

## TOWN OF LA POINTE – BOARD BRIEFING MEMO

### *Childcare Infrastructure Needs & Options for Town Involvement*

Town Board Meeting Date: 12/9/25 . 12/4/25

Prepared for: Town Board of Supervisors

#### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Madeline Island is experiencing a significant demographic shift, with five children born in 2024–2025 and at least four more expected in early 2026. For a year-round population of approximately 300–350 residents, this constitutes a major proportional “baby boom.”

The Town’s 2024 Comprehensive Plan Amendment (the “Comprehensive Plan”) clearly identifies childcare as a core strategic priority. In the Critical Priorities section, the Town commits to:

*“Removing barriers to family success: affordable housing, food access, child care, health care.”  
(Town of La Pointe Comprehensive Plan Amendment 2024, p. 4)*

The Island currently has no licensed childcare provider. Families rely entirely on informal, individually arranged childcare and babysitting. This impedes workforce participation, discourages young families from staying year-round, and constrains economic development.

This briefing memo outlines options for Town involvement in addressing the childcare gap on Madeline Island, with an emphasis on approaches that are consistent with the Comprehensive Plan, fiscally responsible, and operationally realistic.

#### **BACKGROUND: CHILDCARE AS CRITICAL COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE**

The Comprehensive Plan emphasizes that community sustainability depends on maintaining a stable, diverse, and intergenerational population. The Plan’s Vision states:

*“The Town supports sustainable year-round living through access to essential services, a resilient economy, and a healthy community.”*

Childcare is a foundational “essential service” because it affects workforce stability, family retention, housing decisions, and school enrollment. Without reliable childcare, families with young children are less likely to remain on the Island, and employers struggle to recruit and retain staff.

#### **Key Impacts Identified**

##### **1. Workforce Impacts**

- Lack of childcare limits the hours and seasons during which parents can work.
- Town departments, EMS, ferry operations, retail, hospitality, and trades all report difficulty maintaining a stable workforce.

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- Seasonal workers with children may decline Island-based positions due to the absence of formal childcare.

*These challenges align with the Comprehensive Plan's Guiding Principle to "support the workforce needed for a healthy community and economy."*

## **2. Population Stability**

- Families frequently consider leaving or do leave the Island once infants reach toddler age because childcare options are limited.
- Prospective new families may be reluctant to relocate to the Island without a clear childcare solution.
- School enrollment and long-term viability are affected when early-childhood families decide they cannot remain year-round.

*The Comprehensive Plan calls for strategies that "strengthen the community by supporting families and multigenerational living."*

## **3. Economic Development**

- Businesses identify childcare as a barrier to hiring and retaining employees.
- Lack of childcare influences whether workers can take on full-time, year-round roles or must limit their employment to seasonal or part-time work.
- Housing and investment decisions are increasingly tied to the availability of family support services like childcare.

The Comprehensive Plan treats family services, including childcare, as part of the Town's economic and community resilience strategy, rather than as an isolated social issue.

## **DEMAND SUMMARY**

Based on known and anticipated births, at least nine infants and toddlers will reside on Madeline Island by early 2026. In rural communities, small licensed childcare programs are often considered viable starting at approximately five to six enrolled children.

Madeline Island therefore meets or exceeds the typical threshold for a sustainable childcare program. Additional seasonal and extended-family childcare needs would likely increase demand further.

*This directly advances the Comprehensive Plan's direction to "ensure that services and infrastructure meet the needs of year-round residents."*

## **OPTIONS FOR TOWN INVOLVEMENT (ALIGNED WITH THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN)**

The Comprehensive Plan recognizes that the Town may need to act directly or collaboratively to ensure access to essential services. Under Community Facilities and Services, the Plan encourages "exploring creative and collaborative approaches to service provision where traditional market mechanisms are insufficient." Childcare on Madeline Island is a clear example of such a market gap.

### **Option A — Town-Owned, Privately Operated Childcare Center**

- The Town provides or constructs a childcare facility (for example, a modular classroom on Town-owned land).
- A private, licensed childcare operator manages day-to-day operations, staffing, and regulatory compliance.
- Operating costs are primarily supported by parent fees and any available operating subsidies.
- The Town retains control through ownership of the facility and a lease or operating agreement.

