

Vancouver city council approves \$30-million daycare initiative ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

There have been stroller rallies and complaints of a child-care crisis in British Columbia for years. Now the City of Vancouver is responding by getting into the daycare business in a big way.

A four-year capital plan adopted unanimously by city council Wednesday night calls for \$30-million to establish 1,000 new child-care spaces between 2015 and 2018.

"It's unprecedented," Raymond Louie, chair of the city's finance and services committee, said in an interview Thursday. "This is probably the single largest child-care allotment by a municipality - ever - in Canada."

Mr. Louie, who is also first vice-president of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, said many other cities support child care, but he didn't think any city is doing as much as Vancouver. He said council became convinced of the need for a push on child care after an extensive public consultation program.

The priority list that emerged after hearing from thousands of Vancouver residents, he said, ranked the building of new social housing units and the creation of child-care spaces as the top two items.

The capital plan proposes to spend \$125-million over four years to create 2,550 new units of social and supportive housing. It also earmarks \$155-million for parks and recreation, \$55-million for community facilities, \$150-million for transportation, \$325-million for utilities and \$75-million for emerging priorities.

Of those items, the foray into child care marks a significant new direction for municipal spending.

"We already know the demand is significant. Very long wait lists already exist and we're trying to help our citizens stay in our city," said Mr. Louie, alluding to complaints that young parents are being forced to move because of a lack of affordable child care. At about \$1,200 a month on average for toddler care, Vancouver has some of the highest rates in the country.

The capital plan lays out spending goals, but Mr. Louie said every component of the plan will have to come back before council for approval before the budget items are finalized. He said it's hard to say at this point exactly when the new social housing units and new child-care spaces will be available, but "the intention is to spread it fairly evenly across the four-year term."

There has been a growing demand for more provincial spending on child care, including a stroller parade last year that wound through Vancouver streets to Premier Christy Clark's office.

Earlier this year, the provincial government announced funding for the creation of 2,000 new spaces over the next two years.

But Sharon Gregson, of the Coalition of Child Care Advocates, said with the child population expected to increase by at least 15,000 by 2016, the new spaces won't keep pace with the growth.

"No municipal government will ever be able to fix the child-care crisis," she said. "It does take a provincial solution. But what Vancouver is doing is absolutely to be congratulated."

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