



# Social Fertilizer

## Participatory Planning of Community Gardens

Learning from Terra Nova Park  
Richmond, BC

**CASE  
IN  
POINT  
2008**

### Abstract

The future of city planning is rooted within participatory practice. The main focus within participatory planning is the people involved in the process, particularly those who will be most affected by the plan's implementation. Community gardens generally provide a positive experience for those involved, both in the planning and the execution.

Community gardens deserve more recognition within the realm of urban design. Community gardens not only offer an opportunity to encourage community and urban revitalization, they offer restoration of biodiversity and an alternative to an urban park. Community gardens are far less costly to build and maintain than a park, and are socially more viable, educationally more pertinent and physically more diverse.

Terra Nova Rural Park is an alternative park that features a successful community run garden and farm. Much can be learned from it. This paper looks at the Park from the perspective of the planning process which was followed and from the potential to incorporate community gardens into urban design. This case-in-point project is an example of a system transformation. It demonstrates how the current definition of a city park can be transformed into something new, innovative and perhaps more meaningful.

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**Aerial view of Terra Nova Park**

## Context

Richmond, British Columbia is a growing, dynamic urban centre that has boldly adopted the vision "to be the most appealing, livable and well-managed community in Canada".

As Richmond experiences growth and change at a remarkable pace and transforms from a rural and suburban community to an international city, it contin-

ues to recognize and protect its natural heritage and vernacular cultural landscape.

Terra Nova Park, a 63 acre site, is located in the northwest corner of Richmond. It is bordered by Sturgeon Banks, a large estuary; the middle arm of the Fraser River; a 35 acre natural area, and a residential neighbourhood. It is easily accessed by the local community and is adjacent to a regionally significant dyke trail system.

This park has become a special place for people to experience Richmond's natural and cultural landscape. As park users walk, roll or cycle through the park they will find remnants of First Nations fishing camps, 1880's pioneer settlers homes, gardens and orchards, fallow fields, hedgerows, waterways, woodlots, and examples of modern urban agriculture including community garden plots, and a non-profit farm growing produce for the local food banks.

# Background

In the 1970's Richmond was undergoing a rapid change, with farmland being turned into single family housing subdivisions. In 1986 a public hearing was scheduled to rezone 220 acres of farmland called Terra Nova into a suburban neighbourhood.

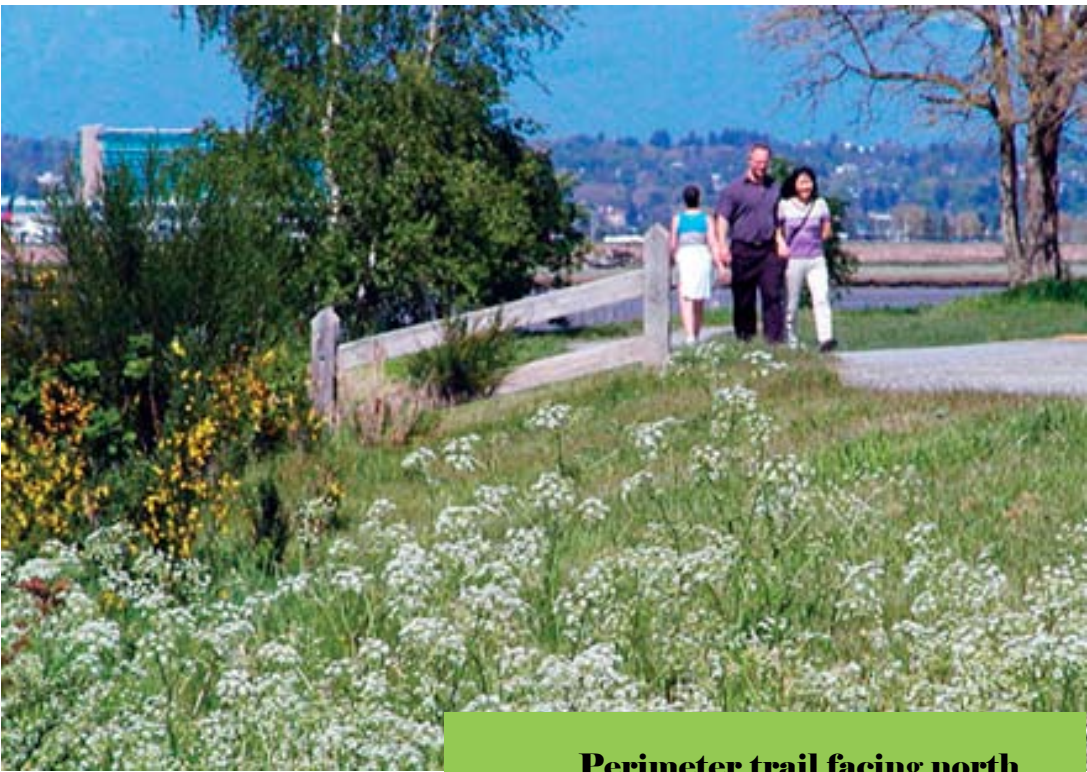
In response, the *Save Richmond Farmland Society* was formed. This group of concerned citizens knocked on thousands of doors, raised public consciousness and mobilized the community to preserve Terra Nova as valuable farmland, important wildlife and marine life habitat and vital open park space. The battle over the Terra Nova lands was fought several times over the years, including an appeal in the Supreme Court of Canada and in the 1990 municipal election in which new councillors were voted in based on their support for saving the land. For many years, this society served as the community's voice in regards to changes in land use.



