

NERDs work on local food issues



Tracey Dale (l), of the Metis Nation of Ontario, and Jane Kali (standing, right foreground), of the North Hastings Community Trust, listen to a student proposal for using fresh local produce at the Food Bank. TONY PEARSON Special to This Week

By Tony Pearson

This week, current and past Northern Environmental Research (NERD) students, as well as graduates of NHHS's Northern Outdoor Studies (NOS) program, gathered at the Faraday Community Centre to answer a challenge from North Hastings Community Trust. The session was part of the ICE initiative of the Ministry of Education. ICE stands for Innovation, Creativity, and Entrepreneurship, and is designed to help students develop the creative problem-solving and teamwork skills they will need in their careers. The challenge students tackle must be an important and 'real-world' current community issue.

The NHCT challenge was all of that, namely: how might we ensure that everyone has equitable access to nutritious food in our local area, based on the environmental sustainability of, and opportunities provided by, the North Hastings land base. In other words, the students had to develop new approaches to ensuring that everyone in this area has enough nutritious and affordable locally-grown food.

Adding their assistance to the students were representatives from the Metis Nation, the area Stewardship Council, and the Ministry of Natural Resources.

After opening presentations on the problem, the students broke into groups to brainstorm solutions, and then refine their ideas into business plans to bring their concepts to reality. Soon ideas were flying, and work tables filled with maps, charts, and models. One group worked on a plan to allow the local food bank to accept local fresh produce. Another projected the conversion of an old chipboard plant to industrial greenhouses, powered by its own solar array. Winter 'community garden' greenhouses were also proposed by another group. Sharing small yards among neighbours to allow decent-sized garden plots was another group's contribution.

By the end of the day, the students felt the effort, the frustration, and the satisfaction of team project development. This will help them earn a Specialist High Skills seal on their diplomas.