

To save childcare spaces, London reluctantly picks up where province cut ^[1]

Council wanted to draw a line in the sand, but couldn't with daycare spaces in limbo

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EXCERPTS

As the city's budget discussions got underway, some London councillors talked about the need to draw a line in the sand by refusing to let local taxpayers take on programs left in limbo by provincial cuts.

But when it came to subsidized childcare spaces, councillors — including those most focused on keeping a lid on the tax increase — had to move that line on Friday.

The proposition: Whether or not to step in and pick up almost \$5 million in costs spread over four years for subsidized childcare spaces. The money represents about 20 per cent of a cost-sharing program that provides subsidized daycare spaces for more than 3,100 children in London. Parents qualify for the subsidy after an income test.

Staff told council that not picking up 20 per cent of the program cost would reduce the number of spaces by about 200 children a year.

The program was created by the province, which recently scaled back its funding commitment, leaving London councillors to decide whether or not to dig into city coffers to make up the difference.

Many councillors were angry about facing what some called an "impossible" choice, none more than budget chief Josh Morgan.

Budget chief 'really not happy about this one'

He called it unfair for the province to put the city on the hook to ensure full funding continues for a much-needed program that was created by the province.

"I'm not really happy about this one," said Morgan, almost choking up. "This is one where the provincial government has fled the space and then stuck a municipal council with an impossible decision. It's not a good spot for one government to put another one in."

Phil Squire, a councillor who's vowed to vote on principle against the city picking up provincial costs, said he was conflicted but in the end voted against the city stepping in.

"I think there's a high risk in jumping into this program," he said. "What's going to happen next, are we going to be told as we move forward that our share is going to increase? I just can't acquiesce to that."

Deputy Mayor Jesse Helmer said he felt the city had no choice but to pick up the cost.

"This is a really important program for families that can't afford child care," said Helmer, who added that the childcare subsidy allowed his nephew to attend daycare while the boy's mother went to university.

Council voted 12-2 to pick up the portion of the program the province had cut, with councillors Michael Van Holst and Squire voting against. Coun. Paul Van Meerbergen abstained due to a conflict.

The city's budget discussions continue next week.

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/20/02/save-childcare-spaces-london-reluctantly-picks-where-province-cut> [2] <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/london/to-save-childcare-spaces-london-reluctantly-picks-up-where-province-cut-1.5448025> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7856> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/spaces> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/9019>