

Plan in works to increase Halton's child care spaces

By **MELANIE HENNESSEY**
The Champion

A plan that will guide the creation of more than 600 new child care spaces throughout Halton was given the thumbs up by regional council Wednesday.

The document, called the Best Start Transition and Infrastructure Plan, outlines how \$23 million from the Province's Best Start initiative will be used to expand child care for kids up to six years old over the next three years.

The money will also go toward increasing access to subsidized child care, increasing services for children with special needs and improving the wages of local child care workers.

It's proposed that more than 400 spaces will be created for children in junior and senior kindergarten and more than 200 for children up to four years old. The spaces will primarily be created in schools.

"I'm pleased that the Province has recognized the need in Halton for additional child care, particularly in the junior and senior kindergarten age groups," said Regional Chairman Joyce Savoline.

"This plan not only represents an investment in Halton's future, but was developed through a collaboration of stakeholders with a shared vision to ensure our children get the best possible start in life."

While numbers for each municipi-

pality still have to be finalized, a preliminary map shows more than 80 spaces each being allocated to Milton and Halton Hills, over 170 spots to Burlington and more than 275 spaces to Oakville.

Renovations at some schools to make way for the spaces will start during the Christmas break and should be ready by next April. The next phase will involve building additions on schools between 2006 and 2008.

An analysis was undertaken of each of Halton's 21 neighbourhoods using the 'Best Start' formula to determine which ones have the highest need for more child care.

The formula considers population growth, child care capacity and needs, such as the number of children with special needs.

Need in south Milton crucial

That analysis found that the south Milton neighbourhood has the most crucial need for more child care spaces, which is largely attributed to the growth the area has seen and continues to see.

"South Milton has huge growth potential," explained Director of Children's Services Mary Beth Jonz.

Currently, 600 children are on wait lists for day care in Milton and of those, 364 are in south Milton.

Following south Milton on the

list are north west Oakville, River Oaks, north Georgetown, Acton, north east Burlington, south west Oakville and south Georgetown.

These eight neighbourhoods will be the focus of the Region's child care expansion.

Locally, rural north Halton placed eighth on the needs list, while both east and west Milton were ranked 15th, meaning the need is lower in those areas.

The funding from the Province will also support the Region's 'Our Kids' hubs, which are centres being created throughout Halton for families to access information on services for their children, from newborns to 18 year olds.

In Milton, Our Lady of Victory School is designated for such a hub.

The plan council approved is a result of a collaboration of Our Kids — the Early Years (Halton's early learning committee), the Region and Halton's public, Catholic and French school boards.

Martin Street School is Milton's proposed site for 2005-06 renovations to make way for the spaces. To accommodate more child care spaces from 2006 to 2008, a site at the Halton District School Board's future school in Milton's Bristol Survey area is proposed.

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