



Andrew Rankin photo

NO HOLDS BARRED: Strait regional school board East Antigonish member Frank Machnik reads aloud his motion to "terminate the services of the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre" in all board-governed schools, at Wednesday's monthly meeting. His motion was defeated by a vote of 7-4 but not before tempers flared and harsh words were exchanged.

Disorder in the Boardroom

School board supports controversial Women's Centre in furious debate

By ANDREW RANKIN

PORT HASTINGS --Tempers flared and heated words were exchanged, but at Wednesday's monthly meeting the Strait Regional School Board (SRSB) members decided in favour of keeping the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre in its schools.

By a vote of 7-4, Frank Machnik's motion to "terminate the services of the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre" was defeated in front of a packed audience of more than 20 supporters of the centre.

But that came after more than one hour of rigorous debate in which a motion to table the issue was rejected and the board's vice-chair stormed out of the meeting in frustration shortly after his motions to prevent staff from speaking on the issue, and subsequently to adjourn the meeting, failed.

Currently the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre (AWRC) offers two programs in partnership with the SRSB: the Inspire and The Healthy Relationships for Youth (HRY) programs. Each program involves partnerships with social workers, nurses and specially-trained community-volunteers working with students. The Inspire program is aimed at females and focuses especially on self-care and healthy decision making, while the Healthy Relationship Project, which is in each of the 10 high schools, focuses on Grade 9 students. Senior students are chosen by adult facilitators to be youth facilitators and are trained to help counsel the younger students. The emphasis is on maintaining healthy relationships.

Machnik argued that "at the heart of the matter" employees of the centre were not qualified to counsel teenage students and that the board should use some of its \$80 million budget to hire "certified professionals such as doctors and psychologists" for that purpose.

He also blamed staff for failing to inform members on the progress of the program. He added that last week he was informed only by the media that the Healthy Relationship Project has expanded into each of the board's high schools.

In what was one of a series of interjections, vice-chair Mike Brown voiced his strong support for Machnik.

Continued on page 7

"Now I ask each and every one of you that have to make the decision tonight, how can you be accountable to your people if you don't know what's going on in your schools?"

"It makes me wonder how much is out there that we don't know about."

On June 20, 2007, the AWRC made a presentation to the board regarding the HRY program, in which it advised that each of the SRSB schools would be invited to participate in the project. Superintendent Phonse Gillis said most successful pilot projects develop into the curriculum.

Machnik received passionate support from Brown, who also argued that the board had no policy that limits the amount of access outside groups have to students. He also received firm backing from North Inverness member Brenda Gillis, who said she received complaints by concerned parents about peer mentors acting inappropriately.

"They're speaking together with students on Facebook talking about having tried Marijuana, Ecstasy, living with someone," she said. "Is this the kind of information we want peers talk-

ing to other peers about in the schools?"

South Inverness member Mary-Jess MacDonald was quick to point out that she has received overwhelming response for the program and added that school principals should ultimately decide whether the program is appropriate for their students.

"I have confidence that they are not going to have something in the school that is not addressing the outcomes," she said. "They will do what's in the best interest for the students. If they're not then I think that's where we should be coming in and asking serious questions."

East Guysborough member Rosalee Parker agreed.

"Our mission statement says we support partnerships. I feel it's micromanaging. I feel that any program that puts information in the hands of students so they can make informed decisions is fine with me. I'm strongly against this motion."

When it came time for Machnik to speak on his motion he raised his voice in frustration, claiming again that members were being "fed" misinformation, especially regarding teacher supervision, which has delayed the board dealing with the programs. Board chair Henry Van



ROCK SOLID SUPPORT: Several supporters of the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre attended the Strait Regional School Board monthly meeting last Wednesday in which members voted to keep the centre in its schools.

Berkel warned Machnik to keep his voice down.

Van Berkel said he supported both programs primarily on the grounds that each of the school principals is in support and that the majority of students and parents he has heard from are as well.

African Nova Scotia representative Clarence Reddick's motion to table the matter so that more information on both programs could be gathered was defeated.

Director of programs and student services Jack Beaton presented

the board with a letter of support from Anne Blackwood, Director of English Program Services for the department of Education, which he had received earlier in the day.

Vehemently upset that staff was able to speak while the motion to table the issue was being debated, Brown then motioned to adjourn the meeting, which was seconded by Gillis but failed to pass.