

Students' community gardens progressing in Whitney



By Mike Riley

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South Algonquin Township council received a letter from Joe Avery, the chair of the Whitney recreation committee, about a Whitney Public School students' initiative to put in some community gardens in the municipality. After reviewing Avery's letter, discussing the students' project and asking some questions, council decided to support this community gardens initiative. The students in the senior class at Whitney PS, taught by Ashley Schutt, also comment on their gardens' project.

South Algonquin Township council received a letter from Whitney Public School teacher Ian Pietras at their April 20 Human Resources, Administration and Public Relations committee meeting about the school's proposed community garden, and Pietras' request for township support. After discussing it, Councillor Bongo Bongo suggested referring the request to the municipality's recreation committees, who they felt would be better able to provide support to what they thought was a fantastic worthwhile initiative for the township's students.

Council subsequently directed Pietras and his students to liaise with the recreation committees.

Avery said they were firmly in support of the students' gardens project, and he told The Bancroft Times on April 29 that he'd met with the Whitney Public School senior class and that they had talked about the pros and cons of three different locations and they were just waiting on council's approval.

Councillor Bongo Bongo told The Bancroft Times on May 3 that he thought the community gardens proposed by the students was a great idea and a big win for the community.

"Getting kids active outside and teaching them how gardening can increase food security is a great real-life lesson," he says.

Senior students at Whitney Public School (consisting of Grades 4,5,6, 7 and 8) Ayla, Kayla, Hailey, Dusty and Joey told Bancroft This Week on May 13, care of their teacher Ashley Schutt, that they were introduced to a Renfrew County District School Board initiative called The Difference Makers Project at the beginning of April, which is a project that works with students to help them make a difference in their community. They say they decided to make a difference by addressing issues like hunger and food insecurity and promoting access to fresh, healthy food by pursuing their community gardens initiative.

"We have plans to build eight garden boxes. Six of those boxes will be placed at our school as our school garden, and the remaining boxes will be placed at the community centre and used as a community garden. The fruits and vegetables that we grow will be free

to anyone who needs them,? they say.

The students say they've taken multiple steps to achieving their goal, including designing and measuring out the planter boxes, ordering wood and soil and starting seeds that will go into the gardens. They are taking care of the seedlings until they are ready to be planted in the boxes.

As for maintaining the garden boxes over the summer, the students say they will use some of the community volunteer service hours they need to accrue for this purpose, which total 40 hours overall for each student. They say there will also be a logbook next to the plant boxes to show what has been done and when it has been done so there are no issues.

?Some local community members, including Whitney PS teacher Sharleen Lavalee, volunteered to check in on the gardens and be responsible for the volunteer signoffs. Adam Wannamaker, who also works with the students at Whitney PS and St. Martin of Tours Catholic School, will also oversee the volunteers. We do not expect the town council and/or the taxpayers to take responsibility for the community garden, but we do welcome anyone who wishes to volunteer or anyone who enjoys gardening to help us with this endeavor,? they say.

Students Madeline, Shayla, Isabella, Graham, Daniel and Jake say that they are doing The Difference Makers Project so they can use the food for healthy snacks at Whitney PS.

?It can also be a place for people to have access to some fresh, healthy food if they want it and/or need it. It will be a good experience for us to plant and take care of the plants. We hope to have fresh, yummy fruits and veggies for our school and for our community to access,? they say.

Students Xavier, Sam, Myra, Blake, Haylee and Clay say they're getting funding from the RCDSB to help them with the community gardens project. They reveal they've gotten approval from Avery to put two garden beds at the community centre in Whitney, and that they're just waiting on some guidance from Dave Gatley as to where exactly they can put those two garden beds.

?In addition, we have reached out to Kate and Eric from Grow for You Inc., who have dedicated their time to coming to Whitney to help us with the growing of our plants. Eric, who also builds his own garden towers, has agreed to make a garden tower for Whitney PS so we can extend our growing season over the fall/winter/spring seasons. We have received a lot of help from our generous community so far, including the McRae Lumber Company, Joe Avery, Barry's Bay Home Hardware, and Kate and Eric from Grow for You Inc.,? they say.

At the meeting on May 4, Mayor Jane Dumas introduced Avery's letter to council about the Whitney Public School students' community gardens project, where he explained he'd been conversing with the students about the best place to plant the gardens. They decided on the community centre and daycare centre, which has a ready supply of water and the daycare centre agreed to take over watering the gardens during the summer when school is out. Avery said the committee was 100 per cent behind the project and its aims, and asked council what to do next to give the school the go ahead to place their garden boxes and start planting.

Martin told council that from a staff perspective, if council wanted the community gardens project to proceed, he suggested having the students and the recreation committee work with public works supervisor Dave Gatley to ensure they're placed appropriately and do not interfere in township operations.

Dumas said she certainly did agree with the community gardens proposed by the students.

?The closer we can be toward demonstrating to our children where food comes from or to anybody, it's a very good thing as far as I'm concerned. So, I would say we give that direction for Bryan to go forward,? she says.

Councillor Sandra Collins added that it was nice that children realize that things go on and have to go on 24 hours, seven days a week.

?It can't be; I'll do it one day and someone else will take care of it. That insistence that things like gardening, watering plants, taking care of a pet, looking after horses and cattle, have to happen every day, not just when they feel like it. So, I think this is wonderful they continue into the school holidays with the daycare there. I think it's brilliant,? she says.

Dumas emphasized that she had gotten reassurance that the students would follow through with the gardens' upkeep and she was resolute in her belief that the opportunity should be given for the students to prove they would stick with it.

With no further discussion or queries, council directed Martin to tell Avery and the students that they could proceed in collaboration with Gatley with their community gardens.