

High-quality daycare closing as free lease ends ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

More than 40 Toronto families are scrambling to find daycare after a long-standing non-profit centre in the city's financial district is being forced to close.

The 72-space Scotia Plaza Child Care Centre on King St. W. has been operated by George Brown College since 1989. Under an agreement between the city and the building's developer, the bank tower was allowed extra density in exchange for free child care space for 25 years.

But now that the time is up, the building's property manager, Dream Unlimited Corp., wants to rent the space to a for-profit child care chain. The college has until the end of November to move out.

With daycare waiting lists running between a year and 18 months, parents are crying foul.

"This is a big mess for all the families involved, as well as the amazing daycare staff, all of whom are soldiering on amid a great deal of uncertainty," said parent Ian Cooper, who has two daughters at the centre.

The college's non-profit teaching centre routinely gets top grades from city inspectors and also provides subsidized spots for about 30 per cent of the families. For-profit centres aren't eligible for city daycare subsidies and research shows commercial operations tend to provide lower quality care. For that reason, many parents are leery of the for-profit operator. Others simply can't afford it without a subsidy, said Cooper, 40, an entertainment and technology lawyer.

"In an ideal world, we would love to see our daycare remain open because it is such an incredible place and it has been there for so long," said Cooper, whose daughters are age 4 and 18 months. "But I am a realist. I 'get' that the property manager needs to make money. We just want parents to have a choice and to have the time to find the care they need."

The college, which has been negotiating with the property manager for about a year, had hoped Dreams Unlimited would see the value of continuing a free or below-market lease for the daycare as a benefit to tenants and other downtown working parents, said Patricia Chorney Rubin, director of the early childhood development faculty.

When that didn't pan out, the college believed it would get a year's grace on its lease to help families find alternatives, said Chorney.

"We were shocked when we learned recently that we had to be out by the end of November," she said. In addition to the Scotia Plaza site her faculty also runs eight other child care centres in the city where students also train to become early childhood educators.

Area Councillor Pam McConnell [Pam McConnell's poliscard] (Ward 28, Toronto Centre-Rosedale) said news of the daycare closing "was quite a surprise."

"I'm hoping we can facilitate a discussion with the property manager," she said in an interview. "City staff will also be supporting the families and making sure the daycare has a longer transition time."

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Region: Ontario ^[3]

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