

Proposed Burlingame child care facility clears city hurdle

Austin Corona, Aspen Daily News Staff Writer
Apr 24, 2024



A rendering from a city memorandum shows designs for the proposed Burlingame Early Childhood Education Center, which would be located just outside of the Burlingame Ranch Phase I development.

Aspen City Council advanced an ordinance to build a 94-student early childhood education center at the Burlingame Ranch affordable housing development on Tuesday.

Council will vote on whether to finalize and pass the ordinance during a second reading at a future meeting.

The ordinance would approve amended land-use entitlements for the child care center, but it would not establish a funding plan or a construction timeline for the project.

The facility would be located on a vacant 39,000-square-foot lot on the west side of Harmony Road immediately south of its intersection with Ford Road at the entrance to Burlingame Phase I. The city would reroute an existing trail that runs through the lot.

The proposed 15,300-square-foot structure would have two stories, according to a city memorandum. The facility would include three playgrounds, with one playground dedicated to each of the facility's infant, toddler and preschool age groups.

The city has envisioned the center at Burlingame Ranch since at least 2011 when it codified a child-care facility and public park as alternative land uses for the vacant lot. The city completed the third and final phase of the Burlingame affordable housing development in 2023 after more than 20 years of planning and construction.

"The use was approved by City Council and the parcel has long been thought of as a location for a childcare center," the memo reads. It later states, "Childcare capacity within Aspen and Roaring Fork Valley is an ongoing challenge for families and businesses..."

City Manager Sara Ott told council members that the city plans to gauge local demand for early childhood care before taking any next steps.

"This is getting the site fully ready so that once demand is induced, it can proceed with development at that time," Ott said.

Ott said the city declined an opportunity to seek federal funding for the project this year because staff believed demand for the project was softening amid a growth in local child-care providers. She said the city's most recent efforts to measure that demand suffered distortion from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ott said the city saw sufficient demand to justify this facility three years ago, but that city staff believe demand for early childhood care has softened since then.

Councilman Bill Guth said he understands the need for early childhood care in the upper valley and supports the city intervening to meet that need.

Nonetheless, he said he would be hesitant to approve funding for the project in the future unless the city had observed adequate demand for its services.

A report released by the Confluence Early Childhood Education Coalition found that upper Roaring Fork Valley early childhood care providers had spots for only about half of the area's children under 5 years old (323 spots for 610 kids) in 2022. The upper valley in this case referred to Aspen, Snowmass Village and Woody Creek.

That study found seven providers active in the area in 2022.

According to Kids First, a city-run early child care resource center, currently 14 providers offer early childhood care in Pitkin County, though some are seasonal.

Ott said her greatest hesitation in building the project was finding staff, not students. The facility calls for 24 full-time employees. Housing constraints and high cost of living have made it difficult for educational institutions through the Roaring Fork Valley to find staff.

"I'll go back to my number one issue I have with constructing this facility is being able to staff it and the staff having housing. I think that's going to be a bigger hurdle," Ott said.

Ott added that the facility could reach its staff and student maximums through a phased increase.

Councilman Sam Rose said he was surprised by the high number of staff members needed for the facility. Rose pointed out that 24 staff members and 94 children would create a roughly 4-1 child-staff member ratio.

austin@aspendedailynews.com

Austin Corona

Staff Reporter