

## Cottonwood Community Gardens: oasis in peril

Oliver Kellhammer | Posted: Sep 19th, 2012



*Green oasis*

Sometimes a bad idea just won't go away. Though Vancouver's future has been looking a lot greener lately, with the expansion of bike lanes and improved municipal composting, I was dismayed to learn that a city-proposed road expansion is threatening to wipe out Cottonwood Community Gardens, one of the Vancouver's best-known examples of citizen-initiated urban greening. As a founder of Cottonwood, twenty-one years ago, I have fought this fight before.

Back in 1991, I started a campaign with a rag-tag group of East Vancouver residents to take over a three acre strip of city land on the southern perimeter of Strathcona Park, which had become a study in urban blight. The city had stopped enforcing anti-dumping bylaws in this industrial neighbourhood and mountains of jettisoned construction debris, landscaping waste, rotten furniture and junked cars were continuing to accumulate on the property with no end in sight, accompanied, unsurprisingly, by an increase in the rat population and the incidence of petty crime.

Tired of this officially sanctioned neglect, our little group of volunteers rolled up its collective sleeves, borrowed some wheelbarrows and shovels and got busy. With an enormous amount of hard work and a sense of community pride, we gradually transformed this unprepossessing piece of urban wasteland into an award-winning public garden and arboretum. It is without doubt one of the things in my life I am most proud of having done.

We called the place 'Cottonwood Community Gardens' as a nod to the giant cottonwood trees that tower over its northern edge, their rustling foliage a reminder of the area's rich ecological past, when it was the marshy edge of False Creek, which once extended as far east as Clark Drive.

When word of our initiative got up to City Hall, we were informed that City

Engineering had made plans to turn the dusty lot into a heavy equipment training area, despite being right beside a major park with heavily used playing fields, to which the dust churned up by the machinery would surely have drifted.

But those were the days of 'recreational apartheid' in East Vancouver, when the right-wing, Non-Partisan Alliance dominated city council and played favourites with the prosperous areas of the city that voted for them while turning their backs on neighbourhoods (like ours) that didn't. The NPA dominated Parks Board was at that time busy assembling million dollar beachfront properties for parks in Point Grey and Kitsilano, while neighbourhoods on the East Side had to grovel to get broken teeter-totters replaced in their over-used inner-city playgrounds.



*What we started out with*

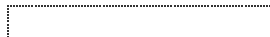


*Cleaning up*

And if that wasn't enough reason to continue with our intervention, a friendly Vancouver Sun reporter had tipped us off that City Engineering was quietly hatching a plan to build a major new truck route through the nearby Grandview Cut and run it right through this ignominious little property, funneling yet more smoke-belching transport trucks into our already polluted and congested environs.

Clearly City Hall was making some terrible decisions at the expense of the neighbourhood, so we needed to act fast. Whatever automatic legitimacy they may once have had was eroded by the pernicious neglect with which they treated the area, offering it up as a kind of sacrifice zone for their 1950's vision of a vehicle-dominated city.

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## (7) Comments

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### Out with the gardins in with the road

AJ September 24th 2012 | 10:22 PM

I'd say a majority of Vancouverites would not care at all about the loss of this garden. If a bunch of hippies, and seniors did indeed chain themselves, vision wouldn't take a hit to their reputation. Removing a community garden is of little consequence to the city, mainly because it doesn't have any value. Compare it to the value of this project, and the greenspace it opens up for all of vancouver (instead of a puny community garden) and it is obvious which is worth more. Your post offers no real alternatives or options, so I don't expect your garden to last much longer. The garden was always city property, it was never yours. It can be moved inwards into the park, or somewhere else. Vancouver does need a wider roadway into downtown, and this roadway does exactly that.

Perhaps setting up a community garden inside the new parkspace created would be a nice option.