**Preserved natural area**

Through the efforts of the *Save Richmond Farmland Society*, tens of thousands of residents shared the vision of retaining Terra Nova as a way to protect fish and wildlife habitat, to preserve Richmond's history and natural beauty, and to facilitate agricultural use.

The City responded to this expression of community values by putting forward a referendum item in the 1996 municipal elections. The result was that 72% of the voters of Richmond approved the borrowing of \$28.5 million to purchase land in Terra Nova for a park and the City began acquiring and assembling the individual properties soon after.



**Perimeter trail facing north**

**“Our vision is one of sustainability where we respect the past and future through linking people, nature, heritage and urban agriculture all in one very special city park”**

Planner, City of Richmond

# Planning Process

The next step in the process was to develop overall park planning principles taking into consideration the biophysical inventory recommendations and then to take these to the public for approval.

A series of three open houses were held in 2004 with a mandarin and Cantonese translator as the majority of Terra Nova residents were new immigrants. The meetings included:

1. "Getting to know the land" where the site and values were introduced, public input on the guiding principles was solicited and potential uses for the site were discussed.
2. Three Design Options looking at different variations on the environment were presented and input was gathered.
3. Approval of a Vision and Preferred Concept Plan.

The open houses were well attended and the community feedback was very positive. The support for the park plan was the highest the City of Richmond Parks Division had ever received for a park plan with 98% of the people strongly supporting the planning principles, and the park vision: "to preserve the unique rural character while providing a balance between agricultural heritage, wildlife conservation, and recreational uses."



**Terra Nova Park Concept Plan**

# Park Development

Upon approval of the Park plan and vision, Council committed an initial \$1.2 million. Construction commenced in 2005 and will continue over the next five years with ongoing annual funding. In addition, the Richmond Foundation has set up a fund that will provide maintenance funding for the future.

The value of Terra Nova Park with its significant environmental, heritage and recreational assets was recognized by of the provincial government and the Government of British Columbia which contributed \$2 million to assist with the development of the site.



**The beginnings of the garden**

## Urban Agriculture

One of the most unique and innovative aspects of Terra Nova Park is that it is a city park that dedicates a portion of its land to urban agriculture.

A key feature of the park plan was the construction of the Farm Centre. The objective of the Farm Centre is to build upon the agricultural heritage of the site and to address modern urban needs by creating an area for growing food as well as public education by developing:

- a farm centre utilizing the existing buildings to store equipment and provide meeting space.
- community gardens with individual plots.
- demonstration garden showcasing waterwise gardening, composting, organic gardening methods.

The community garden provides a place for it's members to learn gar-

dening techniques from others and to socialize.

The Richmond community garden relies on the stewardship from each and every plot holder to help maintain the entire site. In order to ensure this occurs the city created community gardening guidelines.

The City built a Demonstration Garden within the community gardens. It is used for educational purposes and contains a signed composting area, a medicinal garden, and a series of landscape beds to showcase different Waterwise gardening methods, for example types of irrigation, use of rain barrels, choice of drought resistance plants. They also plant and maintain flowers.

It is this diversity of landscapes on the site, from natural growing hedgerows, fields of grass to the individual vegetable plots to the more formal demonstration garden that make this site so diverse and interesting to the public.



**The garden today**



**The Farm Centre**

Two unique programs are also being run through the Farm Centre that focus not only on food security, but also the benefits of urban agriculture for the environment. The Richmond Fruit Tree Sharing Farm Project and The Terra-Nova Schoolyard Project.

### **The Richmond Fruit Tree Sharing Farm Project**

Those behind this project were partners in planning the development of the Terra Nova Park. Their project occupies two acres of farmed land within the park.

The purpose and goals of the project are to:

- Provide a year round harvest of locally grown fruit and vegetables to the Richmond Food Bank and other charitable agencies.
- Participate in an active Richmond-based community food security system.
- Foster responsible stewardship of the land.
- Implement educational programs for people of all ages, with an emphasis on youth.

Starting in 2001, numerous volunteers built raised beds, amended the soil, and planted and harvested vegetable crops for the Richmond Food Bank.

The project has several supporters and partners that donate money, materials, seeds, expertise and manpower.

In 2007, the infrastructure work was completed which included the installation of a 30' x 50' greenhouse; construction of a potting shed; two 10' x 50' hoop houses; a kiosk, fences and gates; drain-

age improvements, installation of irrigation; and the planting of berry shrubs.

In seven years, the Richmond Fruit Tree Project has harvested over 110,000 pounds of fruit and vegetables to give to those living with poverty.

