

# School closures: a planning perspective

**WATERLOO**  
**ENVIRONMENT**

[environment.uwaterloo.ca](http://environment.uwaterloo.ca)

CIP-INFUSE Conference  
July 8, 2013

Mark Seasons PhD, FCIP, RPP

# “Wicked + messy problem”

## Let me begin by noting that:

- There are very few cases where school closures could be considered a positive experience
- School closures are inherently confrontational in nature
- The school closure review process often makes a very difficult situation worse
- Classic “wicked and messy problem” (Rittel and Webber, 1973)

# Schools are community assets

## From an urban planning perspective:

- Schools educate our children; they are also an important part of the community's fabric
- Schools are an essential asset to communities and their host neighbourhood, especially inner city neighbourhoods

# A grim reality

## **School closure is a fact of life in many Canadian communities:**

- Older, smaller schools in the inner city are especially vulnerable
- The impacts of school closure on students, families and neighbourhoods are devastating
- This is a pattern that is all too common in communities across Canada and the United States

# Common challenges

- **School Boards:** face thankless job - tough decisions
- **Task:** meet Ministry objectives and balance books
- **Reality:** enrolment declining in 60/72 Ontario Boards
- **Reasons:** demography, competition with other Boards, evolving delivery technologies, etc.

# Tensions + conflicts

## **Fiscal problem:**

- Ministry of Education budget constrained
- Board allocations affected

## **Policy conflict:**

- Provincial ministries' objectives and policies not coordinated [Education, Infrastructure and MMAH]

# Tensions + conflicts

## Mandate conflict:

**Board** delivers programs, manages schools per Ministry guidelines

- *Schools = real property for Boards*

**City** plans sustainable communities: balances economic, social and environmental factors

- *Schools = community assets*

# Process and governance flaws

- Neo-liberal agenda, new managerialism
- Minimal stakeholder consultation
- Pits neighbourhoods against each other
- Extremely limited consideration of impacts



# Process + governance flaws

- Unilateral decision-making – no appeals
- Boards operate in parallel planning system
- Amalgamated school boards – local representation?
- Trustees – who are they?
- Why do school boards have so much power?



