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Dear Friends of TDSB Pools

I appreciate and welcome all the emails and phone calls that I have received on the pools (and there have been many).

I completely agree with the passionate support that the community is putting behind this issue. To ensure that the conversation leads to effective action to save the pools, there are a few common misunderstandings that need to be corrected. (I have also included answers to 13 "Frequently Asked Questions" in a section following this letter.)

1/ All of the actions that we are considering for the next year are reversible.

I am optimistic that we have ample time to come up with a workable solution if we remain focussed. However next spring, without additional funds, we will be forced to take irreversible action. We have almost a year to find the solution.

2/ The pool funding challenges facing TDSB are real and will not go away without additional funding.

TDSB faces a \$70M deficit with discretionary control over only about \$120M. We have few options, and none of them are without significant societal and educational costs. And if we don't balance the budget, the Province is likely to appoint a bureaucrat to do it for us.

3/ I am open to any and all proposals for finding new sources of funding.

Karen Stintz and I have started exploring some funding sources, but any idea that you have will be considered seriously. This is a community issue. We will need your involvement, along with that of the City and the Province, to make a solution happen. There will be a community meeting in early May to discuss options and how to proceed.

4/ I have a personal stake in the future of our school pools:

My children take lessons in pools that are slated for closure. For the past 7 years, both before I became a Trustee and then as a Trustee, I have worked hard to keep the pools open. I remain completely committed to finding new sources of funding to support our pools.

This problem has existed for a decade and we must fix it properly. The time for stop-gap band-aid and chewing gum solutions is over. Putting off tough decisions will only dig us into a deeper financial hole and result in more drastic action next year.

We have a year to fix the pool funding problem that was created when TDSB lost its power to levy taxes and we became dependent on the Province. Let us work together to make this happen.

Howard Goodman

[NOTE: FAQ section attached]

Answers to some questions that many of you have asked me about our pools.

Q: Why will you be voting to give notice of termination to swim instructors and close 23 pools?

There are four principles that guide my thinking on the pools issue:

- I believe that we should avoid making irrevocable decisions, so that we have time to find additional funds to keep the pools open.
- I believe that we must never play politics with our students.
- I believe that we should be honest about our circumstances, even if the truth is hard to hear.
- I believe that TDSB must be fiscally responsible and live within our funding.

I am convinced that putting off the inevitable for one year will be misinterpreted by many as a sign that TDSB can in fact solve this problem without significant additional funding. Attention will drift to other pressing issues, and the momentum that we have gained towards working together to find a solution will be lost. And as a result, it will be more likely that the pools will be lost forever.

Swim Instructor vote - Our collective agreement with CUPE requires that we provide adequate notice this week if we are to terminate any swim instructors for next school year. If we give notice, we can recall the swim instructors if externally funding arrives and we can afford to keep the pools open. If we don't give notice and no funding arrives, we will be committed to keeping the staff in place for the full year.

Don't close pools yet – The reality is that we have time to negotiate with the City and the Province, and to enlist community financial support. We have 4 months before school opens, and more than a year before we take irreversible action. If we can't find external funding in the next year, we never will. It is my firm belief that there is no need to divert from our current plans in order to look for money to keep the pools open. In fact knowing the realities, the deadlines, and the consequence will likely sharpen the attention of the parties involved.

Q: Why has the pool issue arisen so suddenly?

It hasn't risen suddenly – As a parent, I've been fighting for the pools for 7 years. As a Trustee, I've been raising the inevitability of this problem for the past two years. And last June the Board voted unanimously to start closing pools if the City or the Province didn't provide additional funds. The reality is that it requires a concrete situation to get people's attention, and it was only recently that the abstract problem became real.

The elements that contribute to this coming to a head this year include:

- **Demographics and House Prices** - the echo-boomer students are starting to graduate (fewer students mean less flexibility in how we can use Provincial grants). Also, families are moving out to 905 for larger, newer, and more affordable housing. Each year for the past several years our enrolment has declined by about 4,000 students (enough to fill 10 average-sized elementary

schools). This trend is likely to continue for more than a decade. This year 4,000 fewer students means a reduction of \$38M in grants.

- **More English as Second Language teachers** – historically we have spent about 50% of our ESL grant on ESL (other Boards spend 100%). This year we decided to spend 75%, increasing our costs by \$10M (for 142 additional ESL teachers).
- **Keeping Educational Assistants** – we have over 600 EA's in Kindergartens at a cost of \$24M without funding from the Province. Staff recommended reducing that number by 200 (\$8M) for next year. We decided not to cut the positions (I voted in favour of the staff recommendation to reduce the number of EA's).
- **Existing deficit** – We are likely to end this school year with a \$10M deficit; we are required to pay this off in the coming year.

Q: Isn't this just a negotiating ploy?

No, this is just a statement of the reality of our financial position.

If we are to balance our budget under the current funding from the Province we will have to take a number of unpopular and unattractive measures. The reality is that the Province doesn't give us enough money to fulfill the core education priorities that they set for us, fund a small number of high priority local projects, and pay to keep the pools open.

Last June when we voted unanimously to seek money from the Province and the City we were clear about our circumstances and the action we would take if we didn't find funding. Giving a full year's notice of intention is precisely the opposite of a negotiating ploy – it was our attempt to solve the problem without having to involve the broader public in an anxious discussion.

Q: What is the down-side of keeping the pools open for another year without having a secure source of funding?

It is likely that the Province will step in to assume control over our finances and a bureaucrat will make the decisions on how to balance the budget. I believe elected Trustees will be much more motivated than a bureaucrat to find a creative way to provide stable funding for our pools.

It may seem odd that keeping these pools open for another year increases the likelihood of them closing forever, but I believe this to be the case.

