

Garden led down tangled path of red tape

Not-for-profit group questions costly, frustrating process to permit community project

Getting civic permits for a community garden in Surrey took two years, cost \$30,000 and involved heaps of silly red tape, says a non-profit group disturbed by the cost of doing business.



RIC ERNST/PNG

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“The process was difficult and frustrating,” said Neil Fernyhough, program manager for Alexandra Neighbourhood House. “At city hall, one hand doesn’t know what the other is doing. Every day was another adventure. There is no manual in Surrey for building a community garden on private land,” he said.

His assignment: Lease a halfhectare property at 25th Avenue and 128th Street, remove the blackberry bushes and truck in 150 loads of soil.

It seemed straightforward, but was incredibly complex: a months-long delay resulted when a signature couldn’t be produced for a soil delivery; and a \$1,200 engineering report was required for putting down plywood and wood chips on a road.

“I sometimes wondered if the authorities looked at us like a for-profit business,” said Fernyhough.

“The garden is for seniors, newcomer Canadians, marginalized people and the vulnerable.”

Things went downhill from the start. Access to the site was off a driveway on 128th Street, but officials decided it was too close to a crosswalk.

The only other access was through a school parking lot at Ecole Crescent Park Elementary, which meant school officials had to be involved as well as the city.

Access to the site via the plywood and wood-chip “temporary portal” was permitted for only 30 days.

Additional supplies of gravel and wood chips required for a later phase had to be hauled in by hand.

“It was extremely onerous work for our volunteers, when dump trucks could have deposited the material in a day,” said Fernyhough.

Sometimes, everyone was on the same page, but foul-ups still occurred.

Soil was offered at no cost, but the delivery had to be made right away. All that was missing was a signature from the school district, but that couldn’t be obtained.

The school was on spring break.

The city’s price for a water connection kept rising. Initially pegged at \$3,500, it ballooned to \$6,000 when it was discovered the hookup would need to be farther away.

Alexandra House gave up and installed a 7,500-litre tank.

The organization doesn’t have the only community garden encountering start-up problems in Surrey, says a report by the Burnaby Food First non-profit group.

The report noted Vancouver has 45 community gardens on city land, while there are only six in Surrey, which was criticized for the lack of city space made available.

“Surrey had almost as many community gardens 20 years ago as it does now,” said former mayor Bob Bose, who finished an eight-year term in 1996. “The political capital isn’t there.”

In the meantime, the number of gardens in Vancouver has almost tripled.”

Parks manager Owen Croy said Surrey’s demand is not as high as Vancouver’s.

“Our model works because we have single-family homes on large lots,” he said. “Vancouver has a lot of townhouses and condos, which don’t have space for gardens.”