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## Urban farm planned for Skokie's east side

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The Skokie Park District is trying to acquire about three acres of property near Howard Street and the North Shore Channel that would be turned over to a non-profit organization for the creation of a new urban farm.

Building an urban farm in the area has been a long-time goal of Evanston-based The Talking Farm, which first believed the property it sought was in Evanston because it's east of the North Shore Channel.

But a small strip of property east of the channel is located in Skokie and owned by the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District. Once The Talking Farm representatives learned the true location of the property, it sought the village's help.

Skokie itself could not provide much help in acquiring the property, but the Park District can. Commissioners recently voted to authorize Park District Executive Director Mark Schneiderman to try to execute a lease agreement with the MWRD so the Park District can partner with The Talking Farm on the project.

"We heard what they were about and we became very interested in what they're trying to do," Schneiderman said. "They were looking for a permanent home for an urban garden and they found property that looked right for them. Then they learned it was in Skokie."

An organization like The Talking Farm cannot lease property directly from the MWRD. The Park District, on the other hand, can lease the property from the MWRD for as little as one cent and then bring in The Talking Farm.

The sought-after property off of McCormick Boulevard and Howard Street would be occupied by the farm or garden, which would be separated by a parking lot into southern and northern areas, a building and a greenhouse. The farm would grow and sell goods, emphasize the benefits of home-grown produce, contain areas for demonstrations and classrooms and serve as an ideal venue for school fieldtrips.

Linda Kruhmin, a founding member of The Talking Farm and operations coordinator for the project, considers The Talking Farm an activist organization.

The Talking Farm advocates knowing where foods come from, supporting a sustainable local economy and healthy food system, creating a healthy, safe and green community and helping to shape the country's food and environmental future.

"It's a very exciting time for us," said Kruhmin who noted the organization recently hired its first staff member and moved only this week into a permanent home in Evanston. "We're finding that we have a lot of people who are interested in joining our cause and who believe in what we're doing."

The Talking Farm came out of the Network for Evanston's Future, which first formed the Evanston Food Policy Council. The EFPC was formed to examine the idea of food as a central fact of human life, as well as a linchpin of social and economic systems.

"Food connects everything -- health, basic sustenance, environment, family, energy resources, transportation, economic development, pleasure, economic and social justice, security, and community," The Talking Farm says on its Web site. "In discussing these issues within the community and at local events, the notion of growing organic food on a meaningful scale within our community soon emerged as an obvious and key component of a healthy food system."

The creation of The Talking Farm in 2006 came from the belief that an urban farm would further the group's mission. The Talking Farm has been looking for property but the best it could find prior to now was much smaller property -- a half-acre or so -- in Evanston.

The MWRD property in Skokie provided the organization with more space and an ideal location.

The project is estimated to cost \$1 million, which Kruhmin said will be raised through donations and grants. The Talking Farm, in fact, is pretty advanced in its plans having already created a site plan and designated how the space would be used.

One acre of property to the south of Howard Street would contain an agro forest of sorts combining agricultural

and forestry technologies to create more diverse, productive, profitable, healthy and sustainable land-use systems. The two-acre northern half would be used to grow green produce and basics such as kale, cabbage, onions and garlic.

The Talking Farm's plans also call for an aesthetic upgrade to the area by producing "a beautiful site" with vines, flowers and ornamental decorations, Kruhmin said.

The group has already been busy with other projects including helping to create organic gardens or advancing environmental and green projects at local schools and other venues. It has made a name for itself in Evanston and surrounding areas.

The first step in making its biggest dream come true, activists say, is securing a lease for the property. Once that's accomplished, the Talking Farm can work on water for the site, growing produce and ultimately constructing the building and the greenhouse.

Schneiderman said he is optimistic that the Park District will acquire the property, but there are some complicated legal issues still to work out. It will take a little time, he said.

But The Skokie Park District, he said, shares excitement with The Talking Farm over the prospect of an urban farm right in the village's backyard. He sees the farm as an opportunity for new enlightening and educational programs with cross-programming between the two organizations.

"They're all about health and wellness and we're all about health and wellness," Schneiderman said. "It's a pretty ideal match when you look at it."

For more information about The Talking Farm, visit [www.thetalkingfarm.org](http://www.thetalkingfarm.org).

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