

Bill 64 won't go forward: Goertzen

By: Kyle Darbyson

Posted: 3:00 AM CDT Thursday, Sep. 2, 2021

On his first day as interim premier, former education minister Kelvin Goertzen announced that five major pieces of legislation will not move forward this fall, including Bill 64 — the Education Modernization Act.

Goertzen made this announcement during a Wednesday afternoon news conference with members of the media, citing the need to set a "clean slate" for whoever becomes the official Progressive Conservative party leader on Oct. 30.



Kelvin Goertzen

"I have no expectation that that bill will ever return in the future," Goertzen said when asked about Bill 64 specifically. "The mechanism by which it is not going forward will be determined through negotiation. But it will not exist after we're done with this fall sitting."

Current Education Minister Cliff Cullen unveiled the finer details of Bill 64 in March, shortly after the province's K-12 education review was finally made public.

The legislation proposed massive changes to Manitoba's education system, including the outright elimination of school boards in favour of a single provincial authority.

Even though the province's 37 school divisions would be merged into 15 regional catchment areas, Cullen made it clear these regions would not exercise any legislative authority.

While Cullen said these changes were being proposed to redirect \$40 million worth of unnecessary administrative costs to the classroom, many educators and school officials saw this bill as a massive government overreach and were concerned that it will eliminate the autonomy of local school divisions.

Brandon School Division board of trustees chairperson Linda Ross was among that group of critics, having taken part in a public protest against Bill 64 on March 31.

Ross told the Sun on Wednesday that she was "thrilled" to hear that the legislation won't be moving forward, especially since she didn't expect the announcement to be made during Goertzen's very first day as interim premier.

"It was a bad bill in so many different ways, and I'm glad to see that the public pressure has been brought to bear," she said. "I think that this is the right thing to do for the public education system."

Ross went on to say Wednesday's announcement served as vindication for the many people who spoke out against Bill 64 throughout the last six months, especially after Cullen characterized this opposition as a "vocal minority."

"And you could see that it wasn't a 'vocal minority' just by the number of lawn signs all over Brandon," she said. "And if you've been in Winnipeg lately, they're all over Winnipeg, too. So clearly there's a lot of public ... support against the bill."

For Ross, a clear turning point in the PC government's attitude toward Bill 64 came after Tuxedo MLA Heather Stefanson entered the party leadership race in August, since she promised to stop the legislation during her announcement speech.

"And when Stefanson made that announcement, initially there were something like 24 of the 30-some cabinet ministers who were in support of her," Ross said. "So that clearly indicated that there was significant movement in the party."

Since then, fellow PC leadership hopeful Shannon Martin, an MLA for McPhillips, has also publicly voiced his opposition to Bill 64.

In terms of what happens now, Goertzen said Cullen will be speaking with reporters sometime today in order to provide more information about the fate of Bill 64 and education reform in general.

If the current PC government decides to conduct a different flavour of education reform sometime in the future, Ross hopes that it follows the findings of the K-12 education review more closely.

"Because the findings that came out of the education review were not what was in Bill 64," she said.

"Of course there are things that could be changed for the better. No question about that. But not the wholesale changes that were being proposed."

Outside of Bill 64, the other pieces of legislation that won't be moving forward under the new PC leadership are as follows: the Labour Relations Amendment Act (Bill 16), the Public Utilities Ratepayer Protection and Regulatory Reform Act (Bill 35), the Manitoba Liquor and Lotteries Corporation Amendment and Liquor, Gaming and Cannabis Control Amendment Act (Bill 40) and the Protection of Critical Infrastructure Act (Bill 57).

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