### **The Terra Nova Schoolyard Project**

The Terra Nova Schoolyard Society was founded in 2006 by Chef Ian Lai (Instructor at Northwest Culinary Academy of Vancouver). The recipient of the 2007 "Volunteer of the Year" award, Lai, started with one elementary class involved in growing and harvesting vegetables in one raised bed. Today his initiative has evolved to include 176 students and 5000 square feet of land.

This non-profit community based urban agriculture project works with 11 Richmond organizations from Kindergarten to Grade 12. Students generally visit the site on a weekly basis in the spring and summer and twice a month in the fall. Classroom lessons and activities are also conducted indoors during the winter

months in preparation for the coming season.

This Schoolyard Society's goal is to create an environment that inspires a value of fresh food, healthy eating habits and personal and social responsibility that will last a life time.. The project inspires and answers questions about the origin of the food that people eat everyday.

The learning happens in the field and in the classroom with the help of volunteers. Students learn about soil science and the environmental impacts of growing food, connect with the earth, and prepare food from the produce grown in the garden.

There are multiple learning outcomes and extensions that are achieved by this project. Some key outcomes include social responsibility, science, math, wellness and cooperative learning. Not only has city owned land been dedicated to a Demonstration Garden, 100 individual community garden plots, a school food security project, and a 2.5 acre active farm, but all the produce grown is donated to the regional Food Banks.



**Schoolyard project children**

## Key Lessons

In 2007 this project was recognized nationally when it won a Canadian Parks and Recreation Association award of excellence for innovation.

What makes Terra Nova Park so unique is its story about individual and community aspirations and values being achieved with the assistance of a municipal government dedicated to making a vision happen through successful participatory practices.

It can be argued that the future of city planning is rooted within participatory practice. The main focus within participatory planning is the people involved in the process. While governments and organizations have developed policies to include participatory processes, these programs and services have not always been useful or meaningful to the people they were intended to benefit.

Terra Nova Park is a model in terms of a public process and how it uniquely offers a non-traditional use of city park land. The City's innovative planning techniques and processes can be considered an example of a system transformation. They demonstrate how the current definition of a city park can be transformed into something new and innovative.

Community gardens not only offer community and urban revitalization, they result in the restoration of biodiversity and provide an alternative to a traditional urban park. Community gardens are far less costly to build and maintain than a park, and are socially more viable, educationally more pertinent and physically more diverse.

There are many benefits related to community gardens including; environmental, health, economic and social. They not only can provide a source of fresh,



**End of season garden harvest**

healthy, food, but also a place where important social interaction occurs. The social interaction can be as basic as acknowledging another gardener, or as complex as developing a system of support and friendship among the gardeners.

Community gardens offer benefits to not only the members involved in the production of the garden, but also to the surrounding community. They can provide an educational experience for all whether it is physical or visual; residents may actively or passively enjoy a garden. The social interaction that occurs within community gardens can also offer a form of therapy.

Terra Nova Parks urban agriculture programs not only offer physical and social connections, they provide an avenue for teaching about the local and global issues of food security and environmental stewardship. Children and adults learn about the connection between food and society and the environment through volunteerism, physically working the land, and numerous workshops and programs.

With over 10,000 volunteer hours donated to date, human capacity is being built and the interest being generated by the park has become a catalyst for new programs and groups organizing to take on the larger community issue of food security.

Overall, there is much to be learned from this park project including: the public open house and community process; the participatory practices; the partnerships with volunteer groups; the unique program opportunities; incorporating children and youth; the potential system transformation; how to deal with food security issues; the benefits of urban agriculture on the environment; and the long lasting, positive effects on the surrounding community.

# Winnipeg Context

This project has been an excellent learning opportunity for Richmond city staff and the success of the non-traditional uses are now being viewed for other areas in the city. The City of Winnipeg could learn a lot from their counterparts in Richmond.

Although Winnipeg has a dynamic network of activists that have been advocating for community gardens to be an integral part

of the planning process for a number of years now, this has not yet occurred.

Winnipeg is a culturally diverse city that contains many urban neighbourhoods which face social and economic issues, lack a sense of unity and offer little hope. Although these problems cannot be solved overnight, perhaps the process and development of a community garden can offer some hope for those involved.

Taking over a lot in central Winnipeg, and planting a garden may seem like a small gesture in a neighborhood dealing with crime,

drugs, and large-scale disinvestment. However, many considered it a pivotal first step towards community revitalization. Over time, a network of community gardeners can expand to form: a topography of alternative urban landscapes through which people's perceptions of the environment and their role as citizens is transformed.

Community gardens are what participants make of them, and the process of planning, planting and caring for them has the potential to transform people, neighbourhoods, and cities.. Terra Nova Park has proven this.

## About the Planners

Cara Nichols is completing her Masters in City Planning at the University of Manitoba and is focusing her studies on the social impacts of community gardens and their potential to create a sense of community.

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Harry Finnigan is the Principal of McKay Finnigan and Associates. He served as Director of the Planning Property, and Development Department for the City of Winnipeg from 2002-2007. Over the years he has gained extensive experience in public participation processes in Canada, the U.S.A. and Africa.

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