

Good things grow with seed money and spirit

BY EMMA REILLY

In the morning, the patch of land on Hill Street off Dundurn was just a vacant stretch of grass.

By the end of the day, it was transformed into 30 garden plots for members of the community.

But the cultivating on Saturday was actually the easy part, organizers say.

Far more difficult was negotiating with the city over fears of contaminated soil.

The project started when four neighbourhood residents – Katrina Vandenberg, Crystal Numan, Graham Cubitt and his wife Emma – spotted the unused city-owned lot near Main Street West and decided it would be a perfect spot for a community garden.

The group took their plan to the city last December and have been planning the project ever since.

But the group met several roadblocks when they first approached the city about whether the soil was clean enough to grow food safely.

Graham Cubitt said the city wasn't satisfied with a University of Guelph test that found the soil to be clear of contaminants and wasn't interested in further testing.

"It became a risk-management decision rather than a community garden decision," he said.

The group was told that the garden could only move forward with above-ground plots at a cost of about \$21,000.

Thanks to community donations, the cost was whittled down to about \$2,000.

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Sense of community growing with gardens

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Jennifer DiDomenico, a manager of policy and programs at the city, said the Hill Street garden situation was "challenging" because of the uncertainty of whether the patch of land was appropriate for gardening.

"Where there's an unknown, sometimes it's just better to err on the side of caution," she said. "In this instance, raised beds were just the only way we could go."

The city has created new guidelines for community gardens which are being presented to the public works committee today. The report will outline policies for the approximately 16 existing community gardens in Hamilton, as well as for community groups looking to start their own.

Part of the city's proposal is to create an inventory of clean lots that it can offer up to groups interested in starting a community garden – a move that should avoid the problems faced by the Hill Street group.

Despite the difficulties, the Hill Street organizers have successfully rented out all 30 plots to community members.

"The whole process has brought the community together," said



Matthew Zantingh, 8, puts his back into the building of raised gardens.

Vandenberg. "There needs to be something like this in every community."

Turning the one-time parking lot into a bustling garden on Saturday took about 70 people and hours of labour. Teenagers from church groups lugged soil in wheelbarrows beside community members banging stakes into the ground to form the raised beds. The soil and

PHOTOS BY BARRY GRAY, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

lumber used to build the plots were donated by local businesses, while all the labour came from church and community volunteers.

"It's just been a sharing day all around," Vandenberg said.

For more information visit hillstreetgarden.org.

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Church groups worked with the community to develop more than 30 garden plots off Dundurn. Micah Brouwer gets a ride from mom, Jessica.