

Vancouver hopes to turn downtown parking stalls into daycare ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Vancouver city staff are looking to turn part of an under-used downtown parking lot into a daycare.

It may be an unconventional move, but one staff say makes sense in a city strapped for space and low on child care spots, and is emblematic of the thinking required for the city to meet its goal of creating 1,000 new spaces by 2018.

Many Vancouver families are not having their child care demands met in their neighbourhood, according to a presentation to councillors Tuesday. In the downtown core, just 17 per cent of the child care demand of school-age children is met locally, according to the data presented by Mary Clare Zak, the city's managing director of social policy.

The lack of space has staff considering repurposing the top floor of the city's parkade at 142-150 Water St. for child care.

"Finding available sites that meet our needs for quality child care can be a challenge," Zak said. "We know in a dense urban environment we're going to have to adapt, and adapt to all sorts of different structures. ... Certainly we're not sticking to one size fits all. We're open and flexible, provided it meets (requirements)."

Zak said the rooftop project is on track for completion in 2019.

"We're looking forward to this. It will be an innovative response to the challenge," Zak said.

Earlier in the meeting, and with the help of about a dozen children, Mayor Gregor Robertson proclaimed May Child Care and Early Learning Month in the city. He said barriers in the city to high quality child care and early learning included a lack of spaces, high fees and low wages for some workers.

Most neighbourhoods in the city's east and west sides had less than 25 per cent of their child care demand for kids aged 0-4 met locally, and many of those same neighbourhoods had less than 35 per cent of the demand for school-aged kids met close to home, according to Zak's presentation.

Some of the shortfall in care is met through domestic caregivers, grandparents, family and friends, or by childcare facilities in other municipalities, but data involving those alternate arrangements can be tricky to obtain, according to the city. The data presented to councillors only includes spaces classified by the province as "licensed group care."

It was compiled from a range of sources, including the UBC Human Early Learning Partnership, the Early Development Instrument results from the Vancouver School District, the Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre Listings and Statistics Canada.

Early childhood education helps kids get ready for school, improves long-term health and carries economic benefits, according to the city. But kids need room to play and green space to explore, said Susan Herrington, a professor of landscape architecture at the University of B.C.

Herrington told councillors that Vancouver's policy of 14 square metres of play space per child is equivalent to the footprint of a parking stall. She said most standards in the province were for seven square metres, but that amount of space can lead to aggression among kids. Many European cities have policies of 19 square metres.

Zak said the city has created 577 new child care spaces since 2015.

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