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MetroAg - Alliance for Urban Agriculture

This is an exciting time to be involved in urban agriculture. For the first time, a lot of people and groups who have usually been on the sidelines are recognizing the importance of urban agriculture. They see it as part of the solution to climate change, food security, healthier eating and a recreational pursuit. Urban agriculture is no longer a fringe activity. Now this movement is appealing to people from all walks of lives: people intent on making a living at urban agriculture, environmental organizations that see urban agriculture as a way of providing environmental good and services, market gardeners and artists and designers who want to build functional infrastructure to support urban agriculture. All of these stakeholders are coming together to participate in an exciting pilot urban agriculture project at Parc Downsview Park in Toronto's northwest.

The project at Downsview Park is for the creation of an Urban Agriculture Centre. The plan is to establish a hub for food production and related functions such as composting and marketing, as well as for knowledge on food production. Around 3 acres has been set aside for food production. Downsview recently purchased 3 large greenhouses that are currently being erected. Likely initial tenants include a seed producer, a community-based composting group and market gardeners. Community involvement and education will be key components of this project, aside from the growing of local food and the production of compost for food production.

Since their international design competition in 1999 that resulted in "Tree City" as the winning design, environmental, social and economic sustainability have been cornerstones of their vision. For many years, urban agriculture has been a major component of the Downsview Park vision. In its Sustainable Community Development Guidelines (2007) the creation of a 40 acre cultivation campus is called for. This project has been moved up by a few years because Downsview sees urban agriculture as unique way of building community in a way that is totally consistent with their vision of sustainable, green development.

The Cultivation Campus section of the overall park plan (around 40 acres) calls for a program-driven zone that will include: community gardens, allotment gardens, show gardens, mosaic gardens, horticultural centre, teaching gardens, and a wide range of educational programs. Within the Cultivation Campus, designated areas will be available to the community and various organizations for allotment gardens and greenhouses. The smaller site currently being set up will serve as a pilot project to help prepare for the much larger permanent Cultivation Campus.

The project will make Downsview Park a recognized leader and an important as hub of urban agriculture for locally grown, organic produce throughout the GTA. Throughout the five neighbourhoods within the Downsview Park Sustainable Community, urban agriculture will be vigorously promoted.

MetroAg, Downsview and the people participating at Downsview are excited at how the project is consistent with City Council's thinking on the environment and climate change in particular. We are at a unique point in time to push forward growing food locally. The City of Toronto report *Change is in the Air* (Toronto, 2007) tackles what needs to be done in Toronto to meet the challenge of climate change. The report states that "in a sustainable city, a clean and healthy environment goes hand-in-hand with strong community engagement, a thriving economy and access to opportunity for all residents." The proposed project is an important collaborative effort between partners designed to contribute a local response to the challenge of climate change, helping make Toronto a sustainable, vibrant and productive city.

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The process for creating the proposed Toronto Urban Agriculture Centre at Downsview Park has been a learning process for all involved. This is just one example of the tremendous amount of learning that both individuals and organizations are acquiring these days as a true movement on local food production takes shape. This learning goes beyond the specific techniques that are appropriate for producing food in tight urban spaces – which are of course necessary, and are being developed or picked up nowadays by an increasing number of individuals. Beyond these techniques, other necessary learning involves: figuring out ways to make land available for urban agriculture, tackling innovative ways to make buildings (especially rooftops) into food production sites, and understanding what it takes to make food production in urban areas an enterprise (whether negotiating a lease or preparing a business plan).

The question of learning brings up the crucial issue of knowledge about urban agriculture, which is something that I have been involved in over the past few years. Some of the knowledge-related activities in which I have been participating can highlight the range of learning that will be necessary for local food production to fully blossom.

- Since last year, Ryerson University's Chang School has been offering a whole series of courses on urban agriculture, all of them taught through the Internet. These courses, part of Ryerson's Certificate in Food Security, are proving very popular, enabling many in the Toronto area to learn together along with students registered from around the world.

- The strong interest by many in learning about urban agriculture parallels the growing numbers of students at all Toronto universities who are choosing to focus on urban food production in their schooling. York's Faculty of Environmental Studies, for example, has been a hotbed of urban agriculture studies. This has been crucial to the dynamism of the food movement in town. The interest in the topic is cutting across disciplines, from urban planning to sociology to nutrition, among others.
- One of the most intriguing concentrations of interest recently has been at Ryerson's Department of Architectural Science. Starting with a few scattered students who were interested in preparing architectural thesis projects dealing with food issues, this has developed into a whole array of activities, including a symposium last year on "The role of food and agriculture in the planning and design of buildings and cities". The culmination of this trend is an exhibition that we are currently preparing called "Carrot City: Designing for Urban Agriculture", opening later this month at the Design Exchange.
- This example is only one among the multitude of things around Toronto bringing together individuals and groups around local food production. Collaboration is thriving, but the flip side is that it is becoming difficult to keep up with what is happening, and the need for people to learn about and from others is increasing exponentially. This has been behind the idea that an umbrella coalition for the multiple stakeholders who are part of the local food movement in Toronto is becoming necessary. A series of meetings attended by dozens of people has confirmed this need, leading to the formation last week of a new alliance, named "Toronto Urban Growers".

To go back to Downsview Park, what has been exciting about that project is the interest from the start in making this, not just a site for food production, but also a site for production and dissemination of *knowledge* on food production. The Downsview Park project is thus envisioned as having two main components: a field centre and a knowledge centre on urban agriculture. The latter involves everything from a place to hold meetings and training sessions on urban agriculture, to a library for students to deepen their knowledge and connect with others, to a forum for innovation and dissemination of advances in the area. This is intended to make this into a hub of learning on urban agriculture.

The examples above make it clear that the emergence of a local food production movement in Toronto has had a central dimension of learning and knowledge sharing. We are living right now an exciting moment in Toronto, where we are all learning together how to grow a movement – literally.