

History-making pregnancy has Alberta legislators wrestling with child care, parental leave ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

When Alberta New Democrat Stephanie McLean has her first child early next February, she'll be the province's first sitting MLA to deliver a baby during her term.

That history-making fact has sparked a series of logistical questions at the provincial legislature as the mom-to-be begins to consider the realities of having a child while juggling her responsibilities as the deputy government whip.

"This is going to be really new territory for everyone, for the legislative assembly," said the MLA for Calgary-Varsity.

McLean, 28, said she intends to return to work as soon as possible after her delivery. That alone raises new questions: Does a baby need a security pass to enter the house?

Even if McLean wanted to take maternity leave, it's a non-starter. Because MLAs do not pay into employment insurance, they can't take paid parental leave. Legislature rules also state that any MLA who misses more than 10 days of a sitting will have his or her pay docked by \$100 for every absence — with the only exceptions being bereavement, public duties or illness.

"Well, having a child is not an illness," McLean said wryly.

When Rachel Notley's New Democrats swept to power, the face of Alberta's legislature changed significantly, becoming younger and, thanks to near gender parity on the government benches, filled with more women. Those changing demographics meant considering new needs, such as child care.

The NDP caucus has parents to 15 children under the age of 10, said Brandy Payne, MLA for Calgary-Acadia. When the opposition is included, that figure grows to 20 children. That led the NDP to begin to explore whether it's time to create on-site child care.

"It seems to be that this is the first time this is being considered — that members, whether they're mothers or fathers, might need support with child care," Payne said.

The NDP caucus executive has referred the issue to Speaker Bob Wanner's office to get some direction and reach across the floor to opposition MLAs and even caucus staffers, Payne said.

Earlier this week, Estefania Cortes-Vargas, NDP MLA for Strathcona-Sherwood Park, proposed a non-binding motion calling on the province to consider the possibility of including child-care spaces in new government buildings.

The motion passed 56 to 9, with only Wildrose members voting no.

Wildrose Airdrie MLA Angela Pitt, herself a mother, said during the debate that while she supported the spirit of the motion and understands the pressures for working parents, it gave the impression that private-sector workers would have limited access to any new spaces created in government-owned buildings.

"Ultimately, this could create massive new spending increases while producing limited benefits for the majority of Alberta families," Pitt said in the legislature.

But Progressive Conservative MLA Sandra Jansen, who supported the motion, said she welcomes any opportunity to discuss alternative locations for day cares, such as seniors' facilities and schools.

"As a single mom, child care was the first thing I thought of when I woke up in the morning and the last thing I thought of when I went to bed at night," said Jansen, a former Tory government associate minister.

McLean said the motion is something "that should have been done a long time ago."

If a building is designed without child-care facilities in mind, it can be difficult to reconfigure the space later on, she said, citing the \$400-million Federal Building as an example.

“You’ll notice things like the women’s washrooms throughout that building don’t have baby changing stations, and things like that,” she said.

The government is also pushing to amend the legislature hours to include morning sittings to make the house more welcoming for young families. The Wildrose party said it will filibuster the motion because it had agreed to a 10 a.m. session start three days a week, which it said the government pushed to 9 a.m. without notice. The Official Opposition also said an earlier legislature start time means an earlier workday overall, since MLAs must prepare for bill debates.

The government, however, said the intention is to reduce the assembly’s reliance on evening sittings, which start at 7:30 p.m. and can last late into the night.

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