

City loosens childcare regulations ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

The City of North Vancouver is making it easier for childcare businesses to open up in residential neighbourhoods.

After lively debate, council voted 4-3 last Monday night to eliminate a few hoops would-be childcare providers must jump through before going into business.

Existing bylaws require applicants to go through a public consultation process, submit a traffic plan and attend a public meeting in order to be approved for a business licence. Under the new system, a business only has to write a letter to neighbors informing them of their intent as well as hours of operation and peak drop-off and pick-up times. Public consultation will still happen, but it will be a staff-led process.

Council agreed the city is obligated to encourage more childcare capacity, but the question of how much say neighbours should have sparked debate.

For the majority, the need to boost childcare options outweighed increased consultation.

"When we have policies that restrict the ability of people to provide licensed, quality care in our community, we are forcing parents to make decisions to put their children in unlicensed, poor-quality childcare," said Coun. Linda Buchanan.

Complaints about existing daycares are rare, she added.

North Vancouver should accept the minor annoyances that can come with the territory, said Buchanan.

"The reality of children is, they make noise. That's the beauty of having children. I think it's a sad statement we make about the values of our community if we say they shouldn't make noise, they shouldn't be outside playing, or it's a nuisance to have them," she said, noting that among her nearest four neighbours, there are more than 15 children.

The old policy, which was strengthened to add the public consultation requirements in 2009, had a net effect of decreasing the number childcare spaces becoming available, Coun. Craig Keating noted.

"That is a policy that does not work," he said.

The dissenters, Couns. Don Bell, Pam Bookham and Guy Heywood argued that the city requires broad consultation for even minor neighbourhood changes, and daycares, which can bring noise and traffic, should be no exception.

"I continue to believe that when you introduce a new use into a neighbourhood, that it's important that you do so in a neighbourly way," Bookham said, noting that getting feedback from neighbours is not an onerous process.

The city ought to be using different tools, like density bonusing on large developments, to encourage more childcare, Heywood argued.

"To go back to a place where we are going to allow for the creation of businesses in residential neighbourhoods without having the business licence process and community review and input, I'm opposed to," he said.

Breaking the tie vote, Mayor Darrell Mussatto said daycares face necessary but stringent regulations from the province, making it difficult for them to succeed.

"It makes it very difficult for them to make a go of it financially, and so consequently, our society has a real need for daycares. Anything we can do as a city in any way possible to encourages those . . . is what we need to do," he said.

Speaking to council before the vote, Sara Southerland, an advocate for the North Shore Community Resource Society, urged the city to follow through.

"It makes sense to have children in neighbourhoods. Most homes can be adapted to accommodate group childcare," she said, noting that the alternative is commercial space not designed with kids in mind. "Our children being cared for in warehouses and basements with outdoor play spaces in parking lots and rooftops."

According to NSCRS stats, children aged four and under outnumber licensed childcare spaces in North Vancouver by a margin of three to one.

-reprinted from North Shore News

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[3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/legislation-and-regulation> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/regulated-family-child-care>