

Souris Daycare Facing Financial Crisis; Manager Quits

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Glen Kirby

The largest daycare in Souris is unable to pay its bills, searching for board members and anxious to hire a new manager following the sudden resignation of former executive director Tara Mills.

"We are struggling financially right now," says Brenda Morris, board member for the Souris Cooperative Day Care Centre. "So far, we have been able to pay staff but we are behind in our bills. We were not able to pay any of our bills in the month of December."

Despite the internal turmoil, Morris maintains that services for the 70 children attending the daycare or before-and-after-school programming have not been affected.

"There has been no disruption," she says.

Issues at the childcare cooperative reached a peak in December when Mills abruptly resigned and a crowd of parents stormed a board meeting, demanding to know why.

Morris says the December 16 resignation was effective immediately and Mills offered no reason for leaving.

According to the daycare's website, Mills had been employed at the Centre for more than a decade and executive director since 2009. When contacted by Southwest Post, Mills said that it was "time for a change."

The resignation comes as the volunteer board of directors grapples with financial issues despite having a relatively full complement of children and a waiting list for available spots.

"For the most part, our spaces are pretty full," says Morris. "We're trying to get to the bottom of that, to see what the expenses have been for the last couple of years."

Last summer, the Centre spent an estimated \$120,000 on upgrading its kitchen and flooring although Morris is unable to say if those renovations triggered the current cash-flow problems.

"I can't confirm or deny that. I don't know. But, obviously, those are huge expenses and the first place we would look at," she says. "It's going to take a bit of time to sort through."

Turnover on the volunteer board is hampering the financial review.

Morris says the previous board had shrunk in 2017 to a low of three active members - too few for a quorum. "Your kids gets older. Some board members moved away," she says. Others were effectively removed for contravening a board attendance by-law and missing three meetings in a row.

Since November, Morris and at least two others have joined the board to restore voting numbers and executive positions but she says they have been unable to contact either the former chair or treasurer.

"We don't have board members that have previous experience with this board. We don't have a director to be able to go to and ask questions," says Morris. "We only have what we have."

Mills' departure prompted a dozen parents to attend the Centre's board meeting on December 18.

"There was concern about the director not being in that position anymore," explains Morris, acknowledging a keen interest within the community about the Centre's situation. "I actually took out the resignation letter and read it to them."

Morris, serving as chair of the board's human resources committee, says she was unable to tell parents much more because of confidentiality provisions. She says the board did explain that the Centre was in financial trouble, although the parents' reaction left her somewhat confused.

"Would they not be more concerned about, is the day care closing? Are we losing our staff? Are we locking the doors? How is this going to affect my child?" recalls Morris. "I would have thought those would be the questions that came out but it seemed to be very focussed on the director. Obviously, they were friends and they came there with a mission."

She says the majority of the Centre's staff also attended that meeting, to show support for the board. "Rumours were that the staff was all walking out because the director walked out and they wanted to show the parents that wasn't the case."

The board, assisted by a paid accountant, is meeting regularly to address the current cash flow problems and prepare a 2018 budget, which must be submitted to the provincial government by the end of January.

"We're trying to figure out where we can make changes to make it run better," says Morris, adding that several board members have taken time away from their day jobs to devote more volunteer hours to the Centre's financial situation.

The board is hoping to have a new executive director hired by February.

"The day care is run by a board of directors," says Morris. "The board hires the executive director. The executive director, in consultation with the board, hires the staff. Ultimately, the responsibility falls with the board."

In the meantime, the Centre is asking for contributions of craft supplies and other items for children's programming and activities. Morris says new board members are also needed because the existing board has the minimum required to operate.

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