

Public gives feedback on Wilberforce food centre proposal

By Jenn Watt

If the Ontario Trillium Foundation approves their proposal, Highlands East could have a new food bank space, more access to food for those in need and more cooking classes and food programming.

On Thursday evening, project co-ordinator John Teljeur met with members of the community to explain a plan that he, the municipality and two other food bank co-ordinators, Ken Mott (Wilberforce) and Robert Spurrier (Cardiff), had created to put an addition on the Lloyd Watson Centre in Wilberforce.

‘You’ve got a kitchen here that’s under utilized, we’ve got this amazing hall right here,’ Teljeur said, explaining that the space would not only be used to store and distribute food, but also to have community events that brought people together around food regardless of income.

While the proposal is about creating a new structure on the municipally owned building, it is just as much about creating a new way of viewing food programming, he said.

Outlined in his presentation were ideas such as establishing a community kitchen in the same building as the food bank; putting on programming that will give the space the feeling of a drop-in centre; engaging grocery stores to have them donate good food they are planning to throw away; and increasing the number of community gardens in the county, among others.

Should the municipality receive the Trillium grant, the food bank would become a member of the Ontario Association of Food Banks, giving them access to more food.

eljeur envisioned the Wilberforce Food Centre would become part of a Haliburton County regional food hub, storing and distributing food for all sorts of programming and community endeavours.

‘That food hub is huge. We’re going to acquire more food, we’re going to store more food and we’re going to distribute more food and that’s the bottom line with this,’ he said. Having somewhere to put fresh produce would allow programs such as Food for Kids or charitable organizations to more economically run their events.

Members of the audience wondered whether all of the proposed programs would mean that other community events would be pushed out of the Lloyd Watson Centre.

Councillor Joan Barton clarified that the Wilberforce Food Centre would book space in the same way that any other group did.

‘The intention is not to hand over this facility,’ Barton said. ‘They would be booking like anyone else would book.’

The food bank space would likely only be open about two days a week and be run by local volunteers.

Several community members said they worried that the addition would take up parking spaces beside the centre, which are often hard to come by during big events.

Barton and Reeve Dave Burton couldn’t recall how many parking spaces the plans intended to repurpose for the food centre, but said it was no more than seven spaces that would be lost.

While plans do exist, they weren’t brought to the meeting and councillors said they would be posted to the Highlands East municipal website and made available for the public to peruse.

Burton said there would be another public meeting for further consultation.

Other sites for the food centre had been considered, Teljeur said, but the Lloyd Watson Centre makes most sense because the space would be connected to the kitchen facilities, allowing community kitchen programming to happen.

In addition, the plans include public washrooms to be added to the building.

Many examples of what could be done with the food centre were floated and Teljeur, who is a board member of the OAFB, was able to talk about particularly inspiring models that could be used in the hamlet.

‘Windsor Essex Food Bank ? what they’ve done is they’ve actually partnered with the local colleges and they run chefs programs.

They actually really teach you to cook to the point where you have a skill where you become more employable,’ he said.

Rosie Kadwell, a local health unit dietitian, was in the audience and added that even if classes aren’t formal college courses, there is a lot of good that can come of them for participants.

‘It doesn’t even have to be a chef’s cooking program; it’s just people that come together to cook,’ Kadwell said.

‘It prepares people to go back to the workforce,’ she said.

Kadwell gave the example of a single mother who may have been home with the kids for several years. Volunteering at a community kitchen, taking the safe food handling course and meeting others could give her the skills and experiences she needed to update her resume and build confidence to re-enter the workforce.

Councillors assured audience members that the accessible entrance to the hall would remain in place should the plan go ahead.

The grant would cover the whole project.

This week, members of the Trillium foundation are doing a site visit, however, that doesn't mean the food centre is approved. Word on that decision won't come until the end of October, Teljeur estimated.

If they're unsuccessful in the grant application, Teljeur said he will keep applying until they do receive the money.