

City boosts subsidized child [CA-ON]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

London's subsidized child care is about to get a big boost. Board of control approved a staff proposal yesterday to provide funding this year and next to add about 100 new spaces for qualified families.

The move comes after Ottawa increased child-care funding to the provinces.

It'll cost the city an estimated \$363,000 next year, with the province adding about \$1.8 million to the annual \$12.7 million already spent on the equivalent of about 1,400 full-day subsidized child-care spaces in London.

The province picks up 80 per cent of the cost of subsidized child care.

"This is big," said Jennifer Kirkham, director of community programs and strategies for the city's community services department.

"Investment in child care and early childhood education has been very limited in the past with many Band-Aid solutions. This is a large amount of money."

She explained that without good, affordable child care, many parents, especially single parents, are forced to stay at home on social assistance.

The new funding includes money to expand facilities.

Kirkham said there is already a shortage of space in London and an additional 287 spaces are needed for children under six by 2006.

The board's approval came with serious reservations about the impact on the city's budget.

The city's share for 2004 amounts to about \$242,000, which staff said will be paid from existing sources, not taxpayers. It will add about \$363,000 to the budget in 2005 and subsequent years.

The recommendation goes to council Tuesday for approval.

Several controllers, particularly Gord Hume, worried what will happen if the federal and provincial funding stopped.

"I don't argue for a second how valuable early childhood education is," Hume said. "But (if federal or provincial funding is cut) we'll be painted as the bad guys, not them -- and there'll be a huge . . . uproar."

Controller Bud Polhill urged the board to look past their concerns to the potential long-term savings of having fewer people on welfare and healthier children.

"If we don't give people child care and early learning now, the impact on us 10 years from now is going to be huge," Polhill warned.

- reprinted from the London Free Press

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