

DETROIT

Detroit City Council approves zoning changes to address day care shortage

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The Detroit News

Nov. 19, 2024, 5:33 p.m. ET

In a move to lessen a child care shortage, Detroit City Council on Tuesday approved zoning ordinance changes that will make it easier and less expensive for day care centers to open or expand in residential neighborhoods.

The vote was 7-1 in favor with Councilwoman Latisha Johnson voting no; Councilwoman Angela Whitfield Calloway was not present.

Among the changes: allowing freestanding day care centers to open in neighborhoods zoned as R1 residential, and allowing in-home day care providers caring for up to seven children to expand their operations to accommodate up to 14 children as a group day care home on a by-right basis versus conditional, eliminating the need for a public hearing and formal site plans that bring with it administrative fees.

The day care providers would still be required to meet state licensing requirements, according to officials.

“We've been working toward this for almost two years now, so it's success in itself just to achieve this resolution ...” said Daniel Arking, a city attorney who has been working on the ordinance with the Office of Early Learning.

Arking said the measure focuses on “expanding the zoning districts, smoothing out the permissions, generally making it relatively easier just to open up day care facilities in more portions of the city than the status quo.”

In-home day care facilities that wish to expand also would save \$1,100 in fees and shave weeks off of the process, he said.

“Where these uses are now made by right, it’s certainly much more convenient to establish additional day care capacity,” he said.

Johnson said she wanted to keep the in-home day care expansions conditional because it requires a hearing where residents can give input.

"I think it's important to give residents the opportunity to weigh in, to know what is potentially coming next door to them," she said. "And if there's a need in the community, I think (the day care facilities) will be supported."

Johnson said community input is important, particularly on issues like traffic and safety.

The ordinance, which has been under discussion for over a year, has been viewed as a critical step in helping meet the growing demand for child care services, particularly in areas that have been traditionally underserved.

An estimated 37,000 Detroit children ages 0 to 5 have parents who are participating in the workforce and need access to child care, according to the latest data released by the Office of Early Learning in 2023. But there is a shortage of 15,500 seats in the city’s child care ecosystem.

Critics of the ordinance changes have expressed concerns about allowing freestanding centers in areas zoned residential, citing concerns about crime. Others have said home-based centers that want to expand from family to group day care should remain conditional and require a hearing before they're allowed to do so.

Before the vote, Elizabeth Gonzalez, a community organizer with Congress of Communities, said the changes would help the nonprofit open a child care center in about two years.

"This is a major need that we're asking for," she said, "for the zoning to pass."

Councilman Fred Durhal said he has seen the need for more child care that the ordinance is intended to address.

"I do support by right," he said. "I've given my take on it based off of experience, particularly at the birth of my son, when we were looking for child care in the city of Detroit and some of the bigger child care providers had extensive waiting lists."

He added: "I can only imagine if you are a single parent who may even have problems with transportation, and there is no ... day care facility within the vicinity of your residence, the barrier that it provides to access for child care."

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