

Child care sector feels the squeeze in Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District ^[1]

There are five children for every licensed child care space in the ACRD

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EXCERPTS

The Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District (ACRD) does not have enough child care spaces.

This was confirmed by the region's Child Care Needs Assessment after months of community engagement, through interviews, an online survey, open houses and focus groups. Three consultants—Marcie DeWitt, Tracy Smyth and Maggie Hodge Kwan—were hired by the ACRD earlier this year to organize and develop a regional child care plan and on Wednesday, Nov. 27, DeWitt and Smyth appeared before the board to present their final report.

Smyth explained that there are two crises going on at the same time in the region. There aren't enough quality child care spaces that are accessible by families, but the child care sector itself doesn't have people to staff those spaces.

The report found that there are five children for every licensed child care space in the ACRD. Target numbers are 50 percent.

"There's just not enough space," said Smyth. "That wasn't really earth-shattering news, we knew that, but it was really nice to confirm it."

Findings didn't vary much between communities, added DeWitt. The top space needs reported by parents were for infants/toddlers and before and after school care.

"That was mirrored in every single one of our communities in the region," she said.

Parents also face challenges in flexibility and availability. Even those who have access to child care could still benefit from additional flexibility and options, based on the amount of children they have and the spaces that are available to them.

Childcare has a "tremendous" economic impact on families, DeWitt said, adding that she heard stories from people who have been forced to leave their community because they could not find child care.

In addition, the Early Childhood Care and Education sector itself is also facing a staffing crisis.

"And just the overwhelming feeling that they're not sufficiently valued, for wages and benefits that are given in that sector," DeWitt said.

DeWitt and Smyth brought a number of recommendations to the board on Wednesday, with the goal of creating more child care spaces and attracting educators to the field.

Child care requires some "major policy interventions," said DeWitt, which must take place federally, provincially and at a local level.

"The child care situation in our communities can't be solved by any one organization, and certainly not just by the local government," she said. "It does require some coordination in order to bring together that multi-sectoral approach to looking at these solutions."

ACRD board chair John Jack emphasized the economic impact that child care has on families. "What it provides is time for parents to do what they need to do to make their household work," he said. "The report does confirm a lot of what I think we already suspected, but...we do need to find a way to coordinate an approach with the province."

The ACRD board requested on Wednesday that the provincial government expedite the \$10 a Day Child Care Plan implementation universally.

ACRD staff will also be investigating and reporting back to the board with options to update or adopt child care supporting policies that have been identified in the report.

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