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New School in Brandon to be Built Using Public Funds, Not P3 model.

The Manitoba government will not build a new school in Brandon using the public-private partnership model and will instead use public funds to see the long-awaited project come to fruition.

During its 2018 budget announcement on Monday, the government announced it would set aside more than \$100 million to see five schools built —one more than was previously announced — through the Public Schools Finance Board.

By combining certain phases from each project, such as their design and build, the province says it will be able to build multiple schools at once, reduce duplication, accelerate the process and save at least \$18 million.

“At the end of the day, we’re taking an evidence-based approach and we’re saying we care about the evidence,” Finance Minister Cameron Friesen told reporters via teleconference.

“In this case, the evidence points us to a conventional build.”

Last year, the government said it would explore the possibility of building four new schools, including one in Brandon, using the P3 model, a system where the private sector works with government to build and manage projects.

KPMG was commissioned back in August to develop a business case and Friesen said the firm recommended that government pursue other opportunities.

“We did a study on the P3 methodology, we learned valuable lessons from that investment, we took away new thinking about how to approach the projects, but I assure you, the decision to proceed with this enhanced conventional school construction model is our own,” Friesen said.

While the P3 model is still a “good option,” Friesen said the approach taken by government was thought to be the best in this case.

With tendering set to begin by the end of the year, he said the schools could take form within a year.

“What we told Manitobans is we were not ideological about the methodology, what we were interested to know if savings could be gotten at.”

The announcement was well received by Brandon School Division chair Linda Ross, who, while against the idea of a P3 school, said she gave the government “kudos” for looking at the data and listening to what people had to say.

“This is a very, very welcome announcement today, so we’re just thrilled by it.”

The BSD was not consulted by KPMG and Ross said she hopes the board will get to see a copy of the report.

A provincial spokesperson said the KPMG report will be released at the conclusion of the tendering process in order to avoid any potential effect on competitive bids.

Ross applauded the government for not being stuck in an “ideological mode” and said if the school can be built more efficiently, that is a good thing.

“We’ve got 400 kids who would like to go to school in their own neighbourhood,” she said.

The P3 model was heavily criticized by CUPE Local 737, which pointed to cost overruns and poor planning in other provinces that have used the approach for their schools.

The union even put up a billboard on 18th Street to express its opposition to the idea.

“I think the taxpayers of Brandon are lucky the government has changed their mind and going in the right direction,” said CUPE Local 737 president Jamie Rose.

Brandon Teachers’ Association president Peter Buehler said all things considered, the government’s approach looks like a better one than a P3 school.

“Well our first thought is that P3 projects elsewhere have been fraught with difficulty and unexpected expense, or unreported expense,” he said, “and if the government hasn’t come up with a P3 proposal yet that anybody can look at, then this looks like a better decision.”

The school in Brandon will be a K-8 building, located in the southeast corner of the city at Ninth Street and Maryland Avenue, with a capacity for 450 students — 675 upon future expansion — and 74 child-care spaces.

The other projects include a K-5 school in Precinct E of the Seven Oaks School Division, a K-8 school in Waterford Green within the Winnipeg School Division, and both a K-8 and 9-12 school in Waverley West in the Pembina Trails School Division.

Brandon has been in need of a new school for years due to its growing student population as a result of more families moving to the city for work at Maple Leaf Foods.

The former NDP government promised to build a new school in November 2015, but little was heard about the project following the provincial election in 2016.

The Brandon Sun

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