

Limited downtown daycare poses problems

Public, private input fuels initiative to improve care options in future

The Herald-Sun, Wednesday, October 20, 2010

Story by Monica Chen

DURHAM - Downtown business owners, educators, child care advocates and providers convened on Tuesday to brainstorm next steps to bring more daycare centers to downtown in the next decade, when demand is expected to increase with a more youthful work force.

At the third meeting on the topic, Downtown Durham Inc., Durham's Partnership for Children and the Greater Durham Chamber of Commerce went over the white paper for the initiative.

Since downtown revitalization began, the average age of workers in downtown has dropped to 38 years old, while the number of workers has increased from 4,000 in 1993 to 14,000 in 2010.

At the same time, however, margins for child care facilities are still thin, and many providers are discouraged or delayed from opening new facilities because of fees and regulations that can increase start-up costs.

"There are a lot of people that want to open daycare centers, but they have no idea," said Kara Turner, owner of three five-star day cares in Durham.

Traditional child care business models face two main challenges in downtown locations, according to the initiative's white paper: Licensing requirements are difficult to meet in dense urban environments, and rental rates downtown are usually higher than in the suburbs.

"If you try to build a high school in an urban setting, you can't, because the regulations almost require that they're in suburbs," said Bill Kalkhof, president of DDI. "Same with child care centers."

Carolyn Titus, deputy county manager, recommended the group reach out to churches as well for vacant spaces and at some point, the role of government in providing child care will need to be determined by elected officials.

"The question is: 'What is the role of government beyond what we're doing? What is appropriate?' " she said, noting that child care in downtown would include parents who don't live in Durham and therefore, don't pay taxes to the local government.

Casey Steinbacher, president of the chamber, framed the discussion for businesses: "Every time there is a turnover of workers, there's a cost to the company."

Mel Norton with DDI, who helped put together the white paper, said that for next steps, the group

hopes to meet with city and county planning and hold workshops for child care providers.

"It's especially dire for infants and toddlers. The goal of having child care space close to employers is a huge goal," she said.

Read more: [The Herald-Sun - Limited downtown daycare poses problems](#)