I Agree (17)

I Disagree (55)

### Please sign our petition!

Zoee September 25th 2012 | 4:16 PM

We have created a petition about saving Cottonwood Community Garden, please sign it! <http://www.change.org/en-CA/petitions/city-of-vancouver-save-cottonwood-community-garden>

I Agree (33)

I Disagree (25)

### Garden should remain

DH October 10th 2012 | 12:00 AM

Community gardens are a living testament to peaceful protest. I feel they're living art. The majority isnt always right when blinded by greed and ego. This garden provides for the health and joy of many of the community members in this neighbourhood. If Vancouver sacrifices this greenspace for a larger road it truly has lost its soul. I learned many of my gardening skills in this garden and the nearby strathcona community garden. I now have a small farm in Dawson Yukon where I feed people. This garden maybe small but it has great influence. Lets save this space for all the volunteers that came before and to the future gardeners of such a lovely space.

I Agree (34)

I Disagree (21)

### Connecting gardens to Strathcona concerns is the red herring

Jerry October 21st 2012 | 1:13 PM

I attended the calm Prior Street rally, signed their petition, got their mail-outs etc. I did not ONCE hear any call for calming Prior Street in order to inflate property values. One Province reporter quoting a real estate agent's speculation has nothing to do with the concerns residents expressed. I would argue that nearby community gardens add as much to overall property values as a calmed Prior Street, furthermore any value increases on Prior would likely be offset by losses on Atlantic, who will likely experience more noise, etc. The property value argument is tacky and disingenuous, it's a red herring put forward to tap into anti-gentrification sentiment. The gardeners would do well to avoid that line of thinking, because all it's doing is alienating the potential allies who actually live in Strathcona and (ironically) have to cross Prior to get to the gardens.

This Malkin plan has been on the books for years. The City right of way Cottonwood sits on is for a 12-lane road, my understanding is that the City is proposing a six-lane replacement, with widening at both the north and south sides. It's unfortunate that it will inevitably result in some loss at Cottonwood (I note that Strathcona Gardens wisely chose to do their permanent plantings quite clear of the existing right-of-way) but the fact that they were gardening on borrowed land has been known and apparently ignored for years. Seems like it was a planning blunder when the gardens chose to put raised box plantings on the non-right-of way (north-east corner) and permanent plantings on the right-of-way.

I think there is some room for compromise by reconfiguring Strathcona Park to allow more garden space. The large gravel field on the Raymur side is almost never used (in fact, as a daily park user for at least 15 years I cannot remember the last time I saw it in use), surely that can be turned into a grass field, and then the field inside the oval turned into gardens. Further, the city just built the new astroturf Trillium fields two blocks away, there are plenty of resources for sports teams.

I get that Cottonwood will be upset at the loss of some trees and are worried that increased noise will disrupt the tranquility of the garden (although, the produce terminal trucks and compressors don't seem especially tranquil as it stands now). That said, lots of people are upset that they won't be able to get to downtown 2 minutes faster over the viaduct. Everybody needs to compromise. The all-or-nothing approach Cottonwood is taking doesn't seem to be especially productive or strategic.

I Agree (15)      I Disagree (24)

### re: out with the gardINS in with the road

A.S    November 26th 2012 | 1:13 PM

Quite obviously you lack the knowledge to comment intelligently on this issue. First of all it is GARDENS, second of all, the gardeners are not all hippies or senior citizens. The value of this project is the actual cost (that the widening) Vancouver's taxpayers will endure and how far are they willing to go when it comes to destroying natural wildlife habitats? Get your facts straight, become educated about something before you prove your ignorance once again.

AJ wrote:

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I Agree (14)      I Disagree (12)

### oliverk

jbanting    April 28th 2013 | 6:18 PM

<http://www.oliverk.org/page/cottonwood-community-gardens>

I Agree (9)      I Disagree (11)

### ignorance

jbanting    April 28th 2013 | 6:18 PM

prove your ignorance once again

I Agree (10)      I Disagree (12)