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The Importance of Child Care in the Community

The nature of working America has changed and child care has changed with it. The structure and economics of family life has gone through a dramatic transformation in the last two decades. One consequence of this transformation is that in a single generation, child care has gone from the exception to the norm.

In California, more than 4 million children ages 13 and under live either in two-parent households where both parents are employed or in single-parent families where the parent works outside the home. Many of these parents have moved from using friends and relatives as child care providers to licensed child care centers and family child care homes. Santa Barbara County's working parents are no exception.

According to the 2001 California Child Care Portfolio, published by the California Child Care Resource and Referral Network, Santa Barbara County is home to 47,793 children under the age of 13 living with two employed parents or an employed single parent.

Demand For Child Care Continues to Outstrip the Supply

Despite the influx of parents into the work force, the supply of licensed child care in Santa Barbara County is not increasing commensurately. While there are potentially over 47,000 children in need of child care in the County, there are only 11,589 spaces for children in licensed child care facilities (centers and family child care homes) in the County. Recent welfare reforms, which requires welfare recipients to work, have significantly increased the demand for child care.

Social and demographic shifts throughout the country have brought new responsibilities to local government. In a 1996 survey conducted by the National League of Cities, local governments reported that the most pressing concern of families was child care. It was ranked as one of the three most pressing needs of children and families by 30 percent of all survey respondents, more often than any other item from a list of 34. Child care was the number one concern from the smallest to the largest of cities and in all regions of the United States, and was perceived as one of three most pressing needs for children from birth through age five by 74 percent of all respondents.



Across the nation, city officials are beginning to recognize that:

- ❑ Providing good quality, affordable child care is a sound investment in a community's future. Increasingly, research indicates that it is far less expensive to pay for child care today than to bear the costs of social problems may be caused by the lack of quality care. The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study of 1993 tracked children over 27 years and found that for each dollar invested in preschool programs, over \$7.00 is saved in future spending on criminal justice, education, welfare, and other expenditures.
- ❑ Effective child care systems help to enhance the capacities of families to carry out all of the five core functions of families as identified by the National League of Cities 1992 Futures Report. The five core functions of families are to provide a healthy and secure environment, to care for each generation, to transmit values, to meet economic needs and to establish social networks. Child care contributes to each of these functions.
- ❑ Child care is a factor in the economic life of California cities. A community that joins with employers to increase the supply of child care will attract and retain workers and their families. As child care becomes a recruitment issue for employers, a community's supply of child care may provide a competitive edge in attracting or retaining business and industry.

Zoning – Obstacle or Incentive?

In December 1998, a survey of city planning departments was conducted as a part of the Local Investment in Child Care (LINCC) project. The results of the survey indicated that the imposition of restrictive, complicated, drawn-out and costly zoning regulations is inhibiting the growth of large family child care and child care centers. It is important for communities to integrate child care into the community rather than segregating it, which can happen as a result of zoning practices

Zoning regulations and development fees can have a far-reaching impact on availability, cost and quality of child care. Regulations that restrict child care facilities to a few areas of the community, conflict with state licensing standards, or require a complicated and expensive review process, can have a profound negative impact on child care.

Regulations that allow child care facilities of varying sizes to locate in a variety of zone districts, while carefully safeguarding child and neighborhood concerns, are essential in any community that wants to ensure that adequate child care facilities are developed. The review process for child care facilities should be straightforward and easily understood, in order not to be an obstacle.

Zoning incentives can be used as a planning tool to encourage the development of child care facilities. Initiatives in the zoning ordinance such as density bonuses or site coverage exemptions can spur developers to include child care centers in commercial and residential developments. An increasing number of communities in the state require developers to



mitigate the impact of their developments on child care needs by including facilities in developments or by paying a mitigation fee to be used to fund child care projects.

The Challenge to Communities

As the demand for child care continues to grow, planners are confronted with an array of complex issues associated with the siting of facilities, and decision-makers who understand the role and nature of child care in the community will be well prepared to tackle these issues. Municipal government can be a key player in changing systems to assure that all children and youth are cared for in ways that support long-term development.

Today's planners have an opportunity to create communities that address the needs of children and families; to help support the community's economic health by ensuring sufficient child care for working families; and to create places in which child care flourishes as a well-integrated element of the community.



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