

Ottawa Votes: Candidates pushing to make child care an election issue ^[1]

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Source: Ottawa Citizen ^[2]

Format: Article

Publication Date: 3 Oct 2014

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EXCERPTS

Olivia Chow made waves last week when she pledged to put "children and families at the heart of our city."

A distant third in the race to be Toronto's next mayor, the former NDP MP pledged to spend \$15 million to renovate and build new facilities in order to create 3,000 more child-care spaces, including 1,500 for lower-income families.

She also pledged to forge stronger partnerships with school boards, which, since the 2010 introduction of full-day kindergarten, now find themselves in the child-care business.

It's the kind of talk some candidates and child-care advocates wish they were hearing more of in Ottawa.

A coalition of a dozen child-care organizations says city council has taken a "very narrow" view of its role as the overseer of early learning and child care, focusing mainly on how it manages costs and fee subsidies.

The city has also failed to take a leadership role in planning for licensed care options and consulting with stakeholders to help them transform and modernize child care in the city to the benefit of all families, the coalition says.

"While the Province of Ontario has stepped up for children and families, our city has stepped down," the coalition says in a recent paper prepared for municipal and school board candidates.

Bay ward candidate Alex Cullen agrees the city has dropped the ball.

"We're seeing an absolute lack of leadership," he said.

Cullen was the ward's councillor until he lost to Mark Taylor in 2010. The two are set for a rematch on Oct. 27 and, given Taylor's role as the chair of the community and protective services committee, which oversees child care, Cullen's critiques of the city are particularly sharp.

According to him, the city didn't consult with school boards when it drew up the 2014 Child Care Service Plan and has failed to grasp the blow full-day kindergarten had on the sector.

The city has also closed one of its 13 municipal child-care centres. This at a time when only about a quarter of families in Ottawa can secure a licensed space in a child-care centre.

Taylor, however, says that without a universal child-care program the city is left to work with parents, experts and providers to modernize the system in Ottawa. "Parents and families are the focus of these changes - ones we are making with the support of our many excellent early childhood educators across the city," he said.

Jim Watson, who is seeking re-election as mayor, also said he disagreed with suggestions the city has dropped the ball. "I think we still have a leadership role," he said.

Watson added that he believes funding child care should ultimately be the responsibility of the province, not municipalities.

It's not like the city doesn't have the money, though.

Ottawa is currently sitting on \$13.4 million in two different reserve funds dedicated to child care - \$9.6 million in a fund collected from tax dollars and \$3.8 million in a fund collected from development charges.

Advocates were furious earlier this year when they learned about the unspent development charges reserve, particularly because it came to light only after the city decided to stop collecting it.

The money can only be spent on child-care centres owned or operated by the city, but because no such venture is on the horizon, the city decided to pause any further collection.

At the time, the city said it was "clarifying the rules under the Development Charges Act with the Ontario government to ensure there will be an appropriate use of the funds."

There has been no update since, but city officials said last week both reserves will be the subject of reports to council in 2015. Council also moved to reintroduce the child care-specific development charge.

Marc Aubin, a candidate in the Rideau-Vanier ward, has called on the city to immediately invest the reserve funds in the not-for-profit child-care sector, which continues to struggle following the introduction of full-day kindergarten.

"It just seems a little bit unfair to not continue to meet some of the needs," he said.

Catherine Fortin LeFaivre, another Rideau-Vanier candidate, agreed. "They should be invested immediately ... parents can't wait," she said.

With thousands of children waiting for a licensed spot, Fortin LeFaivre said the city should use the money to help not-for-profit centres renovate their facilities so they can accommodate more babies and toddlers.

Child care hasn't received nearly as much attention during this campaign as transit, trash and condo towers.

While those issues are pressing, it's worth remembering the city spends about \$98 million annually on child care.

The Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care's "I depend on child care" campaign has barely made a dent here, where, so far, only a dozen council and school board candidates have signed the online pledge.

Part of the reason could be that candidates are inundated with such requests and don't have time - or make time - to respond to them all.

But most people don't necessarily think of child care as a municipal service and many, particularly parents, often have a difficult time wrapping their heads around how it all works, says Thomas McVeigh, a Somerset ward candidate.

McVeigh and his wife got lost in the city's bureaucratic maze, and eventually went with a private, unlicensed provider. "We just gave up on the city's process," he said.

He'd like the city to do a better job of walking people through the steps and make the city's new centralized waiting list more user-friendly.

Rideau-Rockcliffe candidate Tobi Nussbaum has called for the same.

But other recent changes have added further complications.

Earlier this year, the city cancelled the child-care referral line, which has been in operation since the 1980s, and transferred the responsibility to 311 operators.

It also overhauled how it subsidizes daycare for young children and changed the way parents qualify for those subsidies, with the biggest change being a shift to attaching subsidies to children as opposed to daycare centres.

The move means school boards will be able to access subsidies for operating before- and after-school programs by attracting subsidized children, but the loss of guaranteed revenue for some child-care centres could be a hit.

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