

# Daycare cuts deferred once again by Thunder Bay council <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS:

Thunder Bay city councillors still want more information before deciding on the future of an after-hours child care program at the Grace Remus Centre.

City administration recommends ending the program to save the city more than \$90,000. The program provides care for children until 2 a.m. to accommodate parents who work late nights.

City staff said the program is underutilized, and has about 15 children in its care each day.

Coun. Mark Bentz said he wants assurance those families would have alternate arrangements.

"I haven't been assured of that here. In order to cut this service, especially if it involves young, vulnerable children, we have to be very careful here."

Councillors already deferred a decision on the program's future last month, in part because they wanted more information on the subject. 'Not that successful'

Administration reported no direct funding will come from the province through the District Social Services Administration Board to support the program. That funding was provided in the past.

City staff recommended gradually reducing the program hours and finally terminating it at the end of June.

The estimated savings to the city by cutting the program would be \$50,000 this year and \$92,000 in future annual savings.

Coun. Brian McKinnon said his colleagues shouldn't stay too attached to the program.

"This was a pilot project, in 2009. How long do you carry on a pilot project? It seems to me it's not that successful, by numbers."

Before making any final decision on the matter, council directed city staff to make sure each family will have other plans.

Administration expects to have its answers next month.

Getting out of the daycare business?

Councillors also want administration to pursue ways to cut the cost of running the four city-run daycares.

City staff said enrolment at the centres is decreasing, and the city is losing money.

Council unanimously supported the review.

But Coun. Andrew Foulds said that shouldn't mean shuttering city-run daycares.

"I don't want this to be perceived that I'm interested in ... closing our child care, because that's not what I'm interested in," he said.

"But I am interested in moving forward in a progressive way and providing quality child care those people who need it."

Administration reported the city-run daycare program cost \$677,200 in 2013, and predicted it would increase to \$774,000 in 2014.

The city operates four licenced daycares - Algoma, Grace Remus, Ogden and Woodcrest Child Care Centres.

'Not a good plan'

Coun. Rebecca Johnson wondered whether the city should be in the daycare business at all.

"One of the options would be to close the child care centres that we [the city] currently have," she said.

"This will be a budget item, and I will be proposing an amendment that we remove this cost from the budget."

Johnson added that doesn't mean the city-run centres should close right away.

"I don't believe that tomorrow we should close them all and put everybody out on the street. That's not a good plan. So we have to have a transition from our system to another system."

Mayor Keith Hobbs said the city should get out of the daycare business eventually - but not now.

"I've been bombarded with families sending me emails - single mothers especially - that they can't find daycare now."

City staff said full-day kindergarten and more private-sector daycares are reducing enrollment at the city-run facilities.

Recommendations from city staff on the matter aren't expected until September.

-reprinted from CBC News

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