

Parents fight to save Lowertown child care centre ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Parents are fighting to keep a Lowertown child care centre open after the city suddenly announced it would close.

City staff told parents on July 8 that the Beausoleil Child Care Centre on York Street would be shuttered at the end of August due to renovation work on the Ottawa Community Housing building where it is located. The project includes renovating concrete balconies and some brickwork on the exterior of the building.

The city has worked to offer alternative spots for the centre's 49 displaced children, but for some parents, this has not been enough.

"We were taken by surprise and it was poorly communicated to us," said Suneeta Millington, a mother whose two-year-old son attends Beausoleil.

"We recognize that the building has to be renovated, but is it so urgent that the city can't keep it open for a few months while they accredit another facility?"

Parents have banded together to create SOS Beausoleil, a group hoping to save the centre, which offers francophone services to mostly low-income families, and has also served as a community hub.

The closure of Beausoleil will leave only two francophone city-operated child care centres.

"The day care really is a hub of the community, in one of the most strongly francophone communities in Ottawa," Millington said. "It's really a community space in many ways."

The city first communicated with the provincial Ministry of Education on May 5 to see if a new licence could be issued to move Beausoleil to another location, said Aaron Burry, the city's general manager of community and social services. The Ministry of Education immediately responded, saying there would not be enough time to relocate before the renovations started, as it would take six to 12 months to issue a licence for a new facility.

The city hoped it would still be able to operate the child care centre in its location during the work, thinking Beausoleil would still have access to one of its two play areas, but on June 16, the city was told the construction would close down both. Burry did not say why it took until July 8 for the city to notify affected families.

"As a result of the significant health and safety risks and with the loss of the two outdoor play yards, the city had no option but to temporarily suspend operations as per the Ministry of Education licensing requirements," Burry said in a statement.

"The city anticipated that the children and staff would have been negatively impacted by noise, dust, parking restrictions, movement of heavy machinery and the loss of the play yards."

Parents blamed a lack of communication between the city and province for the fact they were not given notice until July.

"We recognize there are needs for renovations," Millington said.

"People are willing to tolerate inconvenience for the short term for a long-term solution, but we shouldn't have to bear the brunt of the city screwing things up because the left hand didn't talk to the right hand."

Rideau-Vanier Coun. Mathieu Fleury, who serves as the chairman of Ottawa Community Housing, said the internal delay came from a breakdown in communication between OCH and the city's social services about the scope of the work.

"All along there had been discussion between OCH and the social services department at the city, but for some reason the degree of renovations on the property didn't click," he said.

As of July 21, 33 children in the 46 subsidized spots at Beausoleil had been placed at different providers and seven of those had already left the child care centre, according to the city.

Millington's child has been offered a place at Centre éducatif Pinocchio on Sussex Drive, but the mother commutes on foot and the new location would add an extra two hours of walking to her day.

As Millington's spot is not subsidized and the location of the proposed spot is "untenable" for her, she is being forced back onto a centralized waiting list.

The city has not committed to a specific date for Beausoleil's reopening, but the renovation work is expected to last two years.

It's also unclear if some of the child care centre's staff will be laid off.

"Based on the city's preliminary review, it is anticipated that there will be placements for most staff," Burry said. "Management and human resources are working with staff regarding redeployment options."

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