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By Kris Scheuer

A fruitful way to get your produce

Much of Toronto used to be farmland and while no one is suggesting we plough up Yonge Street to plant corn, city hall is considering lifting the ban on residents selling their homegrown produce.

The government's looking to develop an Urban Food Production policy and from what I've seen so far, I love the idea.

Residents are no stranger to growing fruits and vegetables, but in the majority of cases the bounty is consumed by their family, friends and neighbours. But the idea would allow people to have a plot, garden or mini farm in the city with the intent of selling what's grown.

It turns out this isn't as simple as it sounds. A panel of experts was called to the Parks and Environment Committee on Feb. 5 to explain the benefits and potential pitfalls.

One of those experts was Lauren Baker, director of the Ontario Alliance for Healthy Food and Farming, who pointed out people aren't allowed to produce and sell food in Toronto unless their land is zoned agricultural. A wholesale change in zoning is unlikely, she said, as agricultural lands are taxed at a lower rate, which is an incentive for growers but means less revenue for city hall, she said.

Paula Sobie, from Victoria, B.C., spoke about Spin Farming, where people create market gardens on small plots of urban land.

Ronda Teitel-Payne certainly liked the idea. She works for midtown's The Stop Community Food Centre, which helps Torontonians access healthy food. The organization operates a food bank, community gardens and community cooking sessions.

"We are really keen on getting as many people as possible to grow in every nook and cranny of the city, but we are especially interested in getting people to sell their produce," she told the committee.

Ryerson professors James Kuhns and Joe Nasr spoke about a new initiative in North York's Downsview Park that includes the creation of green houses and three acres for food product and teaching gardens.

FoodShare's Debbie Field spoke passionately about the need for growing spaces everywhere from roadsides to rooftops.

"We are shovel ready," she said referring to economic stimulus infrastructure projects that governments are looking to invest in. "We have a job program like none other."

Councillor Paula Fletcher, the committee's chair, said city staff will report back on the possibilities in three or four months time.

"I'm not sure what's allowed," she told reporters. "That's what we will find out in the report."

"I'm envisioning that we are assisting in small food scale production in the city."

Growing and buying food produced in backyards, rooftops, community gardens, schoolyards and parks is a mouth-watering idea. If we can do it safely and eliminate red tape, the idea could be a fruitful way to reduce climate change in small ways and have access to healthy food.

Midtowners are already putting locally grown food to good use.

There's Not Far From the Tree, a non-profit where volunteers harvest local fruit trees and take some of the bounty, give a third to the owners and donate the remaining to food banks and shelters.

Garden Green is based in St. Paul's Ward 21 and focuses on eco and edible garden workshops and education. These groups are pairing up this spring to plant the first urban community orchard at Ben Nobleman Park across from Eglinton West subway station.

There's also the Cedarvale Children's Garden, established by local resident Claire Rodgers, and Toronto Balconies Bloom, which focuses on teaching apartment dwellers with no yard how to grow food on their balconies.

Maybe soon you'll be buying homegrown tomatoes and squash produced by your neighbours.

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