

Lunch to return to FFHS cafeteria

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By Ken Kellar

Students and staff attending Fort Frances High School this year will soon see the return of a long-lost option for lunches.

NCDS announced that through grant funding, they are overseeing the creation of “The Caf Co.”—a not-for-profit enterprise that is aiming to bring lunch service back to the high school cafeteria.

NCDS executive director Nicke Paddock (Baird) revealed that the money comes from an organization in Thunder Bay that supports business and economic development in most of Ontario.

“It’s called the Social Enterprise Grant through the PARO Centre for Women’s Enterprise,” Paddock said.

“It’s for creating a business, or for a business that you’re currently doing, that is great for the social well-being in communities. So what we’re going to do is open up the cafeteria, which is going to create help create work training program for students, Seven Generations students, some of our clients and they’ll go through a work training program to get them prepared for either through a co-op or just introducing them to a restaurant-style environment.”

The high school’s cafeteria closed down in 2013, and since then students have had to rely on home lunches, vending machines, or one of several restaurants in the town’s west end for food. Attempts have been made in the intervening years to have some kind of service return to the cafeteria, including a student petition in 2017.

Paddock said the new business will be looking to provide an option for students to access healthy, fun and affordable lunches.

“There’s a healthy food policy that’s called the School Food and Beverage Policy,” Paddock said.

“So we’re working with the school to provide food that falls within the policy but also is fun and classic, like chicken caesar salad wraps with homemade caesar salad and real chicken, not processed chicken. So we’re just going to do some real classic recipes and do them really well but the whole spin on this is going to be, ‘Let’s make healthy food fun.’”

Paddock offered up a smoothie as an example of their way of thinking when it comes to fun and healthy menu items.

“I did a fruit smoothie workshop out in B.C. and we’re going to do smoothies here and they’re all natural,” she explained.

“There’s going to be no sugar in them besides natural sugars. They’re going to be healthy, but we could also add some fun things in there where they can add healthy add-ons, if they want to try spinach and flaxseed and protein powder.

“It’s all going to be displayed in a way that’s attractive, so there will be large food canisters with the add-ons and it’ll be just be something that may attract them more to try stuff like that,” noted Paddock.

Currently, the plans are to have a core menu of about eight permanent items with a rotating daily special. There will also be room for special menu items to introduce students to foods they might not otherwise have the opportunity to try.

Paddock said that though the final menu and price point hasn't been set, they will be aiming to keep it affordable for students.

"It's difficult to know until you actually have the exact pricing of the food items," she explained.

"I don't really know food costs yet. The profit margin is going to be smaller than what you would have in a typical restaurant because profit is not our driving factor."

There's also an effort being made to source much of the food as local as possible.

Paddock said that part of the benefit of working with the High School to reopen the cafeteria this way is the opportunity it offers to students and people in the community who might be looking for work experience.

"The great thing is that coming at it from a non-profit, profit is not the driving force of this business," she explained.

"It's the social well-being of the students, and the work training programs that are going to happen through there. So it's a really great opportunity for the community."

The idea, Paddock said, is to offer students an opportunity to work at the cafeteria during part of their lunch breaks, with two prep cooks and a manager preparing the food and making sure everything runs smoothly.

"We have to see what the first year looks like but we're looking at offering a package that has a good wage for the manager along with paid summers off," Paddock said.

"The great thing is it's the same holidays as the students get, so March Break, Christmas, Summers off. And because then they get to fall under NCDS's pension and benefits, we get to offer that which isn't really typical in the food industry."

"So pension, benefits, decent wages and flexible healthy work environment we're going for too, so that type of hiring package I think will really draw in some people," she continued.

"Even our prep cooks, we're trying to go for \$18 an hour."

At this point in the process, Paddock noted that there isn't a firm date in mind for when the cafeteria might open for business, only that it's planned to be sooner rather than later.

"We've got no hard fast deadlines on anything," she said.

"The school has to do some renovations to the cafeteria and get some stuff inspected, like their fan hood. We're going to get it kind of up and going, manuals in place, policies, procedures and then kind of train people into position, so things are up and running to a certain standard."

"We're thinking, if we were to put a date on it, the third week of school, maybe October 1st, like around there," she continued.

"Things take time. The renovations to the kitchen that are happening, that's going to take a little bit of time."

Paddock said anyone interested in learning more about The Caf Co., including updates, job openings and future menu decisions is invited to visit their Facebook page and Instagram at "TheCafCo." Any other questions can be directed to her at NCDS at 807-274-2282.