

Council votes to close daycare (update) ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Union leaders talked about getting a court injunction, after Kenora council voted to close the Castle of Learning Daycare Monday. During deputations, Ray Lindquist from the Canadian Union of Public Employees said the city had broken the terms of their collective bargaining agreement.

He said they didn't provide written notice of their decision 60 days in advance, nor had they provided an explanation or reason for the layoff of 17 staff members. He also didn't understand the financial arguments provided by council, when they talked about a deficit at the city-run operation.

As a resident of Kenora he pressed the councillors for more information to back their decision.

"Why would you want to end this and allow somebody else to determine what quality of care you get?" he asked.

"There's labour laws and what they've done is basically sold out program. So there'll be successor rights issues," she said.

"Bottom line is that council has admitted that they've been doing this behind closed doors, selling off our public sector. We do have the ability to apply for a court injunction to stop the closure, as council has not provided us the proper information. They are legally governed... Just because they've been elected, doesn't mean they get to do what they want," she said.

"We already have our legal team ready to file the court injunction this week, and that will proceed," she added.

"We worked damn hard in 2003. We shed all these tears that are being shed. Look at the program. The program is successful," she said.

Supporters again packed council chambers for the deputations and debate. This time two members of council supported their arguments. Councillors Sharon Smith and Rory McMillan sponsored a motion to defer the decision, but it was defeated. They were the only ones to vote in favour of it.

In her deputation, Erika Olson recalled how she was a single parent trying to re-enter the workforce, after the birth of her daughter. She was having trouble juggling parenting and part-time work and taking care of her infant daughter, so she was considering applying for Ontario Works.

Fortunately, she said the spot at Castle of Learning came up just in time. She was able to accept a position as executive director of Women's Place Kenora, where she helped more women get back into the workforce.

Olson added she was also able to give back to the community by helping to secure a \$3 million grant for affordable housing units in Kenora. She noted this would've been very difficult, if not impossible, without the daycare she received at Castle of Learning.

"I don't want us to be splashed all over the national media as a family-unfriendly city," she said, adding she would be upset if council decided to close the daycare.

Coun. Sharon Smith, who also sits on the development commission, said childcare was an important issue for businesses and workers considering to relocate to Kenora. After the motion passed, she was beside herself.

"A lot of what we've been looking at has been torn into fiction," she said of the financial arguments.

"If you believe in local government for local people, this is not the way to go," she stated.

Coun. Charito Drinkwalter read a press release explaining their decision. She said they'd received assurances both school boards -- Keewatin-Patricia and Kenora Catholic -- had provided them with assurances the service would continue in January, after the Castle of Learning was closed at the end of the year.

Coun. Rod McKay added he wouldn't be voting in favour of the motion, if he didn't feel the spaces closed at the Castle of Learning would be re-opened with a new provider in the New Year.

"I just want to assure you we did think long and hard about this," he said, adding his grandson was in the situation where the family was looking for child care.

Mayor Dave Canfield agreed.

"I honestly and firmly believe that this is the right decision," he said, emphasizing the assurances from the school boards.

"I'm not going to doubt anybody's ability to deliver the service," he said. "There is going to be massive changes in the province in service delivery, and there has to be."

He again referred to the situation facing the homeless, where he said they've approached 20 different agencies with regard to taking responsibility for the situation, but due to duplication nobody would take the lead.

Through streamlining and deferring to the Ministry of Education, the mayor hoped the service would be more sustainable for the future, rather than continuing to burden the local taxpayer by asking them to pay for something that was a provincial responsibility.

Roughly 200 families are affected by the decision to close the Castle of Learning, which is twinned with King George VI elementary school, as part of the Best Start program under the Kenora District Services Board. For many years now, the city has been working with the services board, trustees at the school board and Queen's Park, in order to restructure early childhood education, daycare and kindergarten. This has included the move to full-day, everyday kindergarten.

-reprinted from Kenora Online

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