

Location is everything as Council halts garden plan

By Brock Weir

Community gardens can be a great thing, according to Council, but a proposal to place one in McMahon Park is set to be nipped in the bud following talks last week.

Council is set to look elsewhere for a second community garden serving the needs of Aurora residents after a survey of neighbours surrounding McMahon Park did not show overwhelming enthusiasm for a community garden on the other side of their fence.

Going into last week's General Committee meeting, Council faced a staff recommendation calling for a citizen-led plan for a community garden in the area be nixed following a survey of those living in a 400 metre radius of the area in question showed the slimmest of majorities in favour: 45 votes in favour to 41 opposed, with just 15 per cent of residents responding to the survey.

For those living directly on the edge of the proposed community garden, however, the results were significantly more decisive with 11 respondents voting against with six in favour.

This split gave Council significant pause after delegates came forward at last week's meeting both for and against the initiative.

"We always want to be cautious with any issue that can divide a neighbourhood and this is certainly one of them," said Councillor Michael Thompson. "A few years ago we were discussing the traffic calming measures within this same neighbourhood and if you look at our warrants with regards to our traffic calming policy, we talk about needing to have about 70 per cent community support for any of these measures before implementing it to a neighbourhood. It is important to have a clear majority with some of these issues otherwise it creates division. We want to build a community, not separate it. I think it is clear it is a dividing issue."

This was a view shared in part by Councillor Harold Kim, who cited a recent public information meeting for proposed speed cushions on five Aurora streets, bringing out just one resident to speak out. Last week's General Committee meeting, however, brought out people supporting both sides of the community garden issue.

"I think the passion is there on both sides," he said. "Unless we have that majority vote as everyone else indicated, I won't support this."

One thing most people in the room agreed on, however, was the need for more community gardens within Aurora. With just one currently in operation at the south end of Industrial Parkway South, operated by the York Region Food Network, proponents of the McMahon Park proposal envisioned a garden with several plots that could be used by people from across Aurora to get their hands dirty in growing their own food.

Council reiterated this support, tasking staff with a further report on other potentially suitable locations, ideally outside of established neighbourhoods.

"From the get go, I have been in favour of community gardens and I think they are a great thing," said Councillor Paul Pirri. "Ultimately, if this one is not something we want to move forward on, we should definitely be looking at other locations in the community to place these community gardens." One option that should be examined, he said, is land underneath Aurora's hydro corridors.

Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, agreed these would be appropriate locations but striking an agreement with Ontario Hydro poses complications.

"Our experience with them is if we wish to use the hydro corridor we pick up the cost of taxes on those lands and they are fairly significant," he said. "It might be cost prohibitive to go into the hydro corridor. We are finding some challenges extending some of

our trail routes within those hydro corridors because of those prohibitive costs.?