

Oakwood-Vaughan community is dealing with licensed child care shortage ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

It took Melissa Castanheira nearly half a year to find a child care centre that would take her two boys in the Oakwood-Vaughan area and she's one of the lucky ones.

"It was really lucky," the mom of a one- and three-year-old said. "I've been seeing moms that since they were three months pregnant they apply for a spot and the kids are already one and a half and they still don't have a spot. I hear a lot of those stories."

Castanheira, who works as a doula, and her husband started their search for licensed child care when she was eight months pregnant with their second child, Tiago. Every place was full at the time.

The Vaughan Road Infant and Toddler Centre, which is walking distance to her home, opened up a spot for her infant a few months after she gave birth. When Tiago was four months old, a toddler attending Vaughan Road relocated, which opened up a spot for her oldest son, Pedro, so she enrolled both kids. The centre accepts children ages zero to four years old.

She said Vaughan Road was the only centre that accepted infants in her neighbourhood.

"The only other ones that accept babies are really far away," said Castanheira, who relies on transit.

The next closest infant centre would be at Rawlinson Early Learning and Child Care Centre southwest of Oakwood Avenue and Rogers Road, if they had space available.

Castanheira thanks her luck, but now she has a new fear.

Vaughan Road Academy, where her children's daycare is located, will be closing at the end of this school year. The Toronto District School Board has yet to decide whether it will keep the property, leaving the child care centre, with its 41 child spaces, in a state of uncertainty. This is happening in an area where licensed child care is already scarce.

In Ward 15, where Vaughan Road is located, families of 473 children who have been approved for a child care subsidy are still waiting for a spot, according to the City of Toronto's Children's Services. This number doesn't account for children waiting for a full fee spot.

The TDSB trustee for the area Jennifer Arp said she will advocate to keep the property, that way community services such as the daycare and city-run recreation programs could continue, plus the property could be used for a school again when the child population rebounds.

"I know, based on knowing the community, what it needs and what it could potentially need in the future, which is why I would like to keep it as a core holding," she said.

The board will decide whether it will keep or sell the property in 2017. Arp said she has support from her neighbouring trustees to fight to keep it.

Peter Frampton, executive director of the Learning Enrichment Foundation, which operates the Vaughan Road daycare and 28 others predominantly in the former City of York, is passionate about child care.

"There's always a shortage of licensed child care spaces," he said. Across Ontario, there are enough licensed child care spaces for 20 per cent of the population.

"We know there's a massive shortage, especially of infant and toddler care. The province is about to roll out 100,000 new spaces for kids zero to four. That tells us what the shortage is."

The province aims to add 100,000 child care spaces across Ontario over the next five years, which will double the current number.

Frampton said its essential to hang on to any community infrastructure and replacing the existing child care centre could cost millions of

dollars.

“There are younger families moving in. They’re moving out of the condos and into the neighbourhood. It’s one of the last more-affordable neighbourhoods and it’s changing very quickly.”

He anticipates the Oakwood-Vaughan population will boom once the Eglinton LRT is running. He adds it’s important to keep the property for its sports field, its pool and more.

Oakwood-Vaughan isn’t the only community in the city facing a shortage of child care spaces either. According to the City of Toronto’s Licensed Child Care Demand and Affordability Study, presented in October, there are 47,000 licensed spots for children ages zero to five across the city, while the demand is for 51,000. Demand would be higher if subsidies were more readily available. The same study said if child care costs were capped at \$20 per day per child, the demand for spaces for children aged zero to five would rise to nearly 87,000, or 52 per cent of the zero to five population in Toronto.

For parents like Castanheira, potentially having to find replacement accommodations for her younger son is worrisome. Her oldest son will start kindergarten next year.

“I’m just really worried because there are no spots available for a one year old anywhere,” she said.

-reprinted from Inside Toronto

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