

Garden could improve life in Highlands neighborhood



Bill Wagner / The Daily News Representatives from many community groups are pitching in to make a community garden in the Highlands a reality. From left to right, starting with Americorps worker Tamora Haulk, the group includes Patsy Hite, Floyd Willet, Linda Ball, Ilona Kerby of CAP, Steve Hamilton, Paul Youmans, Larry Russell, and Sandy Junker.

By Amy M.E. Fisher / The Daily News Online | Posted: Saturday, April 2, 2011

Could a vegetable garden change the lives of Longview's Highlands neighborhood residents?

According to those who study how peoples' social environments affect their health, the answer is yes — and in ways that go beyond nutrition.

That's why the local community is getting behind the Highlands Neighborhood Association's effort to create a community garden this spring.

Lower Columbia CAP is allowing the HNA to create a garden in a vacant lot behind the association's new community center at 205 Carolina Street, which CAP is leasing to the association. CAP has offered to sell the plot to the HNA for \$5,000, but unless a donor comes forward, the HNA will just use the land without owning it, Highlands Community Coach Liz Haeck said.

The neighborhood association's initial plan is to build six 15-by-20-foot raised planting beds in the large lot, which is at the corner of Alder and Douglas Streets just across the slough from Industrial Way. Later, the HNA hopes to add picnic tables, benches and pathways, Haeck said. The plots will be planted by six or eight families chosen by the HNA and Lower Columbia College Head Start, which uses half of the community center building as a preschool classroom.

Starting a Highlands community garden is one of Haeck's assignments as a professional community coach. It's also in Head Start's strategic plan, said Sandy Junker, director of the program that helps young, low-income children prepare to enter school.

Statistically, the Highlands has an above-average rate of deaths from chronic disease, drugs, accidents, suicide and crime, and the city and various agencies are trying to reverse the trend by tackling the problems' underlying causes.

One strategy is to build a community garden so residents have a reason to get outside, be physically active and connect with their neighbors, said Paul Youmans, program director for Pathways 2020, a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving local quality of life. When people are working side by side, Youmans said they find other things in common they can work on together. He feels such connectivity with neighbors, schools and children is key in preventing drug and alcohol problems.

Youmans said the Northwest Health Foundation recently awarded Pathways 2020 a \$150,000 grant for supporting school and community gardens, adding that a minimum of \$500 will go toward the Highlands garden.

Although the HNA gained gardening experience last year with its plot at the Longview Community Garden on 32nd Avenue, the group will have outside help to ensure the new garden's success.

The Washington State University Master Gardeners have offered their technical expertise. Volunteers from Love INC and other groups will build the raised beds. Cowlitz Americorps Network volunteer Tamora Haulk is organizing the garden project and pulling together various local groups to support it. Working with her will be a garden manager appointed from the neighborhood.

"I think it's awesome that it's actually coming to fruition," said Haulk, who is tasked with starting community gardens in Longview for Pathways 2020. "It's going to be cool. I'm looking forward to the next few months."

Junker of Head Start likes the idea of parents planting gardens with their children, who will learn from watering the seeds, and picking and eating the vegetables after watching them grow. A garden also will help families stretch their grocery budgets, she said.

HNA president Patsy Hite echoed that sentiment.

"I just think it's very important because a lot of our Highlands residents go to food banks," Hite said.

Also, she said, eating fresh garden produce could improve the health of people in the neighborhood, many of whom have diabetes, heart problems and difficulty breathing, she said.

"The goal is to make the healthy choice the easy choice," Youmans said.

Want to help? Call the Highlands Neighborhood Association at 360-442-5932. Also, the HNA welcomes donations of garden soil, lumber and dryer felt for the project.