

Kindertown's doors open for now

By Kathryn Reed



“I attended the hearing (Thursday) because I was there the day it opened and I wanted to be supportive of its continued existence,” Dave Kurtzman said.

He and a couple dozen parents filled the courtroom of El Dorado County Superior Court Judge Steven Bailey Thursday at 4pm, about two hours after the hearing was scheduled. After less than an hour of testimony from both sides, Kindertown owner Maria Barrows-Crist was granted a 20-day stay.

The decision brought a resounding round of applause – not something often heard in a courtroom.

It was a state of elation at Kindertown as the news spread and parents picked up their kids.

“We’re so happy,” Stephanie Yuzbick said as she loaded her 3-year-old and 18-month-old into the car. Yuzbick was at Thursday’s hearing, where tears of joy flowed.

The stay means Barrows-Crist’s attorney, who she had hired the day before, has until Nov. 4 to review all the documentation that led to the state Department of Social Services to want to close the 36-year-old day care-preschool.

It will also be his job to prove the state’s punishment was not in line with the charges. Those charges include drug use

by Barrows-Crist's daughter, who no longer works at the center; taking kids off the hill without permission during the 2007 Angora Fire; allowing a well-known dance studio owner to teach a class without being fingerprinted.

South Lake Tahoe City Attorney Patrick Enright wrote a letter on behalf of the City Council in support of keeping Kindertown open. Assemblyman Ted Gaines and state Sen. Dave Cox's office have also been involved.

At the El Dorado County level, Barrows-Crist said Supervisor Norma Santiago never returned calls and that she spoke to her assistant once.

"As far as Norma returning calls, I talked to Maria on all calls she made; in great, great detail. Each time, Norma was in session and asked me to handle the calls," Judi Harkins, Santiago's assistant, wrote in an email. "I worked very hard behind the scenes to follow all leads to help Maria."

Regardless, Barrows-Crist knew one thing she had to do was change legal counsel. Not believing the attorney she had was doing enough to keep the doors open, Barrows-Crist on Wednesday hired Mike McLaughlin with Feldman Shaw LLP in Zephyr Cove to represent her.

The state argued via telephone that keeping Kindertown open would hurt the community. McLaughlin argued that displacing families is more of a threat.

"She tried to make me look like the monster from hell," Barrows-Crist said of the state's attorney after the hearing was over.

The threat of closure already meant more than half of the 130 kids Kindertown cared for went elsewhere and half of the 20 employees had to be laid off.

"One thing that interested me is the representative of the

state said parents seemed to have no problem placing their kids elsewhere as the state had not received any letters stating otherwise," Kurtzman said. "I found this curious as the state person seemed to think parents just 'park' their kids while, in fact, parents make deliberate decisions regarding the education and care of their children and moving them can be difficult and sometimes traumatic. The state representative seemed somewhat insensitive to the desires and needs of the parents. The arguments seemed very clinical to me."

Kurtzman credits his former wife, Judy, not himself, for starting Kindertown on July 1, 1973, with about 10 students. The Kurtzmans had moved to South Lake Tahoe seven months earlier; opening Aspen Realty the same year.

Barrows-Crist is the third owner of the center.

Kurtzman said, "(Kindertown) has become a Tahoe institution, with, per Crist, 6,000 past and present students."

It's well documented multiple generations have been cared for at Kindertown.