

Region votes Wednesday on child care centre closures ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Regional politicians decide next week whether to follow a consultant's controversial recommendation to close five regional child centres.

The fate of the five centres will be decided with a vote of council Wednesday night.

"It's really in council's hands," said Coun. Sean Strickland.

He supports closing the centres despite vocal opposition from parents.

"We should proceed with the recommendation," he said. "We heard from 250 families and if we do proceed with the recommendation, it would be disruptive but the fact that we could create 200 additional subsidy spots is not lost on me."

Consultant KPMG recommended in September that the five regional child care centres close and that the estimated \$2.5 million in savings be used to fund 200 new, permanent subsidized child care spaces.

"I won't support eliminating it, no," said Township of Wilmot Mayor Les Armstrong. "I think it's something we really need to keep.

"We're in a position to be able to set a standard and be able to maintain that standard and I think that's something we need to do."

Kitchener Mayor Berry Vrbanovic agreed.

"I unequivocally support seeing us continue in the child care business," he said.

Parents with children in the centres and union representatives for the estimated 50 workers who would lose their jobs vocally oppose the idea.

They packed a public input meeting earlier this month and gave politicians an earful.

Coun. Tom Galloway said he hasn't formulated a position, but he has several concerns.

"Can (the private sector) absorb or create new capacity for the 200 additional spaces that we would then be in a position to fund?" he said.

"Can the private and not-for-profit child care centres pick up the special needs (children?)"

Coun. Karl Kiefer isn't certain of his vote but he's leaning toward keeping the centres.

"I haven't closed my mind totally but from what I've heard so far to this date, I don't think I would say that I would favour closing them," he said.

A staff report released Friday makes no specific recommendation on how council should proceed.

It points out challenges of closing the centres, including concerns that the system could not absorb an additional 200 spaces.

Under provincial legislation, the Region of Waterloo is required to act as a service manager for child care services. Responsibilities include determination of subsidy eligibility, ensuring compliance with the Day Nurseries Act and providing funding to support children with special needs in child care.

The region is not required to operate child care centres.

In 2015 the region is providing full or partial subsidy for about 3,100 child care spaces. There is currently no waiting list for subsidized spaces, but nearly 1,700 families are on a wait-list for immediate child care in the region.

The consultant recommended the change be introduced over a five-year period.

Other KPMG recommendations to be considered by council:

- Discontinue delivery of Employment Ontario, a provincial program, to save about \$384,000

- That the region and local municipalities review the possibility of a shared data centre, service desk and deskside support service
- Restructure the road maintenance agreement with local municipalities to include the same rate structure for all municipalities; and make the rate a combination of a fixed amount per kilometre and variable amount per kilometre
- Focus on increasing revenue and cutting operating and capital costs at the Region of Waterloo International Airport. Also establish a target for the draw on taxpayers to pay for the airport.

Politicians meet in council chambers, 150 Frederick St., in Kitchener at 7 p.m. Wednesday. Delegations must register with the regional clerks' office at 519-575-4400.

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