Q: Toronto is a wealthy city. Why are we dismantling these important community resources?

The short answer is that no-one caught the implications for school pools when TDSB lost taxation powers in 1998, and we were placed on a "fixed income" by the Province.

The longer story is that a generation ago, far-seeing Metro Toronto Councillors and Trustees recognized the value of building pools in schools rather than community centres. No other jurisdiction in Ontario took this step. Since the tax base for the schools and the city were identical at the time, it didn't really matter which property tax bill covered the cost of the pool operations. The pool cost ended up on the school's tax bill.

In 1998, the Province cancelled school board taxation powers, and put TDSB and other school boards on a “fixed income” based on the grant structure under a funding formula. Because only TDSB had school pools, these costs were not included in the formula (they still aren’t). And although we still get an “education property tax” bill, these taxes are neither set by nor controlled by TDSB. It is essentially provincial general revenue.

As a result, the money that had been used to pay for school pools disappeared when boards lost the power to tax.

(Also, it is important to remember that although parts of Toronto are very affluent, a large number of families and children live at or below the poverty line.)

Q: Doesn’t the City provide funding for school pools?

Yes and no. To their credit, the City has committed significant funding for 33 pools as part of their Parks and Recreation program budget, but this leaves 45 pools unfunded. These 45 pools are those that are at risk of closing.

If we close these pools, the remaining pools in schools, community centres, and private organizations will not have the capacity to take in the swimmers who are displaced from the closed pools. Not only will many people not be able to find swimming time, but those that are lucky enough will find that their pool will become increasingly over-crowded.

Q: TDSB’s budget is \$2.3B. Surely you can find \$10M (0.4%) for pools?

Out of the \$2.3B, less than \$120M of our budget is discretionary.

We spend the rest on items that we have no control over. The Province tells us how many teachers we have to hire and how much to spend on Special Education. We have to heat our schools, light our classrooms, and run busses to bring students to class. We have collective agreements that we have to honour, and Principals to hire to run our schools.

Finding \$10M out of \$120M that is being put to good use is tough. Finding \$70M (the size of our projected shortfall for next year) out of \$120M is brutal.

Q: Won’t it cost more to close the pools than it will cost to run them?

Closing the pools will save money if the first year.

Those pools that are set to close this summer will be drained and left empty. There will be minor heating and maintenance costs for the moth-balled pools, but much much less than for an operating pool.

Those pools that staff have recommended for closing summer 2009 are in schools where the space is needed to deliver the phys ed curriculum – these will likely be filled in, covered, and converted to gyms. The cost of turning a pool into a gym is equal to the cost of running the pool for about 2 years.

Q: Don't you make a lot of money from renting the pools?

Yes, we charge permit fees, but even in the most used pools, these are much less than the cost of running the pool.

Glenview is a good example of a pool that is heavily used by the community. Roughly 800 people swim in the pool a week – mostly through the North Toronto Aquatic Club programs. But even here, the cost of running the pools is about \$80,000 more than the permit rental fees. At many pools, the gap is well over \$100,000.

Q: Can each community fund its local pool?

My preference is that we find a stable long-term, city-wide funding source for the pools. I am working towards that goal. I am cautiously optimistic that, with a great deal of hard work and community involvement, this will be possible.

However, I also recognize that this may not happen. In this situation I would work with individual communities to help them find ways to fund individual school pools. This might be achieved by the parents in a school or the communities around the school or by the after-school users of the pool or some combination of all three interested groups.

Individual pool funding is clearly not the optimum solution, but it is better than needlessly closing pools.

Q: What sort of corporate sponsorship would you accept?

I haven't given this a great deal of thought yet. I strongly prefer public tax-based funding because it has greater breadth and greater stability. Corporate support will inevitably depend on the financial health of a company and corporate strategy; both profit and strategy can change overnight leaving one or more pools scrambling to replace the funding.

However, I am open to exploring every funding proposal that is out there and bringing it to the Board for consideration.

Q: Why do you think the pools are valuable?

There are a whole host of reasons: improving health, greater safety, life-long fitness, better school and community spirit, enhanced student engagement, increased property values, and richer recreational opportunities for everyone (including seniors). But the following two are perhaps the most important to me:

- Our communities have developed around these pools and they are an integral part of the social fabric of old Toronto. This area isn't blessed with abundant playing fields or state-of-the-art recreational facilities. Each pool bonds its neighbourhood and creates a community hub in the school. Without these pools, the remaining pools in community centres would be swamped by the demand and every group who uses any pool would find access much more difficult.

- It is no coincidence that Jane Jacobs and Richard Florida, the two leading urban thinkers of the past two generations, both chose to live in Toronto. These weren't random choices – they picked Toronto after a careful consideration of the quality of life and the opportunities provided by our city. They both knew that it is the variety and depth of social, educational, and recreational resources and supports that makes a city a wonderful place to live. These pools are a significant part of what makes Toronto attractive to what Professor Florida calls “the creative class” – the group of people who determine a city's economic and cultural future.

Q: What can I, as a concerned citizen, do?

There are three actions that you can take to increase the chances that our pools will remain open:

1/ Hold your elected representatives accountable for the future of the pools, and make sure that your Councillor, your MPP and the Premier, and your Trustee know that the pools are important to you. We all have a part to play in finding a solution.

2/ Stick with it. Remember that this is likely a 6 to 10 month process and stay involved until we find a solution. There are no quick or easy fixes to this problem, and any fix that comes quick will be as likely to fall apart just as quickly. Building a stable long-term solution will take time, and your attention and involvement will be needed throughout.

3/ Work together as a community, and link with other communities. This a community issue and can only be solved with community support.