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Kalkhof: Child care important to businesses

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DURHAM -- Twice in recent weeks, Bill Kalkhof of Downtown Durham Inc. was having recruitment discussions with companies he was trying to lure to downtown.

"Both times, day care came up," recalled Kalkhof, president of DDI. "Both times, the people wanted to know, where do our employees find day care?"

The availability of high-quality day care in the downtown area is not the most important factor in downtown economic development, local leaders say, but it is a significant one.

"Does it fall in the top five things of what businesses want? Probably not," Kalkhof said. "But it's potentially an important amenity for economic development recruitment efforts. It definitely would help professional recruitment."

More high-quality child care could be a significant driver in business recruitment, said Casey Steinbacher, the president of the Greater Durham Chamber of Commerce.

"When we are doing recruitment, the No. 1 thing we are asked is, what is your talent base for me to employ?" Steinbacher said. "The second thing is what is your pipeline to keep that talent coming? And the third thing is what kind of community are you? What's the quality of life here?, and child care is a big part of that."

Recruitment, Steinbacher explained, is not a process of selection, but elimination.

"What you want is not to get eliminated because you don't have something," she said. "We don't want to be in that situation with day care."

Business boosters like Steinbacher and Kalkhof acknowledge that more quality day care downtown -- there are now just three child-care facilities, with fewer than 300 slots for nearly 14,000 workers -- would be a bonus for their recruitment efforts. But getting that to happen, they know, won't be easy.

Day cares are highly regulated facilities and generally need a lot of premium ground-level space, and they need outside play areas, too -- qualities that are all in short supply downtown.

"We're doing a lot of research now on what are the public policy, development

rules and regulatory issues that we would have to deal with to get day care downtown," Kalkhof said. "What are the obstacles to making it happen?"

As more large parcels of land are developed downtown, "we need to determine if there is an opportunity to bring day care to those developments, either through a contractor coming in or through the developer operating it for them," Kalkhof said. "That's why we're looking at best practices across the nation to see how other places are doing it."

Kalkopf wondered, for instance, if having Durham Central Park just a couple of blocks away from a facility would qualify as green space for a day care. "And maybe there are other things that could be done," he said. "We have to understand the challenges first."

DDI, the chamber and the Durham Partnership for Children will present the results of a survey of downtown workers on child-care facilities at a meeting of community leaders Feb. 25.

"We'll share all the information we have with developers, and work with them and with public bodies to create opportunities downtown," Kalkhof said. "We need to figure out ways to meet the challenges."

For Marsha Basloe, executive director of the partnership, the issue is more than just one of economic development.

"We want to help employees be able to work where they want to," she said, "but we also would like to ensure that children who are in child care are in the highest quality of child care. The higher the quality the better the outcome."

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