

Windsor day care workers to receive layoff notices ^[1]

62 pink slips issued next Tuesday

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EXCERPTS

Sixty-two city employees will receive layoff notices next week after council reaffirmed Monday its decision to close municipally operated daycare centres.

The layoff, one of the biggest in the City of Windsor's history, takes effect in September when all nine municipally operated child care centres in the city and county are closed. Council reaffirmed the controversial decision it had made in February during a 21/2 hour debate Monday night.

"This is going to be extremely difficult," said Jean Fox, president of CUPE Local 543 which represents the 118 employees directly affected by the closure decision.

CAO Helga Reidel said the 62 layoff notices cover regular, full-time early child care education workers. The rest are part-time and temporary workers, a number of whom have already posted for existing vacancies within the city bureaucracy, said Reidel.

Because of seniority rights under the CUPE collective agreement, the layoff notices going out next week are expected to have a "cascading effect" as senior employees bump more junior workers, with that triggering more bumpings elsewhere, a process Mayor Eddie Francis said could take from two to four years.

"The bumping process will be very difficult," said Reidel. The shuffling around will require retraining to make former child care workers eligible to fill in as other openings become available across the city workforce.

"I would not call this situation chaotic," Reidel said.

She estimated that between 20 and 30 of those getting layoff notices next week have enough seniority to be guaranteed employment with the city.

The municipality has already hired two "employee relations assistants" to help in the process, and Reidel said discussions are underway with the school boards and private sector child care operators to accommodate those city employees who wish to continue working with children. One of the factors in city council's decision was the province's decision to begin offering full-day JK and SK at schools starting this fall.

Parents, city ECE workers and public child care advocates spoke out again Monday night and were hoping to get council to reconsider, but after hearing from officials for the private and non-profit daycare sectors, and after receiving new information from administration,

councillors reconfirmed their earlier decision.

City clerk Valerie Critchley advised council that only a reconsideration motion would suffice to change council's position taken in February, requiring a motion by one of the councillors who had earlier voted in favour and then a two-thirds vote. But councillor after councillor spoke out in favour of the closures, and even Coun. Alan Halberstadt joined in by now saying it was the appropriate decision.

Halberstadt, arguing the closures should be phased in, had previously sided with councillors Percy Hatfield and Ken Lewenza Jr. in voting against Windsor leaving the daycare business. But administration said operating fewer centres would make the system even more expensive to operate per child.

The vote in February passed 5-3 with Francis joining councillors Dave Brister, Jo-Anne Gignac, Fulvio Valentinis and Drew Dilkens in favour. As with the earlier debate, councillors Ron Jones and Bill Marra declared conflicts of interest, while Caroline Postma, who also refrained from the earlier discussion and vote, was at a conference and absent Monday.

A staff report earlier this year claimed the city and county would save about \$1 million from the closures, and that the private sector could pick up the slack and at half the cost per child care position.

Parent Shannon Porcellini, a separate school board trustee and city council candidate in this year's election, questioned why the city was willing to "spend my tax dollars" on building a factory for a solar energy company but not on daycares which employ 118 people.

ECE worker Patti Strople said it was "entirely unacceptable" that west enders were not represented at the council table in the debate because both Jones and Postma declared conflicts.

Reidel reiterated that all the city-operated daycares will continue until September. Ronna Warsh, the city's community development and health commissioner, said staff are working with parents to help find alternative accommodations and speaking with private operators to extend operating hours and provide for the continuation of a successful program that sees moms on social assistance get valuable child care training and work experience.

"Soon, we're going to be a municipality without municipal daycare," said Fox.

"These daycares are their only choices and when these daycares close, they'll be without daycare," Lewenza predicts of parents who rely on city-run facilities located along public transit routes in lower-income areas. He gave the most spirited defence against the closures.

When parent Scott Cipkar, representing the Public Child Care Task Force, said it cost him \$37 per day to place his child in the city-operated Amherstburg daycare, Warsh advised council taxpayers make up the difference to the actual cost of that placement which is more than \$100 a day. City treasurer Onorio Colucci said the city operations cost an average of \$88 per child per day while the private sector does the same job for \$33.

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