

Hamilton councillor tries to stop daycare from adding play space

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EXCERPTS:

Members of the City of Hamilton committee of adjustment voted 4-0 (with one abstention) on Thursday to approve a minor variance request that allows for children to play on a grassy area of Catholic school board property at St. Augustine elementary school (located at 25 Alma St.). While childcare spaces are hard to find in many areas of Hamilton, as in the entire province, VanderBeek urged the committee to consider denying the application, or “consider whether (it) goes beyond a minor variance.” She noted that the disputed part of the schoolyard is floodplain zoning.

The area is an open patch of grass on the schoolyard. The daycare centre, which is run by Today’s Family, opened in March 2021 and has 15 toddler spots and 48 preschool spots.

VanderBeek, who is seeking re-election and is so far unopposed, said residents who live near St. Augustine believe the Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board (HWCDSD) did not properly consult with them about the increased, year-round use at St. Augustine.

“Day Care facilities offer early morning, all day and after-school care, along with March Break, Christmas and Summer ‘Camps,’ which far exceed the periods of activity and noise levels in close proximity to the neighbours’ backyard, where they previously had the opportunity to relax in relative peace and quiet while school was not in session,” VanderBeek wrote in a two-page letter. “The regular hours for this Day Care facility are 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. (weekdays) 12 months of the year.

“The neighbours have expressed to me that they feel that the Catholic School Board did not engage with them over the change to the level of use at the school, and did not seek or welcome their input, even though the neighbours felt it would substantially alter their quality of life and had suggestions for mitigation.”

In the application, WEBB Planning Consultant, the agent for HWCDSD, said the variance would “facilitate the use of a portion of the school property to be used as an outdoor play area ancillary to an existing day nursery.” City staff recommended its approval, calling the requested variance “desirable for the appropriate use of the property.”

At least one resident of the surrounding neighbourhood voiced support for daycare continuing to use the area.

“Access to outdoors and natural spaces for discovery, regulation and play is crucial to development, health and well-being of all members of our society including our younger,” wrote Kasey Livingston. “... I sincerely hope that the quality outdoor space continues to be used by the nursery school.”

Child-care desert

Four years ago, a report showed more than two-thirds of Hamilton children under age 12 — about 70 per cent — live in a child-care desert. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives report cross-referenced licensed spaces to the number of children within a postal code.

Ontario was the last province to sign the National Childcare Strategy that intends to create \$10 per day childcare by 2025.

Months before it did, Hamilton councillors even tried to see whether the city could sign on to federal deal without involving the Ontario government. In November, a motion from Ward 1 Coun. Maureen Wilson suggesting exactly that was passed by the emergency and community services meeting.

At that time, Wilson noted that Quebec had a fourfold higher increase in working mothers with children under five than the national average over a 20-year period (1997-2016). Quebec was the first place in Canada to introduce subsidized daycare, in an attempt to keep parents, primarily women, from feeling like working outside the home was unworthwhile due to rising daycare costs.

Wilson noted affordable daycare helps assuage the labour shortages that can affect Canada’s productivity.

“Every percentage increase in women’s participation increases Canada’s GDP (gross domestic product) by \$1.85 billion,” the Ward 1

councillor said at the meeting on Nov. 18.

The Hamilton Catholic board received just over \$5.9 million from the then-Ontario Liberal government in December 2017 to build childcare centres at St. Augustine and other schools. As a matter of fact, the local MPP who was at St. Augustine for the announcement just before Christmas that year was Ted McMeekin — who is now running for Hamilton council in Ward 15.

Like VanderBeek in Ward 13, McMeekin is also thus far the lone nominated candidate.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: outdoor activity ^[4]

child care desert ^[5]

government funding ^[6]

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