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Residents plant the seed for community garden

A promising discussion confirms interest, resources
BY KRISTEN DALTON Staff Writer



Carol Fornwald, of the Monmouth University Community Garden, spoke to residents interested in starting a Shrewsbury Community Garden at a Jan. 17 discussion hosted by the Shrewsbury Garden Club.

KRISTEN DALTON

SHREWSBURY — Community gardens grow communities. That was the reason why more than 30 people raised their hands and expressed interest in planting a garden in the borough at a meeting on Jan. 17.

The discussion at the Shrewsbury Historical Society building in the Municipal Complex was hosted by the Shrewsbury Garden Club (SGC) and was the inspiration of Tim Thomas, who works for the Freehold Soil Conservation District.

He first made his presence known during a borough Environmental Commission meeting last year. He was the only member of the public present then. Now he's spearheading a project for a Shrewsbury community garden.

“There’s many paths that will get you to a community garden. The first thing is do you want to have a community garden?” Thomas asked those in attendance, whose turnout alone confirmed an interest in the project.

The yet-to-be-named community garden group would have a lot of crossover membership between the environmental commission and the garden club and would seek newcomers interested in overseeing the project.

“The [Shrewsbury] Garden Club and the environmental commission have been very supportive, but they both have said that they can’t take the project on. That’s why we would spin off to a new group, hopefully during this next year, and then it would be a third entity,” said Thomas.

He said the borough is already on board with the idea, and Mayor Donald Burden has expressed support. Additionally, Ron Neis, a foreman for the borough’s Department of Public Works, attended the meeting and suggested using the open space at the municipal complex.

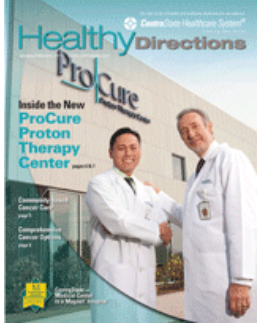
“There’s water access, there’s electricity, and there’s video cameras on the property. We have our own natural compost with no chemicals added. If we had a purpose to get rid of a lot of that, we can do that. It’s very rich and organic,” said Neis.

“I’m here for you. I’ve worked here for 17 years and know every inch of this property.”

According to Thomas, forming a partnership with the borough adds another dimension to the project and could help iron out a variety of concerns such as location, water access, security at the site, visibility and community access.

“Essentially we are at step one with a clean slate. Moving on we’d need to set up a steering committee, and then there’s a host of issues we would have to decide on. That’s

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“We got our start at Brookdale”



BROOKDALE COMMUNITY COLLEGE



where, hopefully, a partner with the town would come in and make those things possible for us,” he said.

The future steering committee would also have to decide on what kind of plots, either individual or community, to build and whether or not there would be a fee to access

them.

“Four feet by 10 feet was the ideal size of an individual plot, so the first year if people take 4 by 20 feet, so what? The next year you can cut it in half and get double the people,” explained Thomas.

Residents had the opportunity to listen to several community garden organizers, including Teresa Maltz, from Tinton Falls, Ellyn Kahle, from Oceanport, and Carol Fornwald, from Monmouth University.

Kahle said the Oceanport Community Garden started as part of the Sustainable New Jersey initiative and was financed through open space funds and several donations that allowed the participating gardeners to join for free. The location next to borough hall provides a water source as well.

The Tinton Falls Community Garden is in its third growing season at the historic Crawford House. According to Maltz, the group’s mission is to grow produce and sell it at a farm stand in order to help fund renovations for the house.

“In addition, we have a community section where individuals in the community can participate in gardening by having their own individual plots. It’s been quite a process, and I think we’ve learned a lot,” said Maltz.

The toughest part of the experience, Maltz said, has been getting organized and assigning each dedicated member a role in helping to sustain the garden.

“Whatever organizational issues we have that have caused a little tension among community members, once we’re out in the garden we seem to forget, and that’s a really nice thing. Once we’re outside, there’s a nice bond,” she said.

The Monmouth University (MU) community garden is also in its third growing season and charges \$25 per plot for about 40 participating gardeners, and there’s a growing waiting list.

The MU garden recently formed a steering committee that installed a natural compost pile and a shed, and is looking to put up a deer fence this year.

“There really is a community effort. Everybody seems to be working together and it’s been a real delight. It seems to work out really well for us,” said Fornwald.

All three existing community gardens are organic and do not use any pesticides or chemicals on crops. They also donate some produce to local food pantries like Lunch Break in Red Bank and the FoodBank of Monmouth and Ocean Counties in Neptune.

They also utilize educational partnerships with schools and local Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops looking to give back to the community.

The residents were enthusiastic about their options and eager to begin the necessary organizational steps.

“We’re in a unique situation, that our garden is really like a seed in a packet, because we’ve heard all the other examples and we can pick and choose what we want to do,” said Thomas.

Evelin Gaffney, of Rumson, is a certified Monmouth County master gardener and said that if there are enough resources and money, the garden could get started sometime this year.

“If you could get your fence up, if you could get your mechanics up, everything is kind of already in place,” said Gaffney.

“I’m from Rumson, but I am absolutely passionate about these gardens.”



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Based on the number of people asking questions that night, she wasn't the only one.