# **WATERLOO** **ENVIRONMENT**

# The PCVS Case

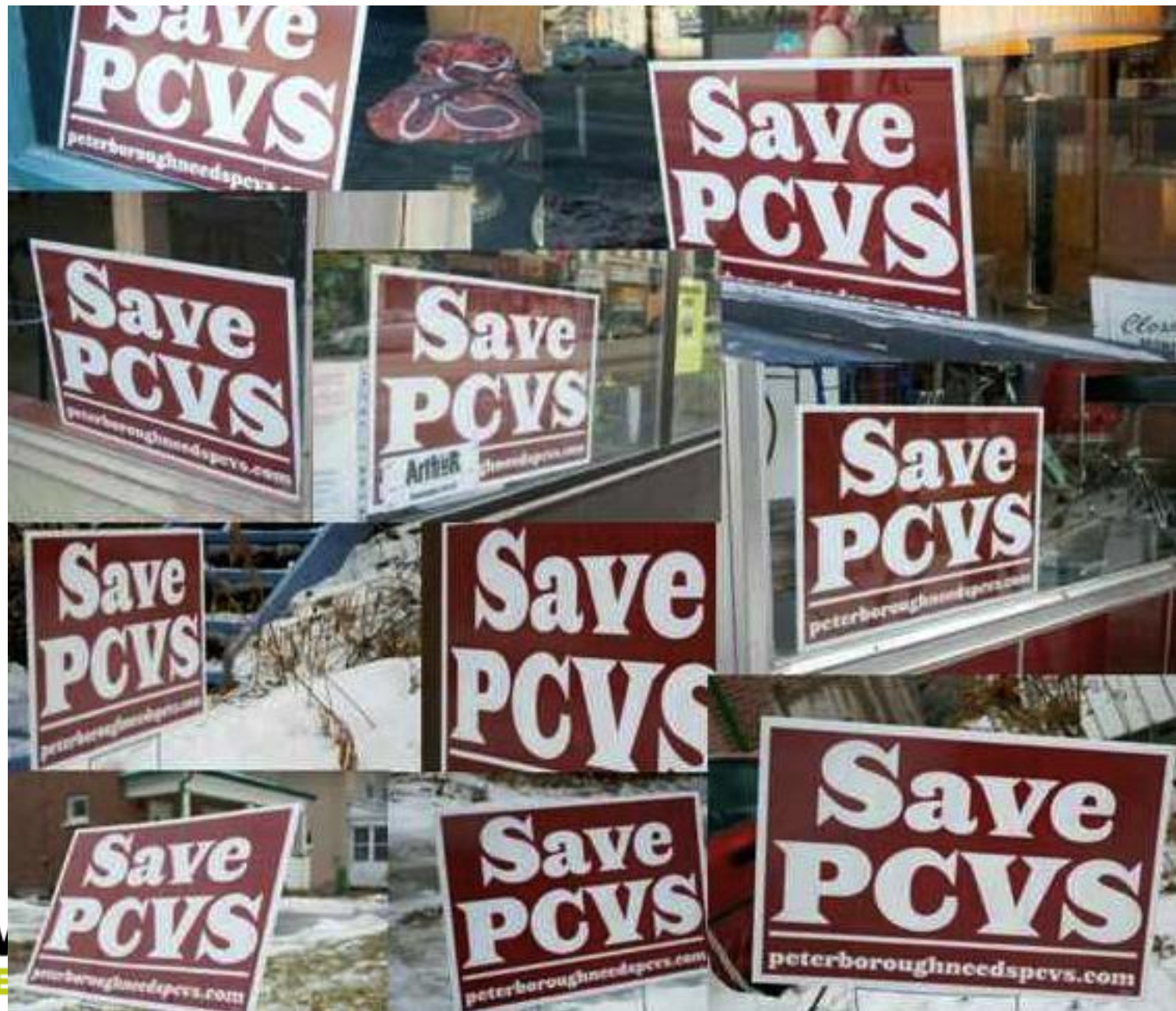
- Peterborough Collegiate + Vocational School
- Established 1827; second oldest in Ontario
- Downtown school – last public school in Core
- 100% capacity
- High-performing academic results
- Inclusive, tolerant culture

# The PCVS Case

- Closed in September 2012
- Reasons:
  - financial, sub-optimal use of other Board high schools (60-70% capacity), program viability
- Intense reaction by community stakeholders
  - Rallies, protests, lobbying, sign campaign, fund-raising
- Legal challenge:
  - Ontario Divisional Court - failed



**WATERLOO**  
**ENVIRONMENT**





**WATERLOO**  
**ENVIRONMENT**

# Impacts on core and inner city

- **School closures in Core Area:**
  - could meet Board objectives, but adversely affect City
- **Downtowns:**
  - highly symbolic and functional roles in mid-size cities
  - delicately balanced; hard work and commitment required



# Impacts on core and inner city

- **Major educational institutions:**
  - considered anchor, catalyst in Downtown
  - full-service secondary school attractive to new residents
  - major contributor to economy [knowledge-based]
  - symbolic + functional roles



**WATERLOO**  
**ENVIRONMENT**

# What needs to be done?

## Change decision-making process to:

- co-ordinate and integrate Board planning with municipal Downtown, Inner City planning
- interpret Ministry of Education policies and guidelines as necessary but not sufficient
- address cost/benefit of closures on local economy, environment and social fabric
- require meaningful consultation

# What needs to be done?

## Learn from urban planning theory + practice since 1960s:

- Planners: almost 50 years experience with complex plans + projects
- Shift *from* efficiency *to* effectiveness + equity as basis for decisions
- Build and maintain relationships
- Ensure inclusive, meaningful consultations

# What needs to be done?

- Acknowledge shortcomings of strongly “rational” decision-making model
- Incorporate elements of transactive planning + collaborative planning
- Use alternative dispute resolution techniques, social/mutual learning
- Enhance transparency + accountability



**Let's find a better way to make these decisions**

# References

Irwin, B. and Seasons, M. (2012). School closure decision-making processes: problems and prospects. *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*, 21(2), 1-23

Rittel, H. and Webber, M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences*, 4, 155-169