

Edmonton's downtown needs more daycares ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Edmonton's downtown is in serious need of daycare sites -- and thanks to a motion at Wednesday's executive committee meeting, baby steps to finding them are being taken.

"People are moving to the core for a walkable lifestyle and then having to drive their child 15 minutes away for a daycare centre," said Coun. Scott McKeen.

He brought up the idea of incentives for developers to include space for child care operations at affordable rates in the downtown core.

"It's about creating a fully-formed neighbourhood downtown," McKeen said.

According to Heather Ratsoy, the move couldn't be made soon enough.

Ratsoy owns All About Kids, a downtown daycare at 100 Avenue and 101 Street, where she said she often gets between 20 to 25 calls a day asking for one of her 59 daycare spots.

"It's disastrous," she said, adding her waiting list is full until 2016 and presently has 400 people on it.

She has looked into expanding within the building she is in, but regulations meant she would need more outdoor space than she has.

"If I expanded and had capacity for 100 children, tomorrow I would have 100 children," Ratsoy explained.

With that kind of demand, some wondered why more facilities don't open up.

"If there's a demand for daycares, the market will drive it," said Coun. Ed Gibbons. "Why are we sticking our noses into something that's not part of our business? The market will drive this stuff."

He called city moves to increase downtown daycare "social engineering," adding he wouldn't vote against the principle of increased daycare but would prefer it to be left to market dynamics.

Ratsoy said she charges anywhere between \$950 a month for pre-schoolers to \$1,115 a month for infants and could likely charge more but wants to keep it accessible for families because of the social good it provides.

They get provincial funding to help with staffing but between the cost of meals and snacks, rent and taxes, she said the profits are slim and pay for staff is less than it should be.

McKeen argued that downtown daycares would drive more families and businesses to move there, further spurring the local economy.

Mayor Don Iveson wasn't sure exactly how the city could be involved, but said other kinds of incentives have been used in past for developers.

"Traditionally what we've asked for (from developers) are things like public art or things like that," said Iveson. "But in this case I think what might be more valuable to the neighbourhood than a sculpture is a bay in the main floor that has people coming and going, that has kids in it, and ensures that there is reasonably affordable childcare for people in the neighbourhood."

Staff have been asked to provide a report on downtown childcare including the market interest and existing barriers to opening new facilities as well as possible incentives to overcome those barriers. It is expected back in October.

-reprinted from the Edmonton Sun

Region: Alberta ^[2]

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