

Parents struggle to save rare downtown non-profit daycare^[1]

Author: Monsebraaten, Laurie

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EXCERPTS

In a last-ditch effort to save one of the few non-profit daycares that offers subsidized spots in Toronto's high-rent financial district, parents at George Brown College's doomed Scotia Plaza child-care centre want to launch a \$2.5-million fundraiser.

The college, however, is refusing to help, leaving the organizers no way to issue tax receipts to donors.

"They have refused both our efforts and our money to support them," said lawyer Ian Cooper, whose two daughters are enrolled at the highly rated centre "This is very disheartening."

The daycare's 25-year rent-free lease — part of a city deal that gave the developer of the building permission to add more floors — ran out last June, leaving the landlord free to offer the space to a for-profit child care chain willing to pay market rent.

Parents were hoping that wealthy bankers, stock traders and lawyers would pitch in to ensure that secretaries, mail room clerks and other lower-income staff in the downtown core have access to affordable, high-quality child care near their workplace.

"The more affluent parents who work in these towers and use this centre can afford to find other high-quality options," Cooper said.

"But what about the single parent with no family in the city who relies on a daycare subsidy?" he said. "Why should she be forced to take transit to another part of town to access a subsidized spot, adding another hour to her work day?"

Mauricio Lemus, a downtown courier company dispatcher, and his wife Andrea, a mail room clerk, are grateful their 1-year-old son and 3-year-old daughter are being cared for at the Scotia Plaza centre, close to where they work.

"For parents like us who rely on subsidies, there aren't many other places downtown for our children," he said. "We think we should do everything we can to save this centre."

After a public outcry prompted by a Star Story last summer, landlord Dream Unlimited gave the college a one-year lease extension, to give families time to make other arrangements.

But parents are still worried about losing the high-quality, non-profit centre that serves about 70 children from birth to age 5 and accepts parents, like the Lemuses, who need subsidies. For-profit centres aren't eligible to offer city-subsidized spots.

Monthly fees at the centre currently range from about \$2,000 for an infant to almost \$1,400 for a pre-schooler.

Last fall, Cooper asked the college's charitable foundation to accept private donations to help save the daycare and to use the money for other child-care initiatives if their goal isn't met.

Through meetings with the landlord, Cooper figures the college would need about \$4.5 million, including at least \$1.5 million in city property taxes, to secure a new 10-year lease for the daycare.

Since land occupied by colleges and universities is exempt from property taxes, George Brown's cost would drop to less than \$3 million, he said. A modest increase to parent fees and city subsidies could push the cost to \$2.5 million or lower, Cooper said.

He acknowledges it is a significant sum to raise in a very short time. But Cooper insists parents like him are well connected and should be given a chance to try.

When asked if Dream would entertain the parents' fundraising efforts to save the centre, a spokesperson said the landlord is proceeding with its plan to lease the space to Kids in Company in June.

"If George Brown College would like to meet to discuss aspects of its lease with us, we would be pleased to do so," Samantha Farrell said in an email.

But late last week, college spokesperson Brian Stock said the institution could not participate in the parents' fundraiser.

"As flattered as we are that the parents want us to stay in that location and are going to bat to try and have that happen, we just can't proceed with actively participating in fundraising," he told the Star.

"We have to move forward with the information that we have . . . that our lease is ending and that we have to make arrangements to find another location," he said, adding the college doubts the parents could raise such a large amount of money in time to save the centre.

Cooper said he is "stunned" that nobody at the college has been willing to pick up the phone and call Dream about the parents' fundraising efforts or the property tax exemption the college could access.

"It is very discouraging that no one has been willing to show leadership to save this important downtown resource for parents and children."

Region: Ontario^[3]

Tags: funding ^[4]
family ^[5]

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