

Tunney's Pasture daycare forced to close due to massive rent hike ^[1]

Author: Crawford, Blair

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EXCERPTS

Four years after winning a temporary reprieve from its landlord, the federal government, a non-profit daycare at Tunney's Pasture has been forced to close for good, throwing 21 people out of work and eliminating 67 French-language and bilingual daycare spots.

Garderie Tunney's Daycare shut down on Oct. 15 when various rent reprieves, subsidies and grants that had kept it solvent for the past four years ran out. Faced with soaring costs and a plunging enrolment due to the pandemic, Tunney's board of directors pulled the plug.

"It just became clear to the board that with the enrolment numbers we had, it was just not financially sustainable," said Jeanna Chan, a member of the board whose two sons have attended the daycare.

Garderie Tunney's Daycare's problems began in 2015 when the then-Conservative government began to charge the daycare commercial rates for the space it had been renting in the main Statistics Canada building at 150 Parkdale Ave. since 1988. After vigorous lobbying, the incoming Liberal government agreed to subsidize its rent until March 2019 and the city offered up some of its own funds for the daycare to expand and accept more clients.

But the COVID-19 pandemic caused havoc. Enrolment dropped and Tunney's had to hire more staff, modify the space, step up cleaning and pay for additional personal protective equipment. The federal pandemic rent subsidy kept it afloat until September, but in October the board was told it would have to begin paying its full rent of nearly \$14,000 a month.

The board has been lobbying the federal government and its local MP, Catherine McKenna, for help. It's also been negotiating with Andrew Fleck Children's Services, which operates 13 other child-care facilities in Ottawa.

"Andrew Fleck said they'd be very interested in taking on the space, rehiring staff and maintaining the daycare as a francophone or bilingual daycare," Chan said. "They're fully on board. They're lined up and ready to go. But they've done their homework and a financial analysis, and they've determined that rent at \$14,000 a month is just not sustainable."

Neither McKenna nor Andrew Fleck Children's Services could be reached for comment Monday.

Tunney's troubles are familiar to Olivier Marois. He was president of the board in 2016 when the daycare won its last reprieve. He says it was a mistake for government to think it can charge commercial rent for the space, which really can't be used for anything else. It's not suitable for government office use, and because it's in a federal building and doesn't have its own entrance it can't be used for commercial purposes.

Getting the reprieve in 2016 may have been easier since the Liberal government was new to power, but even now, driving the daycare out of business by charging sky-high rent doesn't make sense, Marois said.

"Six figures in annual rent for a non-profit is completely absurd. Now you have 21 people unemployed. They're low-paying jobs, mostly women, many of them visible minorities. These are people who depended on this work and now they've lost their job in the middle of a pandemic."

Chan hopes the Liberals stand by their promise in last month's throne speech.

"They publicly committed to making child care as a priority and said it was central to the economic recovery of this country," she said.

"In our minds, it's a simple solution. We're not asking them to change any rules. They can bring us back after the existing policies and they can save these 67 spots and 21 jobs."

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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