

Community garden ?template? proposed for Aurora



By Brock Weir

Projects to provide a place for people to meet their neighbours, get fresh air and exercise, and feel a sense of accomplishment can only be a plus ? but if it can also provide a place for people to grow their own food, so much the better, according to advocates proposing a new community garden in Aurora.

Aurora's Environmental Advisory Committee is calling on Council this month to explore the costs and feasibility of ploughing under a portion of McMahon Park to create a new community garden, and begin a public consultation process within the surrounding community.

Aurora currently has one community garden near the foot of Industrial Parkway South, run in conjunction with the York Region Food Network.

According to advocates, McMahon Park, located just northeast of Yonge and Wellington, has been targeted to develop a second location ? one which could serve as a template for community gardens in other local parks down the road ? through discussions with local residents. Such gardens, they say, are ?important tools towards reducing our carbon footprint by allowing those who choose to live in urban areas the opportunity to spend time working with nature by growing food and being able to walk or cycle to the garden.?

In the plan presented to the Committee (EAC), the McMahon Garden would start off with approximately 12 shared garden plots, and could include programs demonstrating gardening techniques and irrigation, with some services provided to members for a fee.

The existing community garden has a hefty waiting list, they argued, and uptake in a new garden ? should one be permitted for McMahon Park ? would be swift.

?It will be designed to meet the increasing need for garden space and offer the neighbourhood a place for community members to gather, a sustainable food source, gardening space, mentoring and educational opportunities, prospect of community partnerships, joint stewardship of public spaces, while contributing to healthy and active lifestyles,? say advocates. ?McMahon Park is a large public space with areas of high sun exposure and acceptable soil. The project also intends to maintain the integrity of this public space by respecting the current layout of the land and developing the community garden in an underutilized portion of the park, where it will not disrupt current park users.?

McMahon Park is currently used predominantly by the Aurora Community Tennis Club.

The proposal was brought to EAC by local naturalist Klaus Wehrenberg and Catherine Cook, a former administrator for the existing community garden.

?The community garden we do have is quite a bit out of the way,? said Mr. Wehrenberg. ?I am not a member of the Aurora garden partly because it was already filled up. There must be a certain demand that is not being filled because many people who might want to become a member put their name on the list. If we have community gardens in more parks we would have gardens you would be able to walk and cycle to and be able to meet your neighbours. That is the big thing ? getting families and kids to be a part of it.

?This is now at the stage where we need community input. This first park would establish a prototype. If you wanted to have more parks and community gardens right off the back, you would have to have some people in that area who are interested in this who are going to be helpful in establishing it.?

As the one-time coordinator of the York Region Food Network for nine years, Ms. Cook said waiting lists of between 10 and 15 families looking for a chance to dig into the dirt and grow their own food is not unusual.

?Just word of this getting out into our neighbourhood, these people on those waiting lists?it would be word of mouth that would get the people to our new community garden,? said Ms. Cook.

Should Council sign off on investigating the costs of turning a segment of McMahon Park into a community garden at this month's Council meeting slated for August 11, Mr. Wehrenberg and Ms. Cook say they hope public open houses on the subject will soon be in the works and the garden in place by the spring of 2016.

An inevitability, they said, was initial interest might come from neighbourhoods surrounding the park, but it would be a draw for others living elsewhere as well. If it comes to pass this ultimately turns out to be a template for other community gardens in several other parks, ?this would sort itself out naturally,? said Mr. Wehrenberg.

HAVE YOUR SAY ? Should Aurora set aside space in larger area parks to create community gardens? Send your thoughts to letters@auroran.com.