

Whistler's child care 'crisis' deepens [CA-BC]^[1]

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See text below.

EXCERPTS

Parents in Whistler will soon have even fewer child care choices with the Teddy Bear Daycare set to close at the end of May to make way for arts, culture and Olympic Games-related uses.

The closure was discussed in the B.C. Legislature's Question Period this week, with the NDP opposition critic for child care, Vancouver Island MLA Claire Trevena, asking the Minister of State for Child Care, Linda Reid, if the loss of daycare spaces is her Olympic legacy for working families in Whistler.

Whistler Blackcomb (WB) has a contract to operate the Village daycare, located in Millennium Place, until the end of June but has decided to close it one month early. Otto Kamstra, general manager of WB's Ski and Snowboard School, which runs Teddy Bear, said with parents knowing the centre was due to close, they have been reluctant to enrol their children in short-term care.

Though many local families are looking for child care, especially with last week's closure of the Whistler Children's Centre's Spring Creek location, parents are looking for stable, long-term spots for their kids, Kamstra said. Though Teddy Bear's capacity is 16 kids, an average of 12 or 13 are attending and the numbers fluctuate each day, he said.

"We believe that daycare and Teddy Bear is a vital part of our community," he said. "We were only offered a one-year lease on that place... We've tried unsuccessfully to renew it."

WB took over operations of the daycare last July after significant public outcry at the Millennium Place Society's announcement that the centre would be closed to make way for arts and culture uses. Dennis Marriott, general manager of Millennium Place, on Tuesday (March 3) said the building's operating society was only in a position to offer WB a one-year operating contract.

With the municipality set to take over ownership of the building and advising the society the building would likely be "repurposed" for several months around the Games in 2010, an end date of June 2009 was fixed, he said.

It was decided that would be a better time for families to transition and find alternate care than in December 2009, Marriott said. Kamstra said WB officials were seeking a contract term of three years, but were told the space would likely be leased out during the Olympic period.

But Mayor Ken Melamed said while the possibility for Olympic-related uses in the space was a factor in the decision to only offer WB a one-year lease, it wasn't the "overriding factor."

The operating society limited the term because it decided to pursue arts and culture uses in Millennium Place. "Our intention was not to force daycare out in exchange for an opportunity (to rent out) Millennium Place during the Games," Melamed said.

He said Council supports the Millennium Place Society's decision to close the daycare, because the municipality has given the society the task of operating the building.

But Councillor Ralph Forsyth is set to put forward a motion at the March 17 Council meeting asking that Council direct staff to negotiate with a third-party operator to secure a long-term lease for Teddy Bear Daycare.

A similar motion he put forward last May was defeated. Forsyth, who sits on a local child-care working group, said with the Spring Creek daycare closed and now the Teddy Bear in its final few weeks, "We have a crisis on our hands." ...

- reprinted from the Whistler Question

Region: British Columbia^[2]

Tags: spaces^[3]

demand^[4]

availability^[5]

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