

Overnight child care 'necessary' for parents in Fort McMurray and a new bylaw could make it happen ^[1]

'It's actually a necessity for the fundamentals of our community'

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EXCERPTS

Fort McMurray may be getting overnight child care, and business owners and parents say it could be a good move for the community, which has a high population of shift workers.

The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo approved a public hearing for a bylaw that would amend the land use bylaw related to child care facilities.

Currently, under the definition of Child Care Facilities in the Child Care bylaw, child care centres are not allowed to offer overnight accommodation.

The amended bylaw would mean that licensed day cares would be able to offer overnight care — with some stipulations — including that the child care facility can't be approved in a building with a basement suite, home business or bed and breakfast.

The centre would also have to provide an outdoor play space.

The changes do not impact unlicensed day home operators, which have six children or less and aren't regulated by the municipality.

Provincial legislation was passed in 2021 that allowed 24-hour child care.

"That was a great contribution to the province," said Kyla Penner, CEO of KP Squared Innovative Child Care.

Penner said she's planning to bring a large, multi-faceted day care centre to downtown Fort McMurray set to open in the fall. But she needs the bylaw to pass before the centre opens.

"Overnight child care is crucial for the economic growth in our community," said Penner. "We don't live in a traditional community. We have extended hour workers."

"It is no longer a want or a desire, it's actually a necessity for the fundamentals of our community," said Penner. She said many people relocate to Fort McMurray, and don't have family and friends to help.

There are 45 people on the waitlist for her new business's overnight care program and 150 people looking for extended care to 9:30pm.

Penner has been wanting this legislation and bylaw to be implemented for years.

"I can't even actually begin to explain how much work and red tape [is] associated with moving this bylaw through," said Penner.

Taryn Campbell, midwife and mother, relies on overnight child care to allow her to keep working.

"It would be impossible to return to work without this kind of model," said Campbell.

"I'm often paged in the middle of the night ... with somebody in labour," said Campbell. And if her partner is also working, Campbell needs a place to take her one-year-old daughter.

Thankfully, she was able to get a spot in one of Penner's private day homes, but without that she said she, "Quite literally wouldn't be able to do my job."

She uses the service at least twice a month.

Kyle MacDonnell, a single father, works in sales. Sometimes he needs to work late, but finding someone to watch his young daughter was a struggle.

It took a year and a half before he was able to find a day home that could watch her on the nights when he finished work in the evenings.

"It's necessary to have it up here," said MacDonnell.

MacDonnell said he wouldn't be able to continue living in Fort McMurray without extended care, because he doesn't have family or friends to help him out.

"It's a serious issue when mostly everybody does shift work in the town," said MacDonnell.

He said having 24-hour day care available would allow more people to work.

The public hearing for the bylaw is scheduled for June 28. A timeline on the bylaw getting to council for a vote is not available.

Region: Alberta ^[3]

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