

Prefab daycare centres, with workforce housing, proposed by Vancouver councillors ^[1]

Column: "If we had a handle on this kind of thinking 15 years ago, we would not be in as bad a housing crisis, nor school-space crisis and child-care crisis," said Vik Khanna, former chair of the Vancouver District Parent Advisory Council.

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Excerpts

Vancouver councillors are proposing to attack the city's long-running child-care shortage by using prefabricated construction to quickly assemble daycares — with on-site housing for staff — on publicly owned land.

Advocates have called for this in the past. But the two councillors pushing the proposal say it's an idea whose time has come, as Vancouver grapples with an estimated shortfall of almost 15,000 licensed child-care spaces and parents grow increasingly frustrated.

Sharon Gregson, perhaps B.C.'s best-known child-care advocate, calls the proposal "a stroke of brilliance."

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ABC councillors Lisa Dominato and Mike Klassen are introducing a motion next week, that, if approved, would direct city staff to identify public land where new child-care spaces could be built, using prefabricated, modular construction to build as quickly and affordably as possible.

These locations could be on land owned by the city, but the motion also directs staff to work with one of Vancouver's largest property owners: the Vancouver school district.

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The motion envisions finding non-profit organizations to operate the child-care facilities and prioritizing "the most acute shortages of child-care spaces."

One key feature of the motion is the housing. It directs city staff to seek the provincial government and B.C. Housing's financial support for building both child care and "essential workforce housing" on these sites, using prefabricated construction.

As the motion notes, a major hurdle in the expansion of child-care spaces is the inability for facilities to hire enough licensed workers, with almost half of employers losing more staff than they can hire.

While early childhood teachers provide a crucial service in communities, they are not highly paid, which makes it challenging to live in — or even near — an expensive city like Vancouver.

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This idea "potentially represents the biggest one-time increase in the number of child-care spaces in Vancouver's history, or at least in memory," Klassen said.

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There are already examples of school-district-owned properties incorporating child care, like the facility that opened in 2021 on the roof of seismically upgraded Sanford Fleming Elementary. The city has also tried creative solutions on its properties, including one on the roof of a Gastown parking lot.

Vik Khanna, former chair of the Vancouver District Parent Advisory Council, has long been a vocal critic of what he sees as the school

district's poor utilization of its property.

Khanna would not support the idea taking away needed playing fields and green space on school properties to build child-care facilities and housing, he said. But if the school board and city can work together to find ways to make this work — including while it undertakes projects to seismically upgrade dozens of schools in the coming years — then it could be a winner.

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For at least five years, the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of B.C. has advocated the use of modular construction to rapidly add badly needed child-care spaces, said coalition spokesperson and longtime child-care advocate Sharon Gregson.

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Last month, the City of Fernie — with a population of less than 6,500 — announced a provincial pilot project to create 100 child-care space and 27 units of housing for early childhood teachers, using modular construction on city-owned land.

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Although some people might imagine modular, prefabricated buildings look like double-wide trailers or the portable classrooms outside many B.C. schools, Gregson said, “that’s not what we’re talking about here.”

Modular construction has improved dramatically in recent years, and Gregson says she’s seen designs for high-quality, custom modular child-care facilities, calling them “beautiful buildings.”

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