

Peel Region daycares on the chopping block in Thursday vote ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Peel Region council will vote Thursday on closing its 12 daycares and using about \$12 million saved to subsidize more children in less-costly non-profit and commercial centres.

It is the second time this year the council will be asked to close region-run daycares that serve about 760 children in Mississauga and Brampton.

Last January, more than 300 parents and child-care advocates jammed council chambers, urging councillors to reject a staff report calling for the region to get out of daycare operation and focus exclusively on managing Peel's 25,700-space licensed system.

Council balked and struck a task force to study the issue. But last month the task force of nine councillors and the regional chair came to the same conclusion as the staff report. Instead of closing the public daycares immediately, however, the latest report proposes phasing them out over two years, to coincide with the full implementation of all-day kindergarten in 2014.

Parents are still vowing to fight.

"Families need these centres," said Agnieszka Czajkowski, whose 3-year-old daughter and 5-year-old son attend the Ridgeway Child Care Centre in Mississauga.

"Even though my children will be in school when (the daycares) close, what about other families? It is expensive to live in the city. Parents need to work. And children need high-quality care," she said after a strategy session with about two dozen parents at Mississauga Central Library last week.

The task force report says phasing out the centres will give families time to adjust and allow staff to find other jobs. The two-year transition would also give the region time to find non-profit or commercial operators to take over the centres, the report said.

Money saved by closing the centres would help pay for 580 new subsidized spots, boost care for children with special needs and improve quality in the rest of the system by increasing wage subsidies for staff, the report adds. About 4,000 children are waiting for daycare subsidies.

But Councillor Bonnie Crombie, whose Lancaster Malton ward includes two centres slated to close, said she worries the spaces will be lost forever.

"It's fine to argue we should use the money to serve more kids," she said. "But what's the point if you don't have any capacity - you have nowhere to put the kids?"

In the run-up to this week's council vote, parents have been putting up lawn signs, signing petitions and flooding councillors' email accounts with pleas to save the daycares.

"The message is that councillors who vote to close Peel child care centres are going to feel it in the ballot box in the next (municipal) election," said Andrea Calver, of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care. "This might be the most important vote they cast this term, because so many people are watching."

The centres represent 11 per cent of child care for toddlers and preschoolers in Peel, Calver added. "Without them, there is a huge hole in service to families,"

If Peel votes to close all its centres, it would be the third municipality in the province to get out of childcare operation in recent years. Windsor closed its nine municipally run centres in 2010 and Kenora voted to close its only centre this summer.

"This just sends a terrible message to other municipalities and puts other high-quality centres at risk," said Carrie-Lynn Poole-Cotman, of CUPE, which represents child care workers in many municipal and community-based centres.

Thirty years ago, 21 per cent of full-day child-care spaces in Ontario were run by municipalities, said Martha Friendly, of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit. By 2010, before the latest round of closings, the percentage had dropped to just 6 per cent, she said.

"Rather than just letting this happen because there's no provincial plan, limited policy and too little public funding, it seems to me that there's a real role here for the provincial government to step in and work with Peel Region to keep these excellent centres open," Friendly

said. "This would surely be in the best interests of children and families."

Despite this trend, Toronto still operates 53 centres, while Ottawa runs 15.

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Ontario ^[2]

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