

Childcare centre may get reprieve, but overall picture is still grim ^[1]

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It was devastating news when Vancouver's YWCA announced four months ago that it would have to close its Citygate child-care centre because it couldn't afford to run it any more.

Now, less than 100 days from the planned closing date, parents and operators are hoping anxiously that an angel has appeared in the form of Vancouver City Savings Credit Union.

"We haven't finalized the details, but we are in discussion to allow the centre to stay open and we sincerely hope that something will work," Vancity CEO Tamara Vrooman said Wednesday. As both the mother of a young child and a banker, she took a personal interest in the centre near her credit union's head office because Vancouver is desperately short of childcare and needs to do everything it can to keep any space open.

For Ms. Vrooman, YWCA CEO Janet Austin and many others, the Citygate centre's near-death experience is just another warning sign about how precarious child care is in this city.

A visitor strolling around Vancouver's newest developments could be forgiven for thinking that child care has achieved Swedish levels of quantity and quality. Tours of the Olympic village routinely show off the child-care space in the community centre that has million-dollar views of the mountains from its second-storey deck, along with picture-perfect toys and furniture. Projects such as Woodward's and the Mount Pleasant Community Centre also feature attractive facilities.

But the bigger picture is grim.

The entire city has only 2,340 licensed group spaces, according to a 2009 city report, for more than 25,000 children under the age of five.

One group with 388 spots spread over daycare centres in downtown Vancouver has a waiting list of about 2,300.

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Mr. Popovic, who has been driving his son to a child-care centre in West Point Grey from his home near Main and Broadway, would like to see something more rational. "They should opt for more modest but equally functional projects where they are better suited to make an impact on a fundamental aspect of livability in our city, which is affordability," he said.

But affordability appears to be moving further away. Child care for toddlers now costs \$1,138 a month in the city sites, while it's \$796 a month for three- to five-year-olds.

Sandra Menzer, director of the Vancouver Society of Children's Centres, which runs 10 downtown sites, said that in her 20 years in the field, awareness of the importance of child care has improved, but the financial challenges have increased. "It's more expensive and the government grants have gotten smaller," she said.

It's that kind of financial squeeze that forced the YWCA to give notice on its Citygate centre, with 25 toddler spaces, back in February. It had rising expenses and smaller grants, along with a high proportion of special-needs children that made Citygate even more expensive than the three other centres it operates.

After 10 years, it had poured \$1-million in subsidies into the centre and was facing a \$120,000 deficit in the coming years.

For parents, the news was the last thing they needed.

"Knowing the daycare is going to close is another stress in my life," said 32-year-old Marcela Sanchez, a former doctor from Mexico who is studying for her master's in health sciences at the University of British Columbia. Her four-year-old had to change daycares the previous year, and she dreaded moving again. "We really need that daycare. It is very hard for him," she said.

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