

King ready to dig into community farm project

By Angela Gismondi

A community farm is coming to town.

King council received a report regarding the development of a community farm on public lands in Schomberg at the committee meeting Monday. The Schomberg Community Farm will be located at 6335 Highway 9. The property is six acres, with Main Street residences on the east side, the Schomberg River and Osin-Lions Park to the west, Highway 9 to the north and Western Ave. to the south.

The community farm, based on the community garden idea, would be used and run by community members and volunteers. According to the staff report, the Township has been working with the Schomberg Community Farm committee to develop the project since the spring. The idea was first presented to the public by the Schomberg Community Farm executive at this year's Schomberg Fair. More than 60 people responded to a short survey expressing their interest and support for the project.

The Community Farm executive developed a site plan for the lands which includes allotment gardens, demonstration gardens, orchard, bees, chickens, solar panels and possible farmers' market.

Garden shares would be rented out on a yearly basis. There is also a barn on the site. Lands to the south of the barn will remain open and could be used for community events such as the Schomberg Fair. The vision includes the delivery of education programs in organic gardening techniques, food preparation, beekeeping and ecology to schools, youth groups, community groups and individuals.

Administration and day-to-day operation will be done by the Community Farm members and executive.

A number of factors were taken into consideration when choosing a location for the farm including access to property, size of property, adjacent land use, proximity to users, walkability, sun exposure, soil quality, access to water and future proposed use. Currently there is no convenient access to the property and a bridge from Osin Lions Park is required to access the lands.

Local Councillor Bill Cober was anxious to get people working on the garden as soon as possible but Chris Fasciano, director of Parks, Recreation and Culture for the Township, said the project most likely won't be up and running until 2015. Two of the major challenges and the reason for the delay in developing the project, Fasciano explained, are access to the property and access to water and power. A bridge is proposed to be constructed from the parking lot in Osin Lions Park to just south of the barn on the farm property. The construction and design of the bridge has been discussed with the Township's fire department and the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority. A building permit and a permit from the conservation authority are required to move ahead with the project.

'We know the community wants to see the shovels in the ground as soon as possible, but there are some hurdles we have to overcome on the site,' said Fasciano. 'There is an easement on the property and we have to get a bridge to improve access to the site.'

Cober suggested that the Township negotiate access to the property with some of the landowners surrounding the proposed site so that the volunteers can begin some preliminary work.

'The community has a strong appetite and we want to give them something to dig into,' said Cober. 'Is it possible to get the volunteers on site in some capacity?'

Fasciano said he would reach out to the landowners and see what he could do to speed up the process.

Water will also be required as soon as the gardens go in. Two options are being considered. In the short term water can be pumped from the Schomberg River and stored in water tanks in the barn but the preferred option would be to hook up to the municipal water system.

The community farm executive is also hoping to install off-the-grid solar panels to provide the required electrical needs.

The community farm in Schomberg will be a model for future garden developments. Interest has already been expressed by residents in both Nobleton and King City for farms in those communities.

'This first example of a community farm will be an evolutionary process and it will be a learning experience,' said Cober. 'We have a lot of volunteers signed up already and I know that a mutual partnership will be fruitful with a volunteer labour force.'

Councillor Avia Eek was pleased to see the project move forward.

'I'm really excited about this farm. I'm used to hearing about community gardens, not farms,' said Eek adding she hopes the initiative will be volunteer-based and not require too much of Township staff's time. 'Other than that I think it's a great idea.'

Councillor Debbie Schaefer wanted to make sure that the farm would be efficient and sustainable.

'It's going to have a great impact on the community,' Schaefer said. 'Now what we've got to do is get the word out to people that these things exist.'

Councillor Peter Grandilli was concerned about how much the project is going to cost and if a community farm is really needed in King.

'It looks like it's going to be very costly,' said Grandilli. 'Personally I don't think it's necessary in King because we already have big gardens.'

Fasciano replied the cost of the garden has not been determined yet.

The Schomberg Community Farm executive is submitting grant applications for the capital works such as barn repair, access to water and the bridge construction. Township staff could potentially be responsible for items such as annual grass cutting, garden plot preparation (rototilling), supplying woodchips, straw mulch, and compost and building maintenance for the community farm.

'The anticipated contribution is expected to be fairly small in scale and any costs associated with the items would be brought forward for consideration as part of future budget deliberations,' states the staff report.

The report was received and council supported the recommendations to authorize staff to discuss the terms of the proposal with the proponent prior to any evaluation or award. Staff are expected to report back to council on the matter by November.