

Peel votes to close daycare centres ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Peel Region Council voted today to close its 12 daycares and use the savings to subsidize more children in less-costly commercial centres.

"I am very disappointed, but I must admit I was expecting the result," said Mississauga resident Maria-Lucia Castillo, following the 16-5 vote. "It seemed to me from the beginning (Council) was biased toward closing the daycare centres. I never felt there was a true intention to look at options for keeping the centres open."

After five months of meetings, the Peel Task Force on Child Care presented its final recommendations to councillors on the future of daycare delivery in Peel, including a proposal to phase out municipally-run centres by 2014.

The decision saves the Region \$12.7 million - money that will be redirected to help more families pay for spots in non-profit and private centres.

That would allow more children to receive a daycare subsidy and increase support for youngsters with special needs.

About 4,000 children are waiting for daycare subsidies.

"This particular responsibility that Council gave to us to look at the overall system and come back with recommendations was one that we took seriously," said task force chair and Brampton regional councillor Gael Miles. "No one likes to see a service withdrawn, especially one that impacts children. But at the end of the day, when all the facts were before us, we didn't feel that we had a lot of options. The only way that we would be able to strengthen the system, strengthen child care in Peel was really to take those resources and put them into the system as a whole."

Last January, politicians decided to form a task force and engage in further consultations after a staff recommendation to close Peel's child care centres upset residents.

Residents reacted angrily to the recommendation, arguing Peel could have done a better job reaching out to the public.

Politicians opted to hold off on a vote until they'd had further discussions with stakeholders.

Since April, the group, comprised of nine councillors and the regional chair, has heard from parents, various experts as well as daycare operators in a bid to determine whether Peel should continue on as both service provider and service manager.

The task force concluded that Peel could serve more families as a service manager.

Most councillors agreed.

"I can tell you that I am concerned that we are supporting an elitist group and neglecting 97 per cent of the people who need daycare and need subsidy," said Mayor Hazel McCallion, prior to the vote. McCallion had to leave the meeting and wasn't there for the discussion, but made sure to weigh in on the issue before departing.

"We must look at the social needs of all the people," she added.

Peel-run centres will be phased out by September 2014 to coincide with the full implementation of Ontario's full-day kindergarten initiative.

Phasing out the centres will give families time to adjust and allow staff to find other jobs.

The Region's withdrawal from direct delivery of child care affects 126 regular and 117 casual and contract staff.

The two-year transition would also give the Region time to find non-profit or commercial operators to take over the centres, according to the task force report.

Money saved by closing the centres would help pay for 580 new subsidized spots, as well as boost care for children with special needs and improve quality in the rest of the system by increasing wage subsidies for staff.

The report says every \$1 million the Region reallocates could provide either 100 new child care subsidies, an additional wage subsidy of \$3,925 for 255 employees or support 130 to 150 children with special needs.

But many parents who rely on the service aren't happy with the outcome. Many felt Council was simply humouring parents when it decided to form the task force.

Councillors heard from 15 delegates speaking against the proposal to close the centres.

"From the start, the Region has wanted to get out of the business of direct service delivery and they just needed to buy some time to convince all of the councillors, for parents to cool down and dismantle momentum," Castillo said.

Andrea Calver, coordinator of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, called the decision "unnecessary."

"The vote is very disappointing because the closure of the centres is unnecessary. They can be a part of a child care system in Peel that really serves the needs of all families and children."

Related link: Letter to the editor: Childcare decision made no sense ^[2]

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