

Victoria School District looks to create more space for child care

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Portables and added space in upcoming seismic upgrade could be utilized as child-care space

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EXCERPTS

The Greater Victoria School District is preparing to create new spaces for child care on its property.

The B.C. government announced earlier this month that it will create 22,000 new child-care spaces across the province over the next three years.

Along with private, public, and non-profit providers, the government is also looking to school districts to apply for funding to expand child-care facilities on school grounds.

The Greater Victoria School District already has 1,000 child-care spaces on its properties, mostly for school-age kids, but following the announcement, trustees are looking to create more to help meet the government's target.

"Our board of trustees has been incredibly supportive of child care on our sites and have really empowered our administration to go proactively talk to a number of our providers around the district," said Mark Walsh, secretary treasurer of School District 61.

The province has earmarked \$221 million for the new spaces, and Walsh said the school district is looking at a number of options, including improved portables and adding space to existing or new schools during upcoming seismic upgrades.

The modular "learning studios" would be built on school land, cost roughly \$250,000 to build and offer 20 licensed spots for children aged 0-5 years, according to Walsh.

Each space would be run independently by a provider from the community.

"In the core area of Victoria we're a little bit more challenged with respect to how much land we have. Certainly in Saanich, sites are bigger ... We're pretty optimistic that if we can get the funding together and find a partner that we'll be able to expand, reasonably taking the maximum amount that the ministry would be able to give us," Walsh told On The Island's Gregor Craigie.

The new funding will give boards of education 100 per cent eligibility, up from 90 per cent, for the total cost of any child-care project they launch, up to a maximum of \$500,000, according to the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

The new Oak Bay High School, which officially opens in September, is an example of how this funding can be utilized through school district lands, Walsh said.

The state-of-the-art rebuild received funding for a Neighbourhood Learning Centre from the province, which will be used as an activity space, daycare and after-school care.

Victoria High School has applied for funding to have a learning centre addition built during seismic upgrades.

"When you do look around the school district you do see a lot of lands and ... some creative design work that we could do in order to make [community spaces]."

Walsh predicts that once the district applies for funding and is approved to build modular learning studios, they could begin providing space for licensed childcare by spring 2019.

[To hear the full interview listen to media with audio link provided on the site].

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