This model is widely used in rural communities. It is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan's goal to support families and year-round residents with essential services, while managing Town liability and cost exposure.

### **Option B — Town-Supported Childcare Cooperative**

- Parents and community members form a cooperative childcare entity.
- The Town provides suitable space, basic furnishings, and modest start-up or insurance support as legally permissible.
- The cooperative hires qualified early childhood staff and sets fees, policies, and schedules.
- Governance comes from the member families, with the Town's role focused on infrastructure and facilitation.

This approach reflects the Comprehensive Plan's emphasis on collaboration, local engagement, and community-driven solutions.

### **Option C — Municipal / Tribal / Nonprofit Partnership**

- The Town partners with a regional provider (such as a tribal early childhood program or county nonprofit) for staffing and licensing expertise.
- The Town provides or hosts the physical facility, while the partner operates the childcare program.
- This spreads risk and leverages regional experience in early childhood education.

This option aligns with the Comprehensive Plan's call for regional collaboration where appropriate.

## **IMMEDIATE LOW-COST SUPPORT ACTIONS (30–60 DAYS)**

The following steps can be taken quickly, at low cost, and are fully consistent with the Comprehensive Plan's incremental, community-driven approach.

### **1. Town-Managed Childcare & Babysitter Registry**

- Create and maintain a voluntary registry of babysitters and part-time caregivers who are available on the Island.
- Encourage (and where practical, assist) with basic background checks or references.
- Make the registry accessible to parents through the Town's website or Clerk's office.

### **2. Streamlined Zoning for In-Home Childcare**

- Review and, if necessary, adjust zoning and conditional use provisions to make it easier to establish small family childcare homes.
- Consider allowing accessory structures to be used for licensed childcare, subject to building and safety codes.
- Treat childcare as critical workforce infrastructure when interpreting land use policies.

*This supports the Comprehensive Plan objective to “enable flexible and community-oriented housing and land use solutions.”*

### **3. Training & Licensing Support**

- Provide modest financial support to cover required state training courses for Island residents who wish to become childcare assistants or family childcare providers.
- Share information about online and regional training opportunities.
- Encourage development of multiple caregivers with formal qualifications to build local capacity.

These actions are consistent with the Plan’s emphasis on workforce development, family support, and resilient year-round living.

## **SITE & FACILITY OPTIONS**

### **1. Harry Nelson Recreation Center (Corrected Assessment)**

The Harry Nelson Recreation Center was recently renovated to provide ADA-compliant public restrooms, which significantly reduced available interior space. The remaining interior areas are not sufficient to support a licensed childcare program without substantial reconstruction to meet Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) childcare licensing standards (square footage, child-safe bathrooms, egress, etc.).

Conclusion: The Harry Nelson Recreation Center is not a viable primary location for a licensed childcare facility. It may, however, serve as a supplemental space for outdoor programming, parent meetings, or administrative functions.

### **2. Modular / Prefabricated Childcare Classroom (Most Viable Option)**

Given the limited availability of suitable Town-owned indoor space, a modular childcare classroom placed on Town-owned land is the most practical and fundable building solution.

- Purpose-built to meet DCF childcare licensing requirements from the outset.
- Relatively rapid deployment, often within 4–6 months from order to installation.
- Eligible for USDA Rural Development (Community Facilities) and Wisconsin DCF infrastructure grants.
- Scalable and relocatable, allowing the Town to adjust as demand changes.
- Lower overall cost than most new brick-and-mortar construction for a similar use.

#### **Potential placement locations include:**

- Adjacent to Town Hall.
- On land near the Harry Nelson Recreation Center.

- Near an existing schoolhouse or community activity area, if the land is Town-owned and accessible year-round.
- Any centrally located, accessible Town parcel able to accommodate safe drop-off and pick-up.

**Approximate cost ranges (order-of-magnitude estimates):**

- Single-classroom modular unit (6–8 children): \$175,000–\$350,000 installed.
- Double-classroom modular unit (infant and toddler rooms): \$300,000–\$550,000 installed.

USDA Rural Development may fund up to approximately 75% of eligible capital costs, with the Town responsible for the remaining share through local funds, donations, or partnerships. This approach meets multiple Comprehensive Plan directives, including supporting the workforce, prioritizing services that allow families to live and thrive year-round, and investing wisely in community facilities so that they effectively meet priority needs.

