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By Catherine Porter
Columnist

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Anne Pastuszak arrived at City Hall Monday Morning in a grey business suit.

She waited and waited and waited, deputant No. 259, for her two minutes to negotiate with the mayor.

She was back there 12 hours later, still waiting.

By then, the bleary-eyed members of the executive committee had been chastised, cajoled, serenaded and cried to by more than 200 people, most pleading that their precious service be spared the mayor's machete.

Pastuszak didn't come to beg. She came to strike up a deal for Riverdale Farm.

"We want to create a new business plan for Riverdale Farm," Pastuszak told me before taking the microphone. "We want to partner with the city."

Tell me you've been to Riverdale Farm. You must go — today, tomorrow, this weekend. Sit in the "Francey Barn" with the sheep and rabbits and bleating baby goat. The dark and quiet will calm your battered mind. Lean over the fence and watch the copper-coloured pigs roll in the mud — you will remember how simple life can be.

The farm, in the middle of a park in the middle of the city, is a throwback to another time — before all visitors were potential litigators and/or kidnappers. There are no security cameras or barbed wire fences or even turnstiles and ticket takers. It's as open as library, for you to slip in, pick the boysenberries from a tree, pet the sheep and skip back out again a little

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three. A pad in the bucket.

It is on the chopping block. The infamous KPMG report has suggested the city either find another operator for the city's three farms, including Riverdale, or sell them. The savings, for the city, would amount to \$1.3 million for all

Pastuszak doesn't argue with the city's need to make some cuts. She's not playing the "manufactured crisis" card. Instead, she's asking for a reprieve — a few months to draft a plan to make the farm profitable.

"We are not a bunch of whiners," says Dan Eldridge, deputant No. 275 and Pastuszak's partner-in-crime. "We're highly educated, highly motivated, highly connected, highly everything — we're the dream example of a community partner for the city."

Together, Pastuszak and Eldridge have already proven their mettle. She organized the 90 volunteers for the Cabbagetown Tour of Homes this past weekend. As the chair of the Riverdale Farm Advisory Council, he flips the pancakes at community events and paints the white picket fence around the farmhouse every year.

They are the type of neighbours that should be advertised on real estate listings. They make the difference between a neighbourhood and a community.

When they heard of the KPMG report, Pastuszak started a petition — almost 10,000 names now — and Eldridge whipped up the design for some protest signs. He ordered 400 and left them on his front porch, with a note telling neighbours they were free for the taking, but please shove \$4 through his door slot.

By the end of the week, he'd sold 250 and made \$100 profit.

"Nothing's made me feel more proud to live in Cabbagetown," he said. "That's the most beautiful example of civic engagement I can think of."

A community group already runs programs out of Riverdale Farm. If you've ever bought a carrot muffin or sheep's-wool blanket from the snack bar or gift shop inside the old red-bricked Simpson House, you've paid the Friends of Riverdale Farm. It's a non-profit run by neighbours that leases the space. It also runs the glorious weekly organic farmers market.

So the lines have already been blurred. But surely, there is much room for more blurring.

"I was going to check to see if they had a charitable foundation," Powell McDougall told me Monday, as her daughter Adelaide shrieked after the baby goat down in the Francey Barn. "I want to support this place however I can."

If you can sponsor a polar bear, why not a turkey? If you can get married at Casa Loma, why not here?

In Brooklyn, the Prospect Park Alliance raises \$9 million a year for park trees and water fountains and refurbished carousels. They are a group of committed neighbours who use the park. Why can't we do that here?

"These are the ideas we are looking for," says Michelle Berardinetti, one of two councillors on the executive committee who told me they agree with Pastuszak. "We really need to start thinking about creative, innovative solutions, rather than don't touch anything or close it down."

Let's hope she can sway Mayor Rob Ford.

Riverdale Farm is the litmus test for whether the mayor is sincere about working with partners or if he's running purely on cut-and-slash dogma.

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If he isn't interested in alternative solutions, Monday's marathon public meeting was an insulting charade.

Catherine Porter's column usually runs Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. She can be reached at cporter@thestar.ca

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