



PORT COLBORNE

Subject: Community Engagement on Licensed Childcare in Port Colborne

To: Council

From: Office of the Chief Administrative Officer

Report Number: 2025-20

Meeting Date: January 28, 2025

Recommendation:

That Chief Administrative Officer Report 2025-20 be received; and

That Council direct staff to implement the public engagement plan regarding expanding licensed childcare spaces in Port Colborne, and the proposed location at the former Visitors Centre as outlined in this report.

Purpose:

This report seeks Council's approval to engage with the community and determine support for the expansion of licensed childcare spaces in Port Colborne and the proposed location at the former Visitors Centre.

Background:

On August 27, 2024, Council considered Report 2024-115 regarding expanding the number of licensed childcare spaces in Port Colborne. The report cited a clear need for spaces within Port Colborne and described the opportunity to partner with the YMCA of Niagara and the Niagara Region. Council directed staff to jointly apply with the YMCA of Niagara to the Niagara Region to request more licensed childcare spaces in Port Colborne. Council also directed staff to, pending the Region's approval of additional spaces, procure architectural services for a childcare centre at the Vale Health & Wellness Centre.

Discussions with the YMCA of Niagara and the Niagara Region are ongoing and have been very positive to date. At this time, staff are recommending shifting the location of the expanded childcare spaces from the Vale Health & Wellness Centre to the former Visitor Information Centre at Main Street and Mellanby Avenue (76 Main Street West).

Staff will continue to work with partners to identify a financial model that supports using the Vale Health & Wellness Centre.

The former Visitors Centre was identified because it better supports a financial model that would encompass lease payments, development charges and the limited contribution of tax dollars from assessment growth. It is anticipated that the exact model for funding will evolve with the project application and request for proposal/construction phase, should Council decide to move forward after the proposed public engagement is complete. Since the former Visitors Centre is a smaller and less complex facility when compared to the Vale Health & Wellness Centre, and is currently vacant, it makes for a strong option for additional childcare spaces on a shorter timeline.

As identified in the August 27, 2024 report, the operating costs of the new childcare centre would be the responsibility of the YMCA of Niagara. There would be no cost to the City to provide the childcare services.

The City would continue working closely with the YMCA of Niagara and Niagara Region on an application to increase licensed childcare spaces and to ensure Port Colborne remains a priority area in need of additional spaces.

In the meantime, staff are recommending a public engagement campaign that would collect input from residents regarding the expansion of licensed childcare in Port Colborne, and the possibility of using the former Visitor Information Centre, an historic building in Port Colborne, as the initial location.

Discussion:

The former Visitors Centre building at 76 Main Street was originally built in 1852 and was made from cut stone taken from the Welland Canal. It was designated a property with heritage value under By-law 1062/9/81. It is the oldest architect-designed structure in Port Colborne, and was originally used as City Hall, and later as a jail.

The proposed expanded childcare project would bring an additional 3,500 to 3,900 square feet in additional space to the existing building footprint. The project would include a single-storey addition to the back (south) side of the existing building. Proceeding with the design phase of the project would include working closely with a heritage planner and continued consultation with the City's Heritage Committee.

The expansion at the former Visitors Centre would bring an additional 49 childcare spaces for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, and bring new purpose to this vacant building in the heart of Port Colborne.

Given the potential site for the expanded childcare location is within a municipal facility with identified heritage and cultural history, staff are recommending engaging with the public to determine their thoughts to increasing the square footage of the building with an addition, recognizing any addition or renovations would be done with a heritage consultant to ensure compliance with Heritage legislation.

On January 20, 2025 staff met with the City's Heritage Committee to discuss the possibility of using the former Visitors Centre for childcare. The Committee supported obtaining public engagement with an understanding that this project would maintain and preserve the historical significance and heritage aspects of the current building. Should Council decide to proceed after reviewing public feedback, staff plan to consult with the Heritage Committee throughout the project.

To support Council's decision making going forward, staff have proposed a public engagement plan that would gather feedback from the community regarding the proposed expansion of licensed childcare spaces within Port Colborne. The engagement plan has several high-level objectives, including:

- **Gather feedback:** Engage residents meaningfully through a variety of channels and mediums, both in-person and virtually, to gather input from community members with an interest in childcare in Port Colborne.
- **Identify concerns and opportunities:** Gather valuable feedback to highlight areas of alignment and identify potential improvements in the proposed plans.
- **Inform the community:** Educate the community about the proposed heritage site expansion and addition of childcare options, and ensure information is clear, transparent, and accessible.
- **Ensure transparency:** Share the collected feedback online in a clear and accessible format, allowing both Council and the community to see the input and understand how it informs decision-making.

At this stage, staff recommend an online and paper-based survey / feedback form as the primary means for conducting the community engagement project.

An online survey would launch on February 3, 2025, and would ask multiple-choice and open-ended questions to gauge community members thoughts on the proposed heritage site expansion and its potential use for additional childcare options in Port Colborne. Multiple-choice questions allow for easy collection and analysis of the feedback, while open-ended questions allow community members an opportunity to answer in their own words, offering additional qualitative insights. The survey would close on February 14, 2025.

Since not all community members have access to or are comfortable with answering an online survey, an identical version of the online survey would be distributed in a paper-version at various City facilities (City Hall, Vale Health & Wellness Centre, Port Colborne Public Library). The surveys would be collected in a box and then collected for analysis beginning February 14, 2025.

Successfully communicating about the survey opportunity would be a vital part of gathering enough meaningful feedback to support Council's decision-making process. The Corporate Communications team would launch a comprehensive communications campaign to promote the engagement opportunity, which would include (but not be limited to):

- Sharing information on the City's website
- Posting social media content and events on City channels
- Hard-copy posters with QR codes directed to the online survey shared in key community locations and with community special interest groups
- ...and more.

The childcare engagement project would begin on Monday, February 3 and end on Friday, February 14. Once completed, results would be collected and analyzed, and will be provided to Council in a comprehensive summary report in March 2025.

This engagement plan ensures residents have a meaningful role in determining how to best support community growth and the future of childcare in Port Colborne, fostering a collaborative approach to these important community decisions.

Internal Consultations:

The Corporate Leadership Team proposed the original expansion of licensed childcare spaces in Port Colborne. Since then, staff from Finance, Recreation, Public Works, Corporate Communications and Planning have provided input on the potential project.

Financial Implications:

This report is focused primarily on the public engagement activities related to expanding licensed childcare spaces in Port Colborne at the former Visitor Information Centre facility. All expenses related to the public engagement activities are captured in the 2025 operating budget.

Public Engagement:

The City continues to have discussions with the YMCA of Niagara and Niagara Region Children's Services. The implementation of the proposed public engagement plan for childcare would expand this and gather input from a variety of other audiences and residents in the community.

Strategic Plan Alignment:

The initiative contained within this report supports the following pillar(s) of the strategic plan:

- Welcoming, Livable, Healthy Community
- Economic Prosperity

Conclusion:

Expanded access to quality licensed childcare supports childhood learning and development and enables working families in Port Colborne to achieve a work-life balance. This public engagement initiative would gather feedback from the community regarding the expansion of licensed childcare spaces within Port Colborne. It includes an online and paper-based survey that would allow residents an opportunity to provide feedback that Council can use to support their decision-making related to childcare going forward. Results of the public engagement initiative would be presented to Council in March.

Respectfully submitted,

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Report Approval:

All reports reviewed and approved by the Department Director and also the City Treasurer when relevant. Final review and approval by the Chief Administrative Officer.