

Like a poopy diaper, plan to end city-run daycares thrown out ^[1]

Author: Armstrong, Kenneth

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EXCERPTS

Sault Ste. Marie city council has decided to reject the city staff recommendation to get out of the business of operating daycares and will explore the option of moving the existing staff into daycares run within schools.

Council was split on the two options presented tonight, with some councillors unsure of what position they were going to take even after hours of discussion before their vote was cast.

The city staff recommendation was for the city to get out of the business of operating daycares altogether.

Upon that motion failing, a backup option — referred to as option 5 — would result in the city staff operating daycares within schools.

As result of the decision, the Jessie Irving and Maycourt daycare centres will close before the end of 2016, and three city staff jobs will be eliminated.

Currently, city-run daycares support 12 full-time and 18 part-time staff in various positions.

One early childcare educator, one supervisor and one cook will be eliminated as result of the adoption of option 5.

The city currently operates 100 of the 1450 daycare spaces in the city.

With the option to move the city daycare staff into schools accepted, the amount of spaces offered by the city will be reduced to 85.

City staff will now explore just how moving city-run daycare into schools will be implemented.

26 spots would be available 'immediately' at Isabelle Fletcher Public School.

An additional 49 spaces will be made available at the former St. Basil Secondary School site, but not until 2017.

But there is no guarantee at this point the school boards would accept the city's bid to operate daycare centres at those sites.

The viewing gallery was mostly full with city-run daycare staff, as well as parents and their young children in support of the city-run service.

At issue for councillors who voted in favour of the motion to get out of the business of running daycares was Commissioner of Social Services Commissioner Mike Nadeau's assertion that the \$855,000 the Sault Ste. Marie District Social Services Administration Board (DSSAB) pays to the city for the creation of 100 daycare spaces could be used by non-city-run daycares to create 120 spaces.

Mayor Christian Provenzano said it was a difficult decision, but believed the city put forth a responsible course of action by recommending the closure of city-run daycares.

In a complicated arrangement, the city pays the DSSAB almost \$1.4-million for providing childcare, but then takes \$855,000 back from the DSSAB to operate the city-run centres and also covers the operational losses of the Jessie Irving and Maycourt centres.

"When I look at this issue and I look at these monies, we are double-paying for municipal childcare. We're paying for it twice. And if we weren't doing that we would have more spaces, and if we had more spaces I think that would be in the best interest of our community," said Provenzano.

Were the city to have voted to get out of the daycare business, Nadeau assured councillors all spaces from city-run daycares would be transferred to existing or new centres.

Ward 6 councillor Ross Romano — who noted his own children were in privately-run daycare — voted in favour of the motion to close city-run daycares and was against the motion to explore moving them into the schools.

He said the cost savings of moving to the schools is negligible when compared to continuing operating the centres as is.

"We are going to save less than fifty thousand dollars a year by transferring into the schools. While we do so we are only going to service 85-percent of the numbers we currently service. We're reducing the service, we're reducing the staff so we save maybe forty or fifty thousand dollars," said Romano.

He also decried the notion — brought up by many employees and parents who spoke as delegations at the meeting — that city-run centres were the best in the city.

"To take away from what the other service providers are doing, I think is slightly unfair," said Romano.

City staff agreed there was no metric to quantify any statements of who provides the best quality daycare in the city.

Ward 2 councillor Susan Myers said her decision to vote in favour of the city getting out of the daycare business among the most difficult she has made in her nine years on council.

She suggested the city-run daycare workers, were they to be laid off by the city, could band together and apply for assistance from the Sault Ste. Marie Economic Development Corporation to run their own daycare, a notion scoffed at by some in the gallery.

In the end, a tie vote defeated the city staff recommendation for the city to get out of the business of operating daycare centres.

The idea of telling 30 city employees their jobs will soon be eliminated was distasteful to some councillors.

Councillor Joe Krmpotich said the salaries of the city-run daycare employees help drive our local economy.

"Why not go to an option 5? I won't lead the way in eliminating municipal daycare and I don't agree with the recommendation to get out of municipal daycare. The decision has not been easy and requires the use of our heart, our brain and cost versus value," said Krmpotich.

Ross Romano, Matthew Shoemaker, Paul Christian, Susan Myers, Frank Fata and Mayor Christian Provenzano voted in favour of the motion for the city to get out of the daycare business.

Lou Turco, Marchy Bruni, Judy Hupponen, Rick Niro, Steve Butland and Joe Krmpotich voted against, causing a tie which defeated the motion.

A new motion was brought forth by Bruni to have city staff draft up a new recommendation — using option 5 as the template — which passed with two nay votes by Shoemaker and Romano.

A new report based on option 5 is expected to be brought to council early in the new year.

Rachel Punch — who served as a parent representative on the Day Care Review Committee and favoured option 5 — said she was pleased with the decision.

"I was on the edge of my seat the whole time, I didn't know how they were going to vote but I am happy with the outcome," said Punch.

The Ministry of Education changed the funding formula for childcare that resulted in a reduction of over \$885,000 in direct childcare program funding for the community.

Those changes went into effect January 1, 2013 and transitional funding was wound down over for 2014 and 2015.

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