

DAYCARE CENTER'S PLANNED CLOSING SENDS FAMILIES HUSTLING FOR OPTIONS

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Clint Wolf/Beloit Daily News The Kiddie Ranch Daycare and Learning Center at 1702 House St. in Beloit is scheduled to close on Nov. 16. Families are scrambling to find alternative child care services.

BELOIT - Parents have been scrambling for childcare after it was announced Kiddie Ranch Day Care and Learning Center, 1702 House St., will close on Nov. 16.

Its owner of 32 years, Laura Jo Pearson, is retiring. In an interview Thursday, Pearson said the center serves 63 families and is licensed for 72 children. Kiddie Ranch cares for children age two weeks to 12 years. It has infant, preschool and before and after school programs; transports kids to and from school; and is open 5:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday through Friday.

"Kiddie Ranch has had a fabulous reputation and has been a big supporter of children for long time," Pearson said.

Pearson said she is still hoping to find a buyer.

Parent and Beloit Memorial High School teacher Matt Flynn said he received the news a week ago Tuesday. He and his wife, who is also a teacher, sent their three kids to Kiddie Ranch over the past eight years. Although their two older children are in aftercare programs at their schools, the Flynn's had to hustle to find a spot for their one-and-a-half year old.

When Flynn started calling around he heard the daycares were either not accepting any more kids or had a waiting list. He said he called 10 facilities before finding an opening for childcare offered through Our Lady of the Assumption Catholic Church.

Flynn said the loss of Kiddie Ranch will be a big hole in the community. Although he has support from extended family, Flynn said he was unsure what parents who rely more heavily on Kiddie Ranch will do.

Flynn said he knew some of the employees, with some of them working there more than two decades.

Pearson noted Jackie Miedema worked with her for all 32 years.

"We knew Laura Jo so it was reassuring they (the children) were always being taken care of," Flynn said. "With two full time jobs, it's a juggle."

Flynn said Kiddie Ranch was also accommodating to teachers and did not require them to pay to hold a spot in the summer. Many of his other teacher friends have to pay for daycare to hold their spots even when they aren't working in the summer months.

"Kiddie Ranch was flexible and we appreciated that," Flynn said.

Megan Miller, a citizen activist and board president of Little Turtles Playhouse Parent Cooperative Daycare, said she plans to attend Monday evening's Beloit City Council meeting to raise awareness about what she considers a childcare crisis in Beloit. She said another daycare is being sold and may close as well. The *Beloit Daily News* was unable to verify that by press time.

"We have heard from parents who feel they have no other options besides leaving the workforce, and we know that in some households, children will be placed in situations where the children may not receive the best care due to a lack of resources," Miller said.

While Miller said she is proud of the outstanding services that Little Turtles provides, it's limited by space and staff.

Miller said she will call upon the city to offer more options to families such as city-run childcare options or to work with the Greater Beloit Economic Development Corporation and other well resourced entities to assist in creating more private and affordable care options.

Having quality childcare available, she said, should be considered an economic development issue and impacts early literacy.