

Pilon, Janet

Subject: The status of community gardens under the Ontario Emergency Measures legislation.

From: David Moffatt

Sent: Thursday, April 16, 2020 8:57 PM

To: clerk@hamilton.ca

Subject: The status of community gardens under the Ontario Emergency Measures legislation.

Dear sir/madam

I am writing you on the advice of a sitting member of City Council. As a concerned citizen of Hamilton and a long time member of one of the city's many excellent community gardens, I would like to urge Mayor Eisenberger and City Council to include on the agenda of an upcoming council meeting a motion to urge the Premier to change the designation of community gardens under the Emergency Measures legislation from "recreational areas" to "essential food supply services". I know that local associations of community gardens, the Green Party of Ontario and Sustain Ontario are all promoting this move, and that the government of British Columbia has already made such a change. Support from local councils could help to assure that this critical local food source can be opened before the relatively short window of opportunity for spring planting.

I am including below text from an open letter to the Premier and Minister of Health which I also forwarded to all members of council. I believe that a few simple operating restrictions could minimize the already very low chance of community spread of the novel corona virus at these gardens.

I would be happy to discuss any issues related to such a change, but time is of the essence if gardens are to get up and running in time for a 2020 crop.

Thank you for your attention.

Sincerely

Dr. J. David Moffatt

Dundas, ON

Text of letter:

"I am writing to urge the Ontario government to redefine community gardens in the province as essential food production areas during this period of social distancing and movement restrictions. The government of British Columbia has very recently made this same move, defining community gardens as essential services. Defining these gardens as recreational facilities ignores the fact that they fulfill a vital role in food security, quality and affordability for thousands of Ontarians, and provide significant resources for food banks and charitable kitchens. The window of opportunity for planting of many crops for the 2020 season now lies about seven to eight weeks away. Most of these facilities could safely be opened with a few easily implemented restrictions and requirements, enhancing food security and sustainability in the aftermath of this public health crisis.

Why are Community Gardens Essential?

- 1. Community gardens provide a significant part of family groceries over several months for thousands of families. In the Victory Garden tradition, an intensively gardened plot can produce up to 5 kg of usable food per square metre, vastly exceeding both the yield and the diversity of products possible on typical commercial farms. The food produced can be specifically tailored to tastes and dietary restrictions that are not always met in large retail outlets. This food is generally produced free of pesticides, and is primarily grown in cities and towns, reducing the need for transportation.*
- 2. Community gardens can reduce the frequency of trips made by thousands of members to grocery stores, which are much more likely sources of community spread than the gardens themselves.*
- 3. Many community gardens are located in areas with lower income and limited access to commercial retail food stores, and most offer very reasonable rates to clients, providing healthy vegetables to families that might not otherwise be affordable. This could be specially important in 2020 if agricultural production declines because the pandemic reduces the acreage planted in some regions, delays or interrupts the movement of migrant farm workers onto fields, or interrupts supply lines, all of which are quite likely scenarios.*
- 4. Community gardens preserve and pass on the skills of home gardening among a significant minority of the population, skills that become critical in the event of a serious prolonged crisis. The Victory Gardens of the Second World War are a prime example of the way in which a nucleus of skilled enthusiasts can be deployed to aid and educate the population to improve general food security.*
- 5. Many community gardens require their members to provide a fraction of their produce to a food charity, whether a food bank, a charity kitchen, or a local underprivileged family. These humanitarian functions will be lost if no crop is planted this year, and many people beyond the gardening community will be harmed in the process. Even gardens that do not constitutionally require food donations would likely agree to such a measure to avoid the loss of an entire growing season."*

How can Community Gardens be made Safe during a Pandemic?

- 1. Because individual plot sizes in community gardens are generally several metres long and wide, they inherently provide for adequate social distancing. In the event that a garden is very large or has closely*

packed plots, an even/odd date system (based on plot numbers) could be implemented to limit total numbers and to space gardeners out further. In general, gardeners only spend a couple of hours on site on any given day, so they are usually separated by 10 m or more.

- 2. Most community gardens are fenced and locked, with members having restricted access. This provides for control of total numbers in an area. Gardens that do typically have open hours could implement a policy of "unlock on entry, lock on exit".*
- 3. Signs can easily be posted at entry points to gardens defining appropriate social distancing behaviour and methods to minimize potential exposure. Since such gardens have membership contact mechanisms (email lists, phone trees, websites, etc.), restrictions can be communicated to every person with access to the garden.*
- 4. Policies could be implemented to require gardeners to wear face masks while on site to further limit any chance of disease transmission. In gardens where tools are shared, the use of gardening gloves could be similarly mandated. Since most items in a garden are constantly exposed to UV radiation from the sun, the persistence of active virus in such areas should be of short duration. In general, successful gardeners are, by nature, people who take the long view, plan ahead, and follow procedures, so it is an informed and compliant demographic. The type of irresponsible social gathering that has necessitated the closure of many recreational facilities is both unlikely and uncharacteristic of the gardening community.*

In summary, I would urge the government to reconsider the categorization of "community garden" in the legislation from recreational area to essential food production system, with implementation as soon as reasonably possible. Food production is not a luxury, and the recent threats of border closures and disruptions in supply should highlight the need to provide for systems that promote the production of locally grown food, and that preserve the skills to grow it, while protecting public safety to the greatest extent possible.

Thank you for your attention and consideration.

Dr. J. David Moffatt, PhD

Long term gardener and past executive committee member'

Churchill Park Community Garden

Hamilton, ON