

Greater Toronto Area

Lebovic campus will be home to organic garden

By **FRANCES KRAFT**
Staff Reporter

In addition to the Jewish schools, Jewish community centre and other buildings that were in the original plans for the Lebovic Jewish Community Campus in Vaughan, plans are now in the works to create an organic garden that is expected to serve as an environmental learning centre.



Risa Alyson Strauss

The project came about after members of Torat HaTeva, a Jewish environmental organization, approached UJA Federation of Greater Toronto about establishing the garden on the Vaughan site.

“There’s an area that is part of the Don River system,” Shai Spetgang, an environmental consultant who serves as chair of Torat HaTeva’s board of directors, told *The CJN*. “No

one’s allowed to develop there, but everywhere around it will be buildings and homes.”

The garden will be at least 20 by 30 metres in area, as part of at least five acres of conservation land, said Spetgang. He added that, in addition to serving an educational function, the garden will produce fruits and vegetables for the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) project at the Narayever Congregation and for a similar project to be based in the Thornhill area. CSA projects provide organic produce to their members on a weekly basis.

Risa Alyson Strauss, the organic garden project co-ordinator, said the goal is to break ground and put the garden on site for spring 2008.

To begin, she said, volunteers and program participants will “build” the soil, in part by planting low-maintenance crops that will add nutrients and vitamins.

A naturalized area will include plantings of species that already exist on site or that would grow there on their own, like red osier dogwood, a hardy shrub that thrives in wet conditions.

Recently, Torat HaTeva received two grants to make the garden a reality, one from Evergreen in partnership with Wal-Mart Canada for \$4,500, and the other for \$5,000 from Shell Canada’s Shell Environmental Fund.

Organizers are still fundraising and writing grant proposals, said Strauss.

The combined funding they have received so far will pay for “getting a basic garden in the ground” and creating raised garden beds, as well as a composting demonstration site and a couple of rainbarrels to collect rainwater, she said.

Additional funding would enable them to build a small greenhouse and hire an educator, said Strauss.

Income from selling the garden’s produce and from fees paid by user groups would go toward running the garden on an annual basis, she added.

Strauss, who works for the City of Toronto as the program specialist for children’s garden programs, said she believes that “Judaism is so rich in ecological and agricultural wisdom, and that an organic garden will give children and community members a chance to access these teachings through experiential programs and projects.”

In addition, said Spetgang, it will “help connect the disconnect when we go to the supermarket. There’s a great gap. We don’t really know where our food comes from.”

Bryan Keshen, executive director of the

Schwartz/Reisman Centre – the Jewish community centre that will be built on the Lebovic campus – said that having access to a resource like the organic garden is “a wonderful opportunity.”

“There’s a general desire to see both environmental education and environmentally sensitive design going into everything we do,” he said.

Foster families needed

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“We do what we can to help them live Jewishly, but these kids still feel isolated. Living in a Jewish foster home is the ideal situation.”

He is “troubled” that the community is not responding to the agency’s needs, he said. “We are looking for 10 families who can step up to the challenge of opening up their home, and working with us to support a child in our community.”

The community is “fabulous in supporting a variety of causes, but we’re struggling to get people to give their time. We need people to care about these kids.

“Our foster families have told us that fostering has positively changed their lives, the lives of their family and the lives of the foster children.”

Hurwitz said they are willing to come out and talk to prospective foster parents about fostering, and will also speak at Jewish organizations and service clubs.

“We provide financial support and support in working with the kids. These are kids of our Jewish community, and we all have a responsibility to help out. We want them to grow up and take care of themselves.”

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