



SUBJECT: Community Gardens

TO: Environment, Infrastructure & Community Services Cttee.

FROM: Recreation, Community and Culture

Report Number: RCC-06-23

Wards Affected: N/A

File Numbers: 930-01

Date to Committee: June 1, 2023

Date to Council: June 13, 2023

Recommendation:

Receive and file recreation, community and culture department report RCC-06-23 regarding the Community Garden Program.

PURPOSE:

Vision to Focus Alignment:

- Support sustainable infrastructure and a resilient environment
- Building more citizen engagement, community health and culture
- Delivering Customer Centric Services with a Focus on Efficiency and Technology Transformation

Background and Discussion:

The benefits of any community garden provision are well documented in social, mental and physical health materials. The residents of Burlington also agree as we continue to see increased demand for the community garden program. Further, throughout the pandemic years, there has been a substantial increase in those seeking a garden plot.

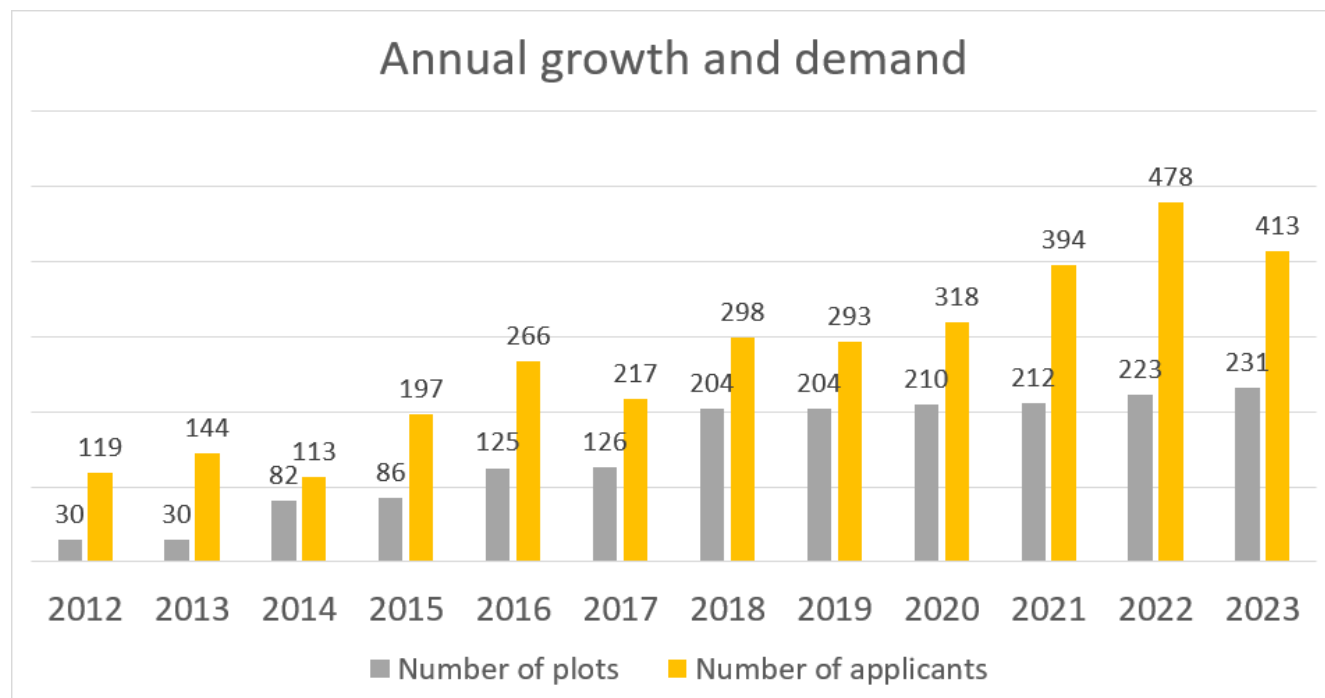
Below are a few samples of testimonies given by participants to validate the benefits of the program:

- “So grateful for the opportunity to grow together and learn about gardening and seeking the right recipes then preparing and cooking. With our very own veggies. Getting to know the other gardeners was a gift also. I'm so appreciative to the city for making this all possible, for people like us who wouldn't otherwise be able to have our own space outside. To call our own for a few glorious months. And to your dedication in keeping, it afloat. It truly was a soul enhancing journey! Absolutely devastated, it's over. Trying to see the bright side of seasons change. So throughout the winter I will carry with me my internal garden.”
- “The community garden was easily the single greatest help for my sanity during covid, especially living alone in 700sq ft with no outdoor space. I cannot say enough good things about the entire experience! I am so grateful.”
- “We're sure hoping we get lucky and can continue our gardening together next year...it's such a bonding experience to do this with my granddaughter. We've both learned a lot, and I find we are eating even more varieties of vegetables as we read and experimented.”
- “We love having the vegetable garden which we wouldn't be able to have otherwise, and enjoyed sharing the extra produce with the Meal Bag Program at Wellington Square where we both volunteer.”
- “My wife was emotional and crying as she has a hard time letting go of what was a wonderful season for her. She longs for next year already. What a testimony of the power of gardening to better health and quality of life for someone. So amazing!”
- “If you ever wonder if your profession makes a difference in peoples' lives, I assure you that it does. Thank you again.”

