

YWCA to open much-needed daycare in Fort Smith ^[1]

Fort Smith could have a brand new daycare as early as January 1, 2019.

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EXCERPTS

Lyda Fuller, executive director of the YWCA in Yellowknife, told Cabin Radio the daycare will be owned and operated by the YWCA.

The final design for the new modular structure will determine the number of childcare spots available, but Fuller hopes the centre will accommodate 24 infants and toddlers.

The daycare will be located at 248 McDougal Road, which has remained a vacant lot since the previous daycare burned down in the early 2000s.

Last fall, the Fort Smith Daycare Society approached the YWCA to request assistance in opening a daycare, armed with years of work including a business plan, a community needs survey, and a list of 30 locations already deemed unfit.

The society, which was established in 2015 to address the lack of childcare options in the community, will remain involved in the project in an advisory capacity.

In the last week, Fort Smith has heard it could lose Aurora College's headquarters if proposals to build a Yellowknife-based polytechnic university are followed – which community members believe would result in significant local job losses.

Asked if the territorial government's final decision regarding that university proposal could change the YWCA's plans, Fuller said she did not see this as something that would impact demand for a daycare.

"There is a real need for childcare in many of the communities and I'm really pleased that we can use our resources and expertise to meet a community need," she said.

'Important to have a choice'

Samantha Stokell, president of the Daycare Society, agrees.

She says there are only two licensed day homes offering approximately 16 spots in Fort Smith right now. But, quoting census data, the society points out its town of 2,500 people contains 385 children aged nine or younger, 170 of whom are four or younger.

"It's pretty much impossible to find childcare right now," said Stokell, "so people are having to have a spouse stay home from work – not necessarily because they want to, but because there is just no other option.

"We feel it's really important for parents to have a choice to stay home or to go to work."

Stokell and other parents of young children have been "patching it together month by month," sharing childcare with friends, bringing children to work with them, and flying grandparents or nannies into town.

"The fact that [the YWCA] is stepping up and investing so much money into this project and into the community is amazing," she said.

The Yellowknife-based non-profit is planning on selling a residential property it owns in the city and putting the proceeds toward the construction of the Fort Smith daycare.

Fuller expects the property to fetch around \$400,000, once minor renovations are completed and the house is put on the market. The YWCA is also hoping to leverage additional federal funding allocated toward expanding childcare spaces.

The Fort Smith daycare will act as a pilot project for the YWCA, with the potential to be replicated in other small communities across the territory in future.

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