

CHILD CARE CONCERNS LINGER

L.B.: Looming demise of flexible-hour program leaves parents anxious.

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Alexandra Padilla and her son Tyler Chavez, 8, leave the extended day Program Tyler attends at Veterans Park Community Center in Long Beach.
(Stephen Carr / Press-Telegram)

LONG BEACH - For three years, 8-year-old Tyler Chavez has gone every day after school to the city's extended day program, which his mother Alexandra Padilla said provides a safe environment and has a flexible schedule that accommodates her needs.

The city-funded program provides child care for elementary school students at three city parks on weekdays in the early morning and the afternoon at a cost of no more than \$10 a day. But the program is expected to close, and parents whose children are enrolled say they are worried about where they will send their young ones in the future.

"I looked into another program, but they (the teachers) don't stay until 6 (p.m.)," said Padilla, who works for an insurance company. "It wouldn't work into my schedule. So I really don't know what I'd do if they close."

For now, the program has been given a respite.

Extended-day programming had been slated to close at the end of the month, but the City Council last week decided during city budget discussions to reallocate \$133,000 from a lighting project near Cal State Long Beach, giving the program three more months of life but raising the ire of one council member.

That money also saved - for one year - the city's traditional Halloween carnivals, Easter egg hunts and snow days that also were to be cut.

At the end of December, however, the extended-day program most likely will close for good.

"Unless more money is found by the end of the year, we'll be notifying parents," Phil Hester, director of the city's Parks, Recreation and Marine Department, said Wednesday.

The program costs the city about \$130,000 per year, he said.

Already, families that can find alternatives are leaving the program, Hester said.

Two or three years ago, about 60 children were enrolled at each of the program's three sites - Houghton, Silverado and Veterans Memorial parks, Hester said. Now, only about 20 students go each day, he said.

In the extended-day classroom at the Veterans Memorial community center on Thursday afternoon, even fewer children remained.

Tyler was one of only four to attend the program that day, because most parents believed the program would close at the end of the month, recreation leader Eryka Aguilera said. The children spent the afternoon doing homework, watching a movie, assembling a puzzle and playing video games, she said.

The children's parents, some of whom are single mothers, lamented the program's closure.

Parent Claire Horton, whose daughter De'Aja Newburn started extended day last year, said she had considered leaving the 5-year-old at the free afternoon program available at many Long Beach elementary schools, but it isn't open late enough and has a rigid schedule that doesn't allow parents to pick up their children early when necessary.

She and the other parents also said they are pleased that the extended day program's recreation leaders walk the children from school to the park, which means they're never unsupervised.

"I have no idea what I'm going to do," Horton said. "A lot of parents don't have anywhere to put their kids."



Boosting public safety

Hester said that while the extended day program may close, at least the Halloween, Easter and snow day events were saved. The festivities have become important to many residents, and they keep kids out of trouble, he said.

"They're really very much family-oriented, and they've actually really grown tremendously over the last three or four years," Hester said.

More than 30,000 people participated in the events last year, including about 5,000 people at a Whaley Park snow day, when snow is trucked in for children to play with, he said.

Councilman Patrick O'Donnell of the 4th District, whose proposal it was to shift money to the recreation programs, said Friday that youths need after-school and holiday activities. He said the need is especially evident following the attack by a group of teenagers on three young women in Bixby Knolls last Halloween.

"The most vulnerable \ for our youth is from 4 to 7 p.m.," said O'Donnell, who is a teacher. "When kids are busy and involved in after-school activities, they don't get in trouble."

Controversial funding

While O'Donnell says youth programs are directly related to public safety, 3rd District Councilman Gary DeLong said last week he disagrees that having Halloween events will prevent youth crime.

DeLong, who was the only council member to vote against the proposed funding change, said the \$400,000 CSULB pedestrian lighting project, to which the city, the county and the university each were to contribute a third of the money, was a better public safety initiative. Several women were attacked last fall around the Cal State Long Beach campus.

"It's unfortunate that the council decided to exchange \$400,000 in long-term infrastructure for \$133,000 worth of Easter egg hunts, Halloween carnivals and snow days," DeLong said. "I think programs for kids are important, but the council also has been stating recently that public safety and infrastructure are our two highest priorities."

The project was to install pedestrian lighting along Bellflower Boulevard, Palo Verde Avenue and Atherton Street.

University President F. King Alexander said in a written statement Friday that "the project is on hold" and that he hopes to see it resume when the city can afford it.

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