City community gardens started as a two-year pilot project in 2012 with one 30-plot garden operated by Burlington Green Environmental Organization on City-owned land. At the conclusion of the pilot in 2013, operational management shifted to the City and two more gardens were added to the inventory. The success of the program and citizen demand led to the expansion of plots within existing gardens where possible and the building of new gardens. Currently the City's community garden program has in its inventory; five gardens containing a total of 231 rentable plots and supported by one Community Garden Coordinator (1 FTE).

The charts below outline the accommodation rate of people successful in receiving a garden plot per year and the total number of applications received.

Annual applications received and number accommodated



Annual accommodation rate (%) based on applications received and number of gardens operating

Annual Growth & Demand	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Number of Gardens	1	1	3	3	4	4	5	5	5	5	5	5
Accommodation Rate	25%	21%	73%	44%	47%	58%	69%	70%	66%	54%	47%	56%

Note: 8 plots are assigned to food security organizations such as the Burlington Food Bank and Next Door Social Space.

With increased urban density reducing suitable land available for home gardens, the added demand for community garden plots on public land will continue to increase. The current five gardens have expanded to their capacity. Over the past few years, staff have undertaken various efforts aimed at easing the demand pressure, these include the following initiatives:

- In 2021 and 2022, staff focused marketing of the Neighbourhood Community Matching Fund to encourage community to lead small projects around gardens being built in housing complexes and private lands.

- In 2021 staff updated the zoning by-law to allow food gardens on any property, private or public; thus removing any zoning barriers to residential, institutional, or commercial property where people would like to have a food garden.
- Staff offered consultation services to develop new gardens, for instance: with schools to establish school-based gardens i.e., Holy Rosary, condo and apt buildings i.e., Brantwell Village and 5166 Lakeshore, faith land resulting in Glad Tidings community garden at Mount Nemo Farm, Faith Church, expansion at St. Christopher's, and available developer land (i.e., Molinaro land) resulting in the Grow4Change urban farm at Brant & Ghent.

Operating Model

The expansion of the community gardens program is also limited due to operating resources capacity. The current operating model has become unsustainable due to the current number of gardens and only one dedicated staff person. Roads, Parks and Forestry (RPF) staff maintains the infrastructure and delivers materials annually in the spring but does not have the capacity to play a role in the day-to-day maintenance operations at the gardens. Any new expansion of community gardens would require additional funding for operating and capital support.

In addition, there are many competing interests for the limited green space in City Parks. The Parks, Recreation and Culture Assets Master Plan (PRCAMP) update will assess the variety of community needs for green space and make the comparison on asset other municipalities to assess comparable service levels.

During the 2020 COVID Experience, the community garden service was the first to re-open by June with brand new COVID protocols. Four part-time Garden Assistant positions were created for four months when POA staff were redeployed to the community gardens. This experience highlighted the need for Garden Assistant positions as the maintenance of the garden areas and friendly customer service were much improved by their efforts.

In 2021 and 2022, the service levels have gone back to pre-pandemic levels without additional staff assistance beyond the one dedicated Garden Coordinator. In 2022, residents that neighbour the gardens and gardeners complained that there was insufficient on-site maintenance. Attempts to rectify included:

- In 2021, Park Ambassadors were instructed to add the community gardens to their routes to provide customer service, however, this was very minimal.

- In 2022, a summer student Sports Field Ambassador was co-opted to become a part-time Garden Assistant. The additional 15-20 hours per week was unfortunately insufficient even though the student was excellent.
- The deteriorating maintenance situation created anxiety and stress for staff. The Recreation, Community and Culture (RCC) department sourced \$8,500 unbudgeted funds to pay a local landscaping company to provide a one-time maintenance fix due to the complaints.

Strategy/process/risk

For 2023, the following service improvement efforts will be piloted to compensate for no approved increase in the operational or capital budget for the service:

- A volunteer opportunity via Better Impact will be piloted. This may prove helpful if there is enough interest, however, any volunteers must be supervised by city staff so a coordinated schedule will be required between volunteers and the Garden Coordinator and depend on volunteer availability.
- RCC staff are investigating offering camp staff the opportunity to work in May and June as Garden Assistants prior to the July/August camp season. Staff have reallocated funds from other areas to make this possible; however, this model of reallocation is not sustainable long term. Grant applications to Canada Summer Jobs and the Ontario Parks and Rec Association have been submitted for three Garden Assistant positions to help with short term need for current service. This is dependent on whether submissions are approved and sourcing and redirecting RCC funds to supplement wages such as only providing 50% of wages. A long term solution still would be needed for future years and any expansion.

