

Parents fear loss of daycare at Old Orchard should Toronto schools close ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The provincial push for a trimmer Toronto District School Board met with its first public reckoning Sunday during a community consultation at Old Orchard Junior Public School.

About 40 parents settled into a circle of toddler chairs set up in the small gymnasium of what was once an eight-classroom school, near College Street and Dovercourt Avenue. Since 1981, it's been home to West End Parents' Daycare (WEPD). Two years ago, a Montessori school opened upstairs. Together, the operations care for and educate 120 children a day.

Local school trustees Ausma Malik and Marit Stiles were joined by city councillor Mike Layton to help explain how Old Orchard got on the list and what might happen next. The trustees, both in their first terms, said they only found out last Tuesday that Old Orchard was being eyed by Toronto Lands Corp., the entity that manages school property not occupied by board students.

"Absolutely, we are feeling pressure," said Ms. Malik. Ontario Education Minister Liz Sandals has given the TDSB until Feb. 13 to come up with a three-year plan to reduce its underutilized space.

Parents at the meeting spoke of pressures of their own when trying to get their children into daycare. Taryn McCormick's daughter has been attending WEPD for six years. She didn't get on the two-year waiting list until her daughter was born, so for her first year back at work she commuted first to Toronto's Junction neighbourhood to drop her daughter off before turning around to go to work downtown.

"If they close this daycare, where are we going to find those spots? There's nowhere for us to go," Ms. McCormick says.

Ben Ofori has a child at the daycare and another on the waiting list. He asked whether the fact the building's tenants are not board-of-education students will mean their interests will fall through the cracks, no matter what comes of a public consultation.

"Who has a duty of care for the children? If all the facilities in this area are oversubscribed already, who will see that they don't make it worse?"

Mr. Ofori drives his family's car to his job near the airport every day. He doesn't expect he could find another daycare spot within walking distance if this one closes. "What happens to the children and families?" he asked. "This is what matters. Not the money."

Holly Venable started the Orchard Montessori two years ago. It occupies the top floor of the building and it has a waiting list to place students, who are two to six years old.

Ms. Venable said that during her search for a suitable site, she could find "absolutely nothing" in the area. Though there were sites with sufficient indoor space, they would have only a "10- by 20-foot parking pad of blacktop for outdoor space."

She listed off the work done on the building over the past two years - new roof, new windows, new boiler - and emphasized "this is not a shuttered, crumbling building."

Though Ms. Malik, the local trustee, said the board will not disclose the financial circumstances surrounding the property, Ms. Venable says the Montessori school pays \$90,000 a year in rent. And Rick Nankisoor, director of WEPD, reported an annual rent of \$66,000.

Whether that is enough to dissuade the TDSB from taking a one-time payout to help combat its \$3-billion capital repair backlog is something that will begin to be decided Tuesday evening. The board will vote on whether to tell the province it will start public consultations on the sale of the property.

"The province is breathing down our necks. The process has been started," explained Ms. Stiles, the other local trustee at the meeting. "Can it be stopped? Yes."

When asked if the city might step in to take the property off the province's hands but keep it in the public realm, Mr. Layton was blunt. "We shouldn't be put in this position. The province is taking money out of our budget. We can't bail them out of 60 schools."

Ms. Malik confirmed that no closings would happen before the end of the next school year.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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