

The region has a surplus. Did it need to close child-care centres?

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EXCERPTS

If the Region of Waterloo now has a surplus of \$4.4 million, as was reported this week, then why were councillors so quick to stop operating the five child-care centres it owns in Cambridge, Kitchener and Elmira?

It was one of the most puzzling decisions I've ever seen.

By 12 votes to three, the decision was made in December, despite pleas of parents, child-care providers and experts who were concerned about 207 child-care spots and 62 jobs being lost.

Some families still have not found alternative care for their children.

Was this painful move really about cutting costs? Or was it actually a philosophical decision, that the region should get out of the business of running child-care centres, and distribute the funds more equitably among more children?

If the former, it turned out not to be necessary. If the latter, that's a perfectly reasonable principle — but it was bizarre timing to throw so many families and jobs overboard, during a pandemic and the unprecedented crisis it created.

Part of the motivation to close four of the centres this year (the fifth, located at Riverside Public School in Elmira, will be turned over to the school board, which will decide its fate) seemed to be that this move would save \$700,000 a year in local tax dollars.

(Additionally there were savings of \$4.3 million in provincial funds that can now be spent on other child-care programs, but those don't affect the region's bottom line.)

"We thought we were looking at a \$20-million deficit" in 2020, said Tom Galloway, a regional councillor who represents Kitchener.

He, Kitchener Mayor Berry Vrbanovic, and Woolwich Township Mayor Sandy Shantz were the three who had opposed closing the centres.

Galloway said the provincial government later offered major aid for municipalities that were in financial trouble because of the pandemic. Hence the region's surplus. But councillors didn't know the aid would be coming when they were making the decision about the centres.

Each of the three dissenters had a different and praiseworthy reason for voting against closing the centres.

Galloway wanted them to stay because they offered an "aspirational level" of high-quality care and also of remuneration for the workers, which would raise the bar for other child-care centres and employees.

Kitchener Mayor Berry Vrbanovic said he couldn't vote to close the centres in the middle of a pandemic, which would put added pressure particularly on women — both as mothers of children in the centres and as the majority of employees who would lose their jobs.

Woolwich Mayor Sandy Shantz also voted against the closures, saying she wanted to see a clearer plan for how the system would be improved before voting to dismantle existing centres.

Shantz's point is well taken. There was never a clear plan presented to councillors about exactly what was going to be done with the money saved.

Parents were last surveyed in 2018, when affordability of spaces was pinpointed as a major problem. They are being surveyed again so the region can discover what their needs are through what Barbara Cardow, the region's director of children's services, calls a "very current and organic process."

Politics is always about taking from one group to give to another. But if I were taking so much, so painfully, I'd want to know exactly what the corresponding rewards would be.

It's strange that Shantz was the only one who asked about it.

Region: Ontario [3]

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