

PAVED PARADISE: THE FATE OF THE KILBORN ALLOTMENT GARDENS

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*Paola De Rose and Chilani Rakhudu on their plots at the Kilborn Allotment Gardens on Oct. 24, 2021.
[Photo by Isaac Phan Nay]*

Despite the wet and cold of late October, the Kilborn Allotment Gardens bustled with life on a grey Sunday afternoon.

Each of the 400 plots making up Ottawa's largest community garden is unique. Some were bound off with chicken wire while others had professional fencing installed around their thousand square-foot plots. A couple plots were enclosed within sheds of scrap tin. Huge puddles flooded the nine-acre allotment gardens forcing a few gardeners to innovate drainage systems out of plywood and plastic. Watering cans and gardening tools were scattered throughout the gardens.

Paola De Rose could be found spreading plant choppings across the rows of her plot on Oct. 24. Even in Autumn, her garden is home to a medley of herbs, tomatoes and a vibrant green broccoli plant.

De Rose worked as a director of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade before becoming senior director at the Centre for Remote Sensing with the National Research Council of Canada. Now, De Rose is retired and spends her time gardening.

And while for De Rose gardening is a hobby, others rely more on the gardens. The Shepherds of Good Hope, an Ottawa non-profit that runs supportive housing units and emergency shelters, use their plot at the Kilborn Allotment Gardens to supply their downtown soup kitchen with fresh fruits and vegetables. According to their manager of community and volunteer services, Gordon Richards, the plot supplies the Shepherds with around 6,000 pounds of produce each year.

But this community space will not be around for long—the Kilborn Allotment Gardens are set to be paved over. The City of Ottawa plans to build a new transportation corridor starting at the intersection of Conroy and Walkley Road and ending at the Nicholas Street on-ramp. Dubbed the "Alta Vista Transportation Corridor" (AVTC), the road would run straight through the Kilborn Allotment Gardens and other greenspaces. De Rose said those plans deeply upset her.

“A space like this, that is essentially a series of little tiny urban farms, is very, very important,” De Rose said. “What the city should be doing is trying to ensure that other wasted green space should all be turned into allotment gardens.”

The allotment garden is also a significant source of the Shepherds of Good Hope’s supply of produce during the Summer.

“When we’re getting super fresh, super clean veggies like that, that’s all we use in the kitchen,” Richards said.

He added that in September alone the garden provided the kitchen with around 80 per cent of their produce for almost 13,000 meals.



The Shepherds of Good Hope use their plot at the Kilborn Allotment Gardens to stock their kitchen with 6,000 pounds of fresh produce each year. Taken on Sept. 26, 2021. [Photo by Isaac Phan Nay]



Garlic planted at the Shepherds of Good Hope's plot at the Kilborn Allotment Gardens, as of Oct. 24, 2021. [Photo by Isaac Phan Nay]

And the Shepherds of Good Hope use their garden plot to stock more than just their kitchen. Richards said volunteers deliver the produce to the non-profit's other projects.

"[Volunteers] drive to our different supporting housing units around Ottawa to deliver veggies just so that everybody gets a piece of it," Richards said. "Financially, certainly [fresh produce] helps, but it's just clean, fresh, great stuff that people don't have a lot of access to."

The Shepherds of Good Hope are only one of many groups with a plot at the garden. Jaku Konbit is a community organization dedicated to supporting people in the African and Caribbean diaspora within Ottawa. The organization calls their plot at the Kilborn Allotment Gardens the Greenstar Community Garden. Before the pandemic, children attending Jaku Konbit's summer camp would learn to grow vegetables at Greenstar, according to outreach coordinator Domenico Peterkin.

Peterkin said the Jaku Konbit donated food grown at the garden to members of their community throughout Ottawa.

"We give [produce] out to our seniors, we talked about it at our community lunches," Peterkin said. "We talk with our outreach programs to see if people are interested in receiving vegetables."

