

Time running out for non-profit daycare. '50 spots will disappear' when University of Ottawa demolishes building ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

A 30-year-old non-profit daycare on the campus of the University of Ottawa is living under a cloud.

Garderie Bernadette Child Care Centre, which occupies space on the ground floor of the Brooks building on Thomas More Private near King Edward Avenue, has been warned that it will get six months warning when the building, a former student residence, is torn down.

As for when that will happen, that is unclear. But when the demolition order comes, 50 daycare spaces will disappear, said Coreen Blais, a member of the board and grandmother to two children in the daycare.

The daycare has been unable to find another suitable space in the neighbourhood. For the past three decades, the daycare has had free rent from the university and paid its own utilities. The university says it can't commit to providing another space for a daycare, and efforts to find an affordable nearby spot have come up with nothing.

"There's nothing in the area for us. And if there is, we couldn't afford it," said Blais.

The biggest asset is the 17 staff members, said Florian Leuprecht, another member of the board whose three young children have all attended Garderie Bernadette.

"Some staff members have been there for 10 to 15 years. That trust element is there," he said.

About half of the 50 spaces at Garderie Bernadette are subsidized, said Blais. Priority goes to families who are affiliated with the university community, including staff, students and alumni. Parents of infants pay \$1,890 a month, \$1,400 for toddlers and \$1,170 for preschoolers. There are currently 75 children on the waiting list.

"There is a shortage of spots. It's a constant source of stress and concern. I think it has been a good partnership over 30 years. We just want to be able to provide that service," said Leuprecht.

The daycare has already opted in to be part of a \$10-a-day daycare plan aimed at making it more feasible for families to return to work.

Under the plan, which the province signed with the federal government in March, child-care fees in the province will be cut in half by the end of 2022. There are more cuts to fees planned for the future, bringing Ontario to an average of \$10 a day by September 2025. The province has pledged to create 86,000 licensed spaces, but critics have argued that far more will be needed.

"The \$10-a-day daycare will mean freedom for so many families. We need more spaces, not less," said Blais. "The university has been a good partner for the past 30 years. We want to continue serving the community."

The university has told the daycare it would have six months notice when it decides to demolish the building, but has been adamant that student residences are the priority, and it has no plans to offer another space for a daycare.

The Brooks building, built in 1987, has been closed as a student residence since September 2018 after a campus master plan identified it as one of several buildings that were "either deficient for their intended use, have significant physical issues or prevent more substantial development on their site."

The plan recommended demolishing the buildings rather than renovating them.

Blais and Leuprecht say they want the university to recognize its 30-year relationship with the daycare. Meanwhile, anticipation that they can be notified of demolition at any time makes it hard to make plans for the future at the current location.

"While there is no set date for demolition, we have agreed to the daycare's request to continue to use its current spaces with the commitment that we would give a six-month advance notice of the demolition, unless it is not feasible to do so for safety and security

considerations,” said university spokeswoman Isabelle Mailloux-Pulkinghorn.

“We appreciate the challenges of finding quality daycare. The university is unfortunately unable to commit to providing alternative spaces given the chronic shortage of available space on campus and the strict requirements for licensed daycare facilities. We are committed to exploring solutions for our own community.”

The city of Ottawa’s Children’s Services will continue to do everything possible to support Garderie Bernadette and the continuity of these spaces to provide essential services to families, said Jason Sabourin, director of Children’s Services for the city of Ottawa.

The city has over 44,000 licensed childcare spaces for children under 12. About 8,000 children currently receive subsidies. The application process for licensed providers to opt in or out of \$10-a-day started on July 18 and will run until Sept. 1, said Sabourin. The numbers of how many opted in or out be released after that.

Leuprecht acknowledges that the daycare has known for some time that its days are numbered, but he’s hoping the university reconsiders.

“But it was never clear when the demolition will take place. We still don’t know,” he said.

“When the daycare closes, 50 spots will disappear. Maybe others can fill the gap, but there will be an immediate loss of spaces.”

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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