## **FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES**

### **1. Wisconsin DCF Childcare Infrastructure Grants**

- Prioritize rural and underserved communities, including childcare deserts.
- Can fund modular facilities, renovations, safety improvements, and outdoor play spaces.

### **2. USDA Rural Development – Community Facilities Program**

- Highly suitable for an isolated rural community such as Madeline Island.
- Can provide grants and/or loans covering a large portion of capital costs, in some cases up to 75%.
- Explicitly supports construction, renovation, or purchase of essential community facilities, including childcare centers.

### **3. Workforce & Economic Development Grants**

- Because childcare access is closely linked to workforce stability, the Town may be eligible for regional workforce or tourism-related grants.
- Additional opportunities may arise under future federal or state childcare stabilization and economic recovery programs.

Pursuing these funding sources is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan’s emphasis on leveraging outside resources and partnerships to support community goals.

## **SUGGESTED TOWN BOARD TASK FORCE ACTION STEPS**

To ensure that childcare planning is community-driven, transparent, and aligned with the Comprehensive Plan, the Town Board may wish to create a temporary advisory body such as a “Madeline Island Childcare Task Force.” Suggested steps include:

- Draft and adopt a formal Board resolution creating the Task Force, stating its purpose, scope, and duration.

- Specify the Task Force's charge, such as: assessing childcare needs, evaluating facility and funding options, and recommending a preferred model to the Board.
- Define membership (for example, parents of young children, employers, a Town Board representative, a childcare professional if available, and at-large community members).
- Set a target timeline (for example, an initial report within 90–120 days).
- Direct the Task Force to review the Comprehensive Plan excerpts related to families, workforce, and essential services to ensure alignment.
- Provide staff support (e.g., from the Clerk/Treasurer's office) for meeting noticing, minutes, and basic research support.
- Invite the Task Force to identify grant opportunities and potential operating partners as part of its final recommendation.

This approach reflects the Comprehensive Plan's emphasis on community collaboration, local engagement, and implementing achievable improvements that support long-term resilience.

## **RECOMMENDED PHASED APPROACH**

### **Phase 1 (30–60 days): Planning and Community Engagement**

- Adopt a resolution establishing the Madeline Island Childcare Task Force and appoint members.
- Identify candidate Town parcels suitable for a modular childcare classroom, considering access, utilities, and safety.
- Conduct a community childcare needs survey (online and paper) to document current and projected childcare needs.
- Begin compiling information required for USDA Rural Development and Wisconsin DCF grant applications.

### **Phase 2 (60–180 days): Facility and Operator Development**

- Obtain preliminary cost estimates and conceptual site plans for one- and two-classroom modular facilities.
- Issue a Request for Interest (RFI) to potential private operators and/or cooperative organizers.
- Evaluate partnership options with tribal or county early childhood providers.
- Prepare and submit grant applications to USDA Rural Development, Wisconsin DCF, and any relevant workforce or economic development programs.

### **Phase 3 (6–18 months): Construction, Launch, and Evaluation**

- Secure funding commitments and finalize design and site selection.
- Purchase and install the modular childcare facility.
- Execute lease or operating agreements with the selected provider or cooperative.
- Open the childcare program with an initial capacity of approximately 6–10 children, with room to adjust as demand evolves.
- After the first full year of operation, evaluate the program's performance and consider adjustments or expansion if warranted.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Town of La Pointe's 2024 Comprehensive Plan Amendment explicitly identifies childcare as one of the critical barriers to family success, placing it alongside affordable housing, food access, and health care. The Plan's guiding principles emphasize supporting families, enabling year-round living, and ensuring access to essential services.

A Town-facilitated childcare solution—most likely through a modular, grant-supported facility operated by a private provider or cooperative—would directly implement these adopted policy goals. Such an initiative would support young families, strengthen workforce reliability, encourage year-round residency, and enhance long-term community stability.

Pursuing this path is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan's overarching vision for “a sustainable year-round living environment supported by essential services and a resilient community.” By taking measured, phased steps—beginning with the creation of a Childcare Task Force—the Town can move toward a practical, fiscally responsible childcare solution that reflects the Island's values and priorities.