

Olivia Chow's 'think of the children' is nothing to kid about ^[1]

Opinion

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EXCERPTS

"Won't someone please think of the children?"

It's a plea so often nonsensically deployed in political arguments - about national security, censorship, technology, electronic dance music parties, or any other topic where a distraction from actual logic is needed - that it has almost become an automatic punchline.

Olivia Chow has already drawn some mockery in this mayoral campaign for making "children at the heart of the city" one of the major themes of her platform.

It's suggested often enough that it is Chow's version of the late Jack Layton's "working families" or Rob Ford (open Rob Ford's policard)'s "taxpayers" or Justin Trudeau's "middle class" - a generic, meaningless phrase meant to conjure happy thoughts. I've even heard from Chow supporters who are childless that they feel left out when she talks about it.

Sure enough, there came a moment in a debate last week when she provided hilarious fodder for radio recaps, pleading over the arguments of her shouting opponents, "Can we get back to talking about the children?" Drink!

So, there she was again Tuesday, standing outside a daycare centre, issuing an announcement about a new policy proposal: "When a city puts children at its heart, it works better for everyone." Cue the laugh track.

But here's the thing: it is funny because it is true. In both the generalities and the specifics, Chow is right, and she's the only major candidate for mayor addressing an issue of pressing importance not just for children and their parents, but everyone else who lives in the city.

The specific promise Tuesday was to invest in childcare - \$15 million in money to build and expand facilities, \$20 million in ongoing operating funds. Together she says these would create 3,000 new childcare spaces, half of them subsidized.

In a city where a dramatic shortage of care spots available is a crisis that limits the earning power and quality of life of hundreds of thousands of residents, this fills a need. When the waiting list for subsidized spots is 20,000 kids long, a proposal to increase the number of spots almost 8 per cent is better than doing nothing. Nothing is the sum total of what the other candidates have put in their platforms so far.

The new promise dovetails with Olivia Chow's other modest but concrete kid-centric proposals to expand after-school recreational programs and school nutrition programs, and with her general focus on children in her approach to the waterfront, affordable housing and community safety.

There's a good reason parents and non-parents alike should appreciate that focus. City planners are fond of saying that children are the "indicator species" of a healthy neighbourhood (I've heard it most frequently from Brent Toderian, the former chief planner of Vancouver).

Which is to say that a city that is a great place to raise children is also just a great city, period.

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Read online at the Toronto Star ^[2]

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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