There is a demonstrated desire to expand the community garden program. However, to do this, there needs to be additional funds added to the current operating dollars to maintain the current inventory for maintenance and staff and/or a change to the operating model with the alignment of the required budget to expand the garden service.

Options Considered

To maintain a sustainable community garden program the following options are being considered. Any future expansion of the program would require further resources.

Option 1 - Community Group Based

The Community Group Based option is considered when there is an identified group willing to deliver a community gardens service – This was negotiated with BurlingtonGreen in 2013/14 which provided a proposal to act as a vendor to provide this service to the City. However, the negotiations were not successful, hence operation moved to City's care and control for the 2014 season and since.

Option 2 – Service Provider

The Service Provider option is considered when there is an identified vendor willing to provide some of the community gardens service – This model would split the responsibilities between City staff and a vendor with the maintenance expertise. City staff would manage the plot registration and assignment, customer experience and oversee community garden development. The service provider such as a landscape company would provide the necessary maintenance and upkeep the garden inventory.

Option 3 – Enhanced City Direct Operation

The Enhanced Model for Operation by adding in financial and HR resources and a mechanism for moving to a sustainable model for delivery – This model would be scalable and would manage the current demand and future growth of community garden service. It would consist of the following additions to the current model:

- A team of four Garden Assistants for summer student positions.
- Build a robust garden volunteer program.
- Bring current operating dollars to a sustainable value for the service with continually inflationary costs added to subsequent budgets.

Staff are looking to move to an enhanced model of regular operation for summer 2024 and beyond as the most sustainable model for operating community gardens in current state.

For any capital garden projects, develop a capital planning process for expansion with the appropriate operating dollars for supplies, equipment and staff also factored into the project.

Financial Matters:

Total Financial Impact

Council makes both capital and operating investments in the community garden program. The section below is a high-level overview of the investment per garden, the overall annual operating cost and annual revenues.

Source of Funding

Current Operating

Annual operating costs include the Community Garden Coordinator, operating costs to cover supplies costs provided by the Roads, Parks and Forestry department (RPF) and revenues from the plot rental. For 2023, the total net impact is \$78,822.

2023 Approved Operating Budget	
Human Resource Costs (1 FTE)	\$72,338
Operating Costs (RCC and RPF)	\$15,184
Total Expenditures	\$87,522
Total Revenues	\$8,700
Net Impact	\$78,822

Capital Investment

Capital renewal of the asset happens every 5 years with a budget of \$30,000 per site.

For any capital expansion such as a new garden, capital costs include the total project budget consisting of design, construction and associated project costs. For example, \$170,000 is the planned project budget for a new garden at Nelson Park with 37 plots forecasted in 2024.

Proposed Estimation for Business Case

In order to maintain the existing service level, an estimation for additional funding would be \$25,000 - \$40,000 for items to support daily operations, to include:

- 4 PT seasonal staff (\$25,000 - \$36,000)
- Inflationary increases for supplies and equipment (\$4,000)

For 2025, any additional funds required to cover operating costs (staff, supplies and equipment) will be requested for the Nelson Garden expansion. Any further garden

builds will be pending the outcome of the PRCAMP strategy to guide any expansion requirements and site selection. As mentioned, any new capital investments will include operating budget dollars for equipment, supplies and PT staffing dollars.

Other Resource Impacts

Staff from RPF, part-time summer day camps staff from recreation and customer service from recreation support the community garden's ongoing operations in addition to the full-time Community Garden Coordinator. In addition, the community garden also uses the support of the RCC marketing team and corporate communications to assist in getting information out about the gardens and program for resident awareness. In addition, the water cost is covered within the park maintenance budget.

Staff will be putting forward a business case through the 2024 RCC and RPF operational budgets.

Climate Implications:

Community gardens increase biodiversity by attracting pollinators from previously monoculture grass turf that would require diesel-fueled mowing. Petroleum power tools are not used beyond construction and delivering soil, woodchips and compost. People grow their food organically without synthetic pesticides and fertilizers and lessen their contribution to food miles associated with buying non-local and imported food. The gardens assist with stormwater absorption. Participants are more likely to travel to their garden plot by cycling or walking when the garden is less than 1km from their home.

Engagement Matters:

Data from applications reveals the consistently high demand for garden plots. Success for the service is revealed in user testimonies and participant returning interest rates. Broad community engagement in 2015 revealed the most desired locations. Local community engagement occurs prior to the construction of new gardens. Most recently, the Nelson community and field user groups were consulted for the next garden location behind Nelson Arena.

Conclusion:

RCC and RPF staff will review the most economical option to improve the service maintenance level by increasing staff complement for the community garden service in the 2024 operating budget. This would be in alignment with for the next needed

community garden at Nelson Park in ward four in the 2024 capital forecast. This next garden would take demand pressure off the Central Park community garden and expand the service into the south-east area. With the current five gardens and potential for a sixth community garden additional staff are needed to properly maintain these assets.

Respectfully submitted,

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Report Approval:

All reports are reviewed and/or approved by Department Director, the Chief Financial Officer and the Executive Director of Legal Services & Corporation Counsel.