

McMahon Park garden proposal divides community



By Brock Weir

Gardens are typically seen as a hub for people to gather and enjoy, but a proposal to turn a portion of McMahon Park into a community garden had all the ingredients of becoming a neighbourhood battleground last week as residents fought for and against the plan.

Neighbours on both sides of the garden path made their cases to Council at last week's General Committee meeting. With residents opposing the plan having the more vocal cheering section in the audience, their views were brought together by former councillor Bob McRoberts, who has lived within a stone's throw of the land in question for the better part of 60 years.

For him, his opposition to a community garden in this area was less of a NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard) issue, but rather a NIAP ? that is, ?Not in Any Park.?

A survey to gauge the interest in a neighbourhood garden, which would have provided plots for people across Aurora to grow their own vegetables and fruit, only went to homes within a 400 metre radius of McMahon Park, Mr. McRoberts contended.

?Those people already live in houses with front, back and side yards for growing vegetables,? he said. ?Maybe it is a PYOBY ? Put In Your Own Back Yard. I am surprised the Town is willing to consider providing these residents with even more land. Perhaps the survey would better discover a true need by being sent to only Aurora's apartment and condo dwellers. My condo-living daughter says, ?If I wanted a garden, I'd live in a house.' I agree with the concept of providing some land for a community garden, but I do not agree with the location.?

McMahon Park is already a busy community hub, he noted, with tennis courts, lawn bowling, picnic areas, playgrounds and soccer pitches being a draw for people across Aurora. Plowing a portion of this park over for gardens would create an eyesore if the current condition of Aurora's first community garden on Industrial Parkway South is any indication, he added, citing standing water, dripping taps, broken fences, and unkempt plots.

?I am sure the gardeners all started with great enthusiasm and good intentions,? said Mr. McRoberts. ?Over time, human nature sets in. As people's lives change, so do their priorities. Vegetable patches take a lot of time and energy to maintain. People are more apt to look after them if they are in their own yards. McMahon Park is already a well-used, much appreciated green space. Please put the vegetable patch in some yet-to-be-developed plot, as is the current one on Industrial Parkway, not smack in the middle of an established neighbourhood. Please don't divide our neighbourhood.?

In the opposite corner were local trails advocate Klaus Wehrenberg and community garden organizer Catherine Cook, both

neighbours living around the McMahon Park area. Mr. Wehrenberg and Ms. Cook were instrumental in bringing the community garden proposal forward to Council, first pitching their idea at both Aurora's Environmental Advisory and Parks and Recreation Committee.

Despite the staff report advising against moving forward with the garden plan despite the slightest majority of respondents voting in favour of the issue, their enthusiasm was undiminished.

?In a democracy the majority prevails,? said Mr. Wehrenberg, adding Aurora's Parks and Recreation Master Plan calls for further community gardens on a trial basis. ?With such a proposal having been brought forth and with 52 per cent of support by the greater McMahon Park neighbourhood, I would like to know why the proposal would not be allowed to be implemented on a trial basis.

?We are aware of the concerns and undertake to respect them in both the set-up and the future operation of such an allotment garden and respectfully request that our capacity to implement will not be pre-judged on the basis of negative examples and thoughts, for which we cannot be made responsible.?

Ms. Cook, on the other hand, was a leading figure in the development of the Industrial Parkway South Garden, managing community food gardens for York Region for the past decade. She said she did not disagree with neighbours who characterized that particular garden as unkempt, but come the fall plants die, leaves fall, and these concerns can ?inform? how the McMahon garden would have developed going forward.

?I think we can all appreciate the concerns from local residents about the unknown but over time it is those neighbours who participate in and benefit from the garden program who will be most impacted,? said Ms. Cook. ?Not all property owners responded. Most importantly, the majority of survey respondents, 52 per cent, support the garden yet this statistic is not emphasized in the report.

?This is an acceptable location. In fact, it is an excellent location. It bodes critical factors needed for successful planting: full-day sun exposure, viable soil, water access, available space, and close proximity to participants. Concerned voices about soil quality, drainage, etc., may pose challenges but are easily overcome using simple gardening strategies.?