBE.

The decommissioning of a name requires that it be formally commemorated at the school's closing ceremonies "in a dignified and honourable manner" and that a plaque be placed in either "the successor or receiving school" or at the CBE corporate offices.

CREDIT: Ted Jacob, Calgary Herald

Picture Above: Greg Clayton says he hopes Ernest Manning High School's name will live on when it's replaced by a new facility.

Such was the case in 2006 when tears were shed at the closure of Fred Seymour Elementary School in Willow Park and Jerry Potts Elementary School in Varsity.

When the school board held a public hearing Sept. 25 for the Ernest Manning closure, parents, teachers and former staff pleaded that the name be retained. Abandoning it, they argued, would diminish the public's memory of a historical leader and cause alumni to lose their connection to the past. Graduation pictures, football uniforms, sports trophies and other Manning high school artifacts would also have to be archived rather than displayed.

"Kids from the west side will still be going to the new school, and looking back on the trophies of the football team keeps the school history and adds the school spirit. So keeping the name keeps that lineage," Clayton says.

Alumni of Ernest Manning include wrestler Bret (the Hitman) Hart. The building also houses the stand-alone National Sport School, specially tailored to Olympic-calibre athletes.

If the Manning name were to be ditched for the new school, family members would have to be advised and, according to board policy, invited to the school's closing ceremony.

So where does Preston Manning, the Reform party founder, former parliamentarian and Manning's son, stand on the issue?

Ever the politician, he declined comment.