NHCS hears from parents, raises rates



Registered early childhood educator Valerie Bailey speaks with visitors on the advantages of loose-parts play with natural objects in the preschool age classroom at North Hastings Children's Services. Bailey was presented with flowers at the end of NHCS annual general meeting as it was one of her last weeks there. She's moving north to be closer to family. NHCS wished her the best in her future endeavours. / SARAH SOBANSKI Staff

By Sarah Sobanski

Foregoing strategic reserves planning and increasing child care rates still won't be enough to fully support provincially mandated minimum wage increases at North Hastings Children's Services.

In the beginning of February, NHCS executive director Jessica Anderson estimated the wage increase to $14 an hour would cost the children's services more than $67,000 by the end of 2018. By the end of 2019, the increase to $15 an hour would cost it more than $95,000.

She said the children's services couldn't increase its revenue by nearly $100,000 without raising child care rates.

At its annual general meeting April 11, Anderson said the children's services has decided to target 50 per cent of what it needs to balance the salary increases. It's increased its membership rate, its child care rates and budgeted what would normally go into its reserves to increased costs instead.

The membership fee went from $35 to $40. The before school program rate increased from $10 to $11 and after school rate increased from $12 to $13. The infant rate has increased from $58 to $61, toddler rate from $37 to $40 and preschool rate from $35 to $37. The full day school age rate has increased from $35 to $37 and now includes lunch.

NHCS surveyed parents on what options they would like to see them take to offset costs following its February meeting. None of the 30 who responded said they could afford an increase of more than $3 a day, Anderson said.

Fortunately, Anderson said, NHCS can reallocate what it planned for reserves because it met its strategic five-year goal for reserves funding in two years.

?Our strategic plan was that we would put three per cent away over five years in order to have a reserve for things like this, for emergencies or fluctuations of money coming in or whatnot because we were always living on the edge,? said Anderson.

NHCS increased its revenues from around $35,000 to nearly $60,000 between 2014 and 2017. She said it managed to put away 1.82 per cent for reserves in 2016 and 1.48 per cent in 2017, adding up to 3.3 per cent.

?Our goal is always to break even because we're a not-for-profit and a charity. But we are able to put funds in a reserve if it's a board goal,? she said. ?In 2018 if we were to use the same philosophy of putting away one-plus per cent, then we would be able to cover a portion of [the] expense for the minimum wage increase.?

Anderson said NHCS is continuing to advocate to the province. She said she'd ?rather run a deficit than put that burden on our parents? but maintained that, for this year at least, the 2018 $1.4 million budget will be balanced.

?I've asked for a meeting with them to show the financials and show the impact that it has had on rural child care. It's a huge point to demonstrate? that it's all coming out of that parent's pockets,? she said noting 55 per cent of parents with the services aren't subsidized for child care.

Other AGM news: Anderson discussed how early childhood education is changing. Over the course of the year NHCS has moved away from bright primary colours to softer neutral and natural colours. She said studies show these colours helps children stay calm and relax. Studies show this opens them up to more learning.

NHCS is also working with more natural sensory and risk-play. Anderson said children play with moss, sticks and rocks. They jump in puddles and climb fences. They get dirty in the gardens. This promotes independence and problem solving.

?It's not push buttons and lights go off anymore,? she said noting education focuses more on socialization and getting along than just ABCs. ?Climbing a fence, it seems so simple, but climbing a fence is a lot of learning.?

Anderson also said NHCS would be focusing on outreach and educating parents on its programs and services as it rebrands as an EarlyON Centre. It'll also continue to be an active member of the community.

?We're at all the special events that have children,? she said.