

Child care issue put off: Region calls for task force^[1]

Author: Criscione, Peter

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EXCERPTS:

Peel Regional councillors voted unanimously today to put off a decision on closing Peel's 12 child care centres so officials can get a true picture of how the closures will affect residents.

Cheers from the approximately 100 residents who packed the council gallery greeted that decision.

A report to council recommended redirecting the \$13.6 million Peel spends on its centres to struggling community-based daycares.

The money would be used to subsidize care for about 1,000 children including youngsters with special needs.

This plan, which effectively moves Peel Region from the role of child care provider to that of service manager, would eliminate more than 800 child care spaces and nearly 300 jobs.

The report proposed a drastic restructuring partly because half the children in Peel child care centres will either start Grade 1 or be eligible for full-day kindergarten in September 2012.

Also, the Region argues there isn't enough funding to provide child care subsidy for all Peel families who need it.

There are 4,000 children on the Region's subsidy waiting list. A family can expect to wait a minimum of 12 months for a fee subsidy.

Redirecting regional funds would help a greater number of children get access to the service.

"This is not about eliminating the service," said Janet Menard, Peel's commissioner of human services. "It's about replacing one provider of the service with another provider of the service."

Peel is home to 445 licensed daycare centres with 25,600 spaces.

The Region commissioned the daycare study a year ago in light of chronic provincial underfunding.

Parents have been vocal in their opposition to the recommendations.

For many residents, the option to shut child care centres by September seems harsh considering the provincial government won't finish rolling out their full-day kindergarten programs until 2014.

They're worried they won't be able find alternate daycare by then.

Parents complained that it took a year to compile the recommendations, but the Region gave the public only a week to consider the information.

Many parents suggested the Region tried to rush the new plan through to prevent them from opposing it.

"To announce on Friday that you plan to abolish an entire service and the doors close in seven months is irresponsible and unethical," said Mississauga resident Lisa Martinez. "You have pulled the rug out from under families and staff. You have blind-sided us."

Angry parents turned up at Regional Council this morning (Thursday) to protest against the recommendations. Several dozen people rallied in front of regional headquarters before heading to the fifth floor for the council meeting.

There wasn't enough space in council chambers to fit everyone who showed up, so the gallery was limited to media and delegates who were speaking.

Those who did not address council crammed into three "overflow" rooms fitted with screens.

It took about five hours to get through the list of more than 60 delegates who asked to address council.

Many made emotional pleas to councillors not to close the centres.

"As a mother and grandmother, I ask you to stop this foolishness," said Edna Toth, a community activist and member of the Peel Poverty Action Group.

The meeting was an emotionally charged affair, with Region Chair Emil Kolb stepping in on a couple of occasions to keep the order.

But the gallery's mood changed once a large number of the councillors talked about delaying a decision.

Councillors called the consultation process "flawed" and "rushed" and felt more information is needed before a decision can be made.

A motion put forward by Mississauga Councillor Pat Saito asked for more time. It passed.

The Region will use the next seven months to conduct consultations with staff, parents and other stakeholders affected by changing the system.

Staff will also try to figure out how the municipality can continue paying for a service that very few children in Peel receive.

It was pointed that most youngsters attend daycare at private facilities.

Peel argues the daily cost to provide care at Peel's Learn.Play.Care. centres is \$83 per child compared to an average of \$40 at other licensed child care programs in Peel.

Once consultations are done, politicians said they will be in a better position to determine whether the Region should continue to be in the daycare business. The matter will come back to council in September.

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