Neither Jaku Konbit nor The Shepherds of Good Hope could use their volunteer-run garden in 2020 because of COVID-19 restrictions. Richards said volunteers were upset they could not work in the garden, and that the organization had to rely more on partnerships with local businesses and the government to provide for the hungry.

"We had to bite the bullet, suck it up and modify the budget a bit and use some of the, COVID-19 funding that we got from the city towards veggies," Richards said. "It is missed when we can't get the variety of vegetables that we make ourselves in the garden."

The COVID-19 pandemic made it hard for low-income groups in Ottawa to put food on the table, according to Dakota Cherry. Cherry is a research partner with the Bridge Engagement Centre in Ottawa, an organization that researches how policy affects healthy equity in Ottawa.

"We measured the large amount of food insecurity that these people experience on a daily basis," Cherry said. "They don't have access to food, [or] they can't afford it. And the food that they can access is not nutritious."

Cherry noted the Bridge Engagement Centre uses their own plot at the Kilborn Allotment Gardens to help the hungry learn how to grow fruits and vegetables. Cherry added if the city promoted these gardens, nutritious food would be accessible to marginalized people.

“Changing [our food system] has a huge impact on changing the lives of people who are most adversely impacted by climate change and COVID-19,” Cherry said.

But the Kilborn Allotment Gardens are not a priority for the city. Jean Cloutier is the Ottawa city councilor for the Alta Vista ward, which includes the Kilborn Allotment Gardens. Cloutier wrote he supported the AVTC in an email.

“My position has been consistent on this item since I became a volunteer for the Canterbury Community Association in 1987,” Cloutier wrote in the email. “I want the AVTC to remain on [Ottawa’s] Transportation Master Plan.”

The Official Plan Ottawa passed on Oct. 27 and became bylaw on Nov. 25. According to the plan, the city’s population is expected to grow by 402,000 people in the next 25 years. They estimate they will need 194,800 new private households to house the growing population. In fact, schedule two of the city’s plan lists meeting this demand as “big policy move number one.”

“We will need to create an affordable supply of options across the city for different household types and income groups,” the plan states. “The city will accommodate this growth within its existing neighbourhoods and villages, in undeveloped greenfield areas within Ottawa’s urban boundary.”

Urban planners call the further development of already developed areas “intensification.” In Alta Vista, the neighbourhood surrounding the Kilborn Allotment Gardens, the plan mandates development of three-storey buildings where single-family residential homes currently lie.

Intensifying in a neighbourhood like Alta Vista also means the city can accommodate housing needs without encroaching on larger greenspaces outside city bounds, according to City of Ottawa manager of policy planning Alain Miguelez.

“Everything that surrounds us right now is difficult land,” Miguelez said. “It’s either land that you can’t touch because it’s agricultural, therefore protected, or is environmentally sensitive, therefore protected, or it’s an aggregate resource, therefore protected.”

Intensification also means developing 15-minute neighbourhoods, where a variety of local amenities such as grocery stores, medical services and greenspaces are in walkable distance for residents, Miguelez added. Right now, Miguelez said Pleasant Park Road and Kilborn Avenue are the major corridors for Alta Vista.

“These are the main roads in and out of the neighborhood and everybody ends up on them,” Miguelez said. “It’s just logical that we see these streets evolving as we start to gather the ingredients for the 15-minute neighborhood.”

Right now, both roads are mostly single-lane residential streets. The Pleasant Park Public School and the Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic school are on Pleasant Park Road. Some Alta Vista residents would rather move traffic off these roads instead of increasing transportation through the neighbourhood, according to Martha Carr, president of the Alta Vista Community Association.

“There are people that want the road. They want traffic off of their street and they want it diverted away,” she said. “You don't often find this much available land, so there will have to be difficult discussions, with residents feeling very strongly either way.”

Enter the AVTC, a road that could sustain transportation of a denser population and move traffic off the suburban streets.

