

EDITORIAL: Community garden in park could work

EDITORIAL Fredericton Daily Gleaner

October 14, 2015

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Jasmine Hunter, a summer employee with the City of Fredericton parks and trees department, works on a flower garden in Wilmot Park in this file photo.

Photo: Stephen MacGillivray/The Daily Gleaner

New Brunswick Community Harvest Gardens has been providing a wonderful service to Fredericton residents for a few years.

The non-profit offers space at two sites in the city for people to grow their own food. It could be seen as a quaint idea. Why put all that effort into growing food when you can buy exotic items from around the world at groceries stores? Not only does it require time and effort, but there's no guaranteed return on investment.

The gardens, however, aren't just about food, and this is reflected in the group's motto: grow food, grow minds and grow community.

With this in mind, Harvest Gardens is looking to sow the seeds of success on the south side of the river. The group has two spaces on the north side: a 77-plot garden in St. Marys and an 85-plot space in Marysville.

Harvest Gardens has had an eye on expanding to the downtown area for five years. The problem is where to put it.

Edee Klee, co-chair of the group, says Wilmot Park is an ideal spot. There's a lot to like about the location. A central location is crucial. Community gardens are usually the domain of people without the space to do it home.

"There is a large, high-density, low-income population here in the downtown and we need to bring the gardens to the people," Ms. Klee said.

Wilmot Park is a busy spot in the spring and summer. The tennis court, basketball courts, lawn bowling, playground and wading pool attract everyone from toddlers to seniors. The park will probably attract even more people once the waterpark is complete.

Wilmot is not, however, overrun. There is plenty of space available to see up a garden without inconveniencing any of park's traditional users.

The park has evolved over the years to meet the needs of Fredericton residents. The basketball courts, for example, were set up where a baseball field was once located. Lawn bowling was added about 25 years ago. According to the city of Fredericton's website, the park was created as a "pleasure ground." Gardening fits the bill.

The province has an obesity problem and it is only more pronounced in the low-income population. Efforts that encourage food education and healthier eating need support. Community gardens are a good way to support both. On top of providing the space to grow food, the group offers cooking classes and gardening workshops.

Two concerns about setting up in Wilmot Park, however, must be addressed. Wilmot is located in a wellfield-protection area. While Harvest Gardens uses organic gardening practices, the city needs to know its water supply won't be harmed. As a community, we need evidence that even all-natural gardening won't pollute the water. The group should contact other communities that have faced a similar issue, or perhaps experts from the University of New Brunswick could shed some light on the situation.

The other issue is security. The gardens are designed to be accessible and inclusive. What is the plan to keep troublemakers out? It's not unusual to find empty bottles of liquor in the park and there's evidence intravenous drug use was taking place across the street over the summer.

If the group can show the wellfield won't be harmed, the city should provide the space needed to get a garden up and running.