

Parents in a panic amid Queensborough's child-care crisis ^[1]

No where is immune from the child-care shortage, but Queensborough is hit especially hard

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EXCERPTS

As the school year approaches, Queensborough parents are worrying that a lack of child care in the neighbourhood could have real consequences for their lives.

Parents are calling the situation a crisis, and it's one that's already caused a strain on life at home for Maria Read. Not finding before- and after-school care for her son, Joshua, could mean holding him back a year.

"We'd be devastated," she said.

The Reads aren't the only ones worried about child care in Queensborough. A June school board meeting included 57 pages of correspondence on the issue between Queensborough parents and staff at city hall and the school district.

"I have been on the waitlist since June 2016! It will be more than three years and we do not have a spot," wrote Thoa Pattison, who said parents could risk their employment without adequate child-care space.

Between dropping her daughter and son off in the morning and picking them up in the afternoon, Pattison said in her letter to the city that she would only be able to stay at work between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m.

"Four hours a day for my full-time management position? Would you still be employed if you were in this situation? I have put in 10 years of postsecondary education to make it to my career goal, and now I need to worry that I can no longer hold a job because there is no child care available," she said.

"It's absurd and absolutely disheartening."

Richmond offers refuge for desperate parents

The dearth of care space has parents looking outside the city. Several parents, including Read, take their children to the Bethany Child Care Centre across the Richmond border in that city's Hamilton neighbourhood.

The latter isn't a long commute for Queensborough residents, but because Bethany is in Richmond, it's unclear if that option will be viable when those children are of school age.

Read has applied to enrol Joshua in Richmond's Hamilton Elementary School – as have at least seven other parents, she says. But the Richmond School District has said it will either take all eight kids or none, and they won't know for sure until Sept. 6.

"So it doesn't really give us hope," Read said.

If she can't get her son into school this year, Read said moving to Richmond isn't off the table, and she isn't the only one. Other parents wrote of either considering moving away themselves or seeing other families moving away.

Neither the Richmond School District nor the Bethany Child Care Centre has responded to requests for comment.

By the numbers, Queensborough hit hardest

It's not hard to see why parents are worried – they need care in a matter of weeks, but waitlists are currently measured in years.

The issue isn't entirely unique to Queensborough, but data from the City of New West's November 2018 child-care assessment show some neighbourhoods are better served than others.

With just 10.9 child care spaces per 100 children aged 0-12, Queensborough has just a quarter of the per-capita child-care space across the bridge in the West End (42.3 spaces per 100), and less than two-fifths of the entire city's space (28.2 spaces per 100). Metro Vancouver, meanwhile, has an average of 18.5 spaces per 100.

The situation in Queensborough has improved over the years – in the October 2008 child-care assessment, the neighbourhood only had

3.8 spaces per 100 children.

The city recently added 25 care spaces for children aged three-to-five at the community centre, the first civic child-care facility in New West. It also covered the cost of renovating a portable for 20 school-age care spaces on Queensborough Middle School grounds.

Transit, the floodplain and zoning all play a role

But why has it been so hard to catch up to the rest of the New West? City planner John Stark says there are several factors that go into it.

Queensborough has been fertile land for new single-detached and townhouse developments, which are exactly the types of housing young families are most likely to settle in. Ironically, however, those developments are also the least conducive to expanding child-care spaces, Stark says.

Without the developers needing to apply for a zoning amendment, the city has few bargaining chips to push for amenities like child care.

The area also lacks “suitably sized” commercial spaces. Similarly, there are few religious facilities, which are already zoned for child care. Operators are also reluctant to locate their service in Queensborough due to too much traffic and too little transit.

Finally, there’s the floodplain. Stark said the lower floors of most older single-family homes are too low to the ground to house family-operated daycare.

That said, there are some solutions in the pipeline – though nothing concrete that would help parents enrolling in the 2019/20 school year.

Long-term solutions in the mix, short-term still uncertain

Between the school district and city, efforts include an expansion of Queen Elizabeth Elementary that could include school-age care, though it’s unclear if or when that could happen; a Furness Street townhouse development will include 12 infant/toddler and 25 three-to-five spaces, allowing the community centre’s three-to-five care to convert to school-age care; and an application for a grant of up to \$3 million from the provincial government for a modular project on Lawrence Street.

But that still doesn’t offer any hope for Read and other parents, who are desperately looking for solutions for the coming school year.

The city, however, is also working on short-term solutions – officials are in talks with the school district, though Stark said he couldn’t get into the details.

The city’s also talking to Aragon Properties to try to lease its Salter Street sales centre at an affordable rate. Stark said he’s also talked to the president of Roma Hall on Ewen Avenue to see if any space there could be utilized.

According to Read, the Bethany Child Care Centre in Richmond has offered to open a space for up to 25 Queensborough children, but that would require bussing.

“It could be just a temporary solution until you find child-care spaces in Queensborough,” Read said.

Stark says the city has looked at that option, but the low end of the costs to charter a bus would be around \$210 per day plus tax.

“It’s not an ideal situation,” Stark said. “You’re talking considerable cost, probably anywhere from \$50,000-plus per year, and that may be on the minimum.”

If the city won’t support that, Read has set up an email address on the chance that someone from the community might help sponsor a bus for students. Anyone who is interested can contact Read at qbbaasc@gmail.com [3].

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