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## Workers want child care downtown

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Two-thirds say they'd might pay more for facilities close to work

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DURHAM -- Downtown workers would like to see quality child care available downtown -- and are willing to pay for it.

Those are two of the major conclusions of a survey of downtown workers conducted recently by Durham's Partnership for Young Children, the Greater Durham Chamber of Commerce and Downtown Durham Inc.

The survey results, which will be presented to business, education and local government leaders later this month, showed that child care in proximity to the workplace was preferred over care near the home by a ratio of nearly 3-to-1.

Two thirds of the nearly 300 respondents to the survey indicated that they would or might pay more for quality child care that was closer to where they worked.

"Those are the two big takeaways," said Bill Kalkhof, president of Downtown Durham. "There is demand -- and it's greater than I had thought -- and people will pay to have that demand met."

The survey grew out of a strategic initiative launched by the partnership more than a year ago to expand early child care facilities in downtown. "We had a sense that in Durham people looked for child care closer to home than to their work," said Casey Steinbacher, the president of the chamber. "We were surprised it was the other way around, although that makes a lot of sense, that that's what people want."

Working with the chamber and DDI, Marsha Basloe, the director of the partnership, organized a large-scale meeting of civic leaders last August to examine the issue and the group decided on the survey.

"There was some anecdotal evidence of the need, but the downtown community had grown so much, it was time to really look at the situation," Basloe said. "We needed to find out how to support the employee base that had now been built."

Currently, there are only three day-care centers downtown, with a total of 273 slots. All three centers are at 100 percent occupancy and none of the three is a 5-star center, the highest grade for child care facilities.

According to the most recent figures, nearly 14,000 people now work downtown.

"When you look at the number of people working downtown and the number of child care slots available, well, there's just not enough," Basloe said.

But the need is more than just increasing numbers, said Kalkhof. "What we've also found is that the downtown working population is not just growing, it is also changing," he said. "Six to seven years ago, the average age of downtown employees was in the mid-40s. Now, it's 38. Back then, the average income of downtown employees was in the mid-\$30,000 range. Today, it's in the mid-\$50,000 range"

When you combine those numbers, he added, "it means there are a lot more people in downtown with wealth. When you have people of child-bearing age with higher incomes, you definitely have a market which would pay a fair dollar for quality child care."

The survey also found that 55 percent of the respondents have a child-care arrangement that is 10-plus miles from their workplace and that 55 percent found it difficult or very difficult to find quality care downtown.

Twelve percent said they couldn't find any day care at all downtown. Proximity to the workplace was the third most important factor in choosing a child care facility, the respondents said. Quality was No. 1, and affordability was second.

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