

Calgary councillor proposing city solutions for affordable child care ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

With a second province on board with the federal government's \$10-a-day child care program, city councillors in Alberta's largest city will take a look at what role it can play to help Calgarians access affordable child care.

On Tuesday, Ward 3 Coun. Jyoti Gondek, along with Ward 7's Druh Farrell and Ward 9's Gian-Carlo Carra, will be presenting a notice of motion titled "increasing accessibility to and safety of affordable child care in Calgary" to the city's priorities and finance committee.

"Speaking with a lot of families over the last year and a half during the pandemic, I think there's a heightened awareness of the importance of child care for either two-income families to be fully able to participate in the labour force, but particularly for women," Gondek told Global News.

If passed by committee and council, it would direct administration to investigate ways for the city to help ensure access to affordable child care, like direct flow-through of federal funds, creating a database of municipally-licensed facilities, reviewing existing bylaws to identify gaps, barriers and costs, and to look how the city could leverage the land use bylaw.

Gondek said the city could look to affordable housing as a comparative model for its work.

"The city does not have jurisdiction over affordable housing, but we do have tools that allow people to provide for affordable housing," she said. "Density bonusing is one of those tools where if you are coming in to do a redevelopment somewhere, that we would allow you to have perhaps an extra storey or extra space in that development if you're able to demonstrate that affordable child care will be something that you will deliver on."

For one child care advocate, the idea of municipal moves toward affordability is "fantastic."

Judy White, director of operations at Thornhill Childcare Society, was especially hopeful of the possibility of federal funds going directly to the city.

"I hope our federal government takes that into consideration, because then it offers choice," White told Global News. "What happens in the rural community is very different from what's needed in a city."

Earlier in July, the press secretary for Rebecca Schulz, the provincial minister of children's services, said Schulz has spoken with her federal counterpart "multiple times since this funding was announced and he has indicated his willingness to work with us and ensure flexibility in any agreement.

"The negotiation process has begun and we look forward to a deal that ensures access to affordable, high-quality child care so parents can get back to work," Becca Polak said in a statement to Global News on July 9.

White said pricing for child care in Calgary currently ranges from \$900 to \$1,200 a month. Infant care can run upwards of \$1,700 a month.

White said child care costs should not rival mortgage payments.

"Right now, if you have two children in care, it's more than a mortgage payment — it's almost like a double mortgage payment and that's just a travesty," she said.

White said provincial subsidies have helped make child care more affordable, but noted that if two parents are both making \$19 or more an hour, that disqualifies them from receiving child care subsidies if they are raising a single child.

"That final ceiling of what someone can access for subsidy is pretty lean," White said. "You're left with what I would call your lower middle-class families unable to access something at all unless they have two or three children in order to get ahead."

New data from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) shows a \$10-a-day national child care plan will mean big savings for Calgary parents.

The CCPA told Global News that, if implemented, the plan could save an average of \$7,800 next year with a 50 per cent reduction in fees and nearly \$13,000 per year by 2026.

White noted that affordability can mean many things, depending on each family's circumstances. But she said the prospect of a federal-provincial agreement would be a big help.

Calgary Mayor Naheed Nenshi said he's heard concerns about the limits of the city's jurisdiction or accepting responsibilities without funding, but said he sees the matter in another light.

"One thing that we learned absolutely during this entire COVID-19 time is the criticality of quality, safe, affordable child care in order to get our workforce working," Nenshi said. "We know this pays for itself because it allows more people, mostly women, to be able to enter the workforce."

"I'm very pleased at the idea of seeing how the city can help create more safe, affordable child care spaces."

Gondek said that the pandemic revealed a societal bias that the burden of child care falls upon women, working or not. She added that some women were able to balance both of those demands during the pandemic.

"Child care is a serious business and you can't expect someone to juggle working and actively participating properly in the labour force and also be managing kids at the same time," the Ward 3 councillor said.

Gondek said there's "tremendous opportunity" in having more women entrepreneurs active in the local economy as the city looks to recover from the pandemic and the oil price shock in 2015.

"I think it's adding that extra diversity of perspective to the business community that will really allow us to have the type of economy that's incredibly inclusive and addressing needs that people haven't discussed in the past. So for me, I'm very interested to see what kind of ideas women are coming in with."

But Gondek pushed back on the idea that licensing of child care at the municipal level would be adding a layer of bureaucracy.

"I don't want to increase red tape," she said. "What I do want to offer families and child care operators is an understanding that, No. 1, the operator is providing strong, safe, quality care and that the family is able to put their child in a safe environment. If we are equating safety to red tape, I think we've got big problems."

Gondek pointed to the recently revamped Responsible Pet Ownership Bylaw.

"We have standards by which people who care for hens must perform. We don't have that for children. Why is it that we can have it for our animals, but we don't have it for our kids?"

Region: Alberta ^[4]

Tags: expansion ^[5]

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