The city's plan outlines the development of the AVTC, a road that Miguelez said has been included in the city's Transportation Master Plan (TMP) since the 20th century. Section 1.3 of the city's Official Plan 2A states the road will “wind through the green transportation and utility corridor behind the Ottawa Hospital and CHEO, and “is planned to be a major transportation corridor.”

The AVTC would also run through the greenspace where the Kilborn Allotment Gardens currently lie. While Miguelez declined to comment on the AVTC, he noted planners would review the proposed highway when reviewing Ottawa's transportation plan.

“What our colleagues need to do is look at the whole network and see what happens if you take out a piece or you add a piece,” Miguelez said. “You can't just isolate one [road], take it out and then call it a day, you have to do all the modeling for all the rest of the network.”

Miguelez said the city was waiting for traffic to return to pre-pandemic levels before Ottawa could reassess transportation needs.

Cloutier also stated that comment on the AVTC should only be made in the context of the transportation plan, which he added would be under review in 2023.

However, urban planners in charge of zoning and facilitating development have to follow their city's Official Plan, according to professor of landscape architecture at Guelph University Karen Landman.

“[The Official Plan] really sets the agenda for how a community changes, how it develops,” Landman said. “If [a development] is in the Official Plan, it is part of the city policies. Then the planners must respond to that.”

And while the future of the AVTC might be on hold for now, planners following the Official Plan do not have to wait to propose changes to zoning by-law. On Nov. 8, city planners proposed changing zoning by-law to allow for warehouse development at the intersection of Conroy Road and Walkley, one end of the proposed AVTC.

Residents of Alta Vista might not see the disorganized sprawl of gardening plots as an amenity, either. Landman said the appearance of an urban farming space makes it less valuable to the community.

“[Gardens] should be beautiful. If you have a rough looking farm, the people who are living around that might object.” Landman said. “But as long as it's beautiful —surround it with some flowers, everybody loves some flowers—they will appreciate it as part of their community.”

The Kilborn Allotment Gardens are not filled with tidy rows of pretty flowers. Plots are run by people who want or need them, not professional gardeners.



A makeshift shed at the Kilborn Allotment Gardens on Oct. 24, 2021. [Photo by Isaac Phan Nay]



The walkway between two plots at the Kilborn Allotment Garden on Oct. 24, 2021. [Photo by Isaac Phan Nay]



A plot at the Kilborn Allotment Gardens on Oct. 24, 2021. [Photo by Isaac Phan Nay]



Inside a sheltered plot at the Kilborn Allotment Gardens on Sept. 26, 2021. [Photo by Isaac Phan Nay]

But what looks unseemly to the untrained eye might serve a very important purpose to gardeners. On that cold October afternoon, De Rose’s plot was covered in a mess of cut-up garlic stalks and mulch.

De Rose said that chaos was intentional. Instead of tilling her soil in the spring she covers the ground with plant choppings and mulch to protect the soil from harmful ultraviolet rays. She calls it a “permaculture garden.”

“[The garden] has been generating soil since I got here five years ago and there’s now much, much better soil. The yields are also much better,” De Rose said.

The former government scientist added urban farms like the Kilborn Allotment Gardens have a profound benefit for the planet.

“Community gardening gets us away from industrial agriculture, it helps to improve the soil as a carbon sink, it means that your food is transported shorter distances,” De Rose said. “Urban farming is probably the best thing the average citizen can do if they want to help combat the environmental crisis.”

Cherry agreed the local gardens diverted emissions caused by large-scale agriculture and food transportation. Cherry is working to get the certification she needs to get city funding to coordinate

Ottawa community gardens. She said she plans to use the certification to ensure local gardens are accessible throughout Ottawa.

“If [the city] eliminates these gardens, we're going to need to start building new ones.” Cherry said. “As a young person I see it as our responsibility to get more involved in these processes [and] determine the future of our food system.”