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Flint to consider ordinance changes to enhance urban agriculture

By Liz Shaw

July 07, 2009, 9:25AM



Ryan Garza | The Flint Journal

Carolyn Meekins, executive director for Urban Community Youth Outreach program, stands in an urban garden on Philadelphia Avenue in Flint, with the first hoop greenhouse allowed on a vacant lot in the city.

FLINT, Michigan -- Every summer, Carolyn Meekins watches with pride as neighbors and church members descend on the gardens she helps maintain on 11 vacant lots on the city's north side.

"We tell them to come pick what you need, so there's no way of measuring how much we actually produce. People just drive up with their bags and pick," Meekins said of the Urban Community Youth Outreach garden and greenhouse project on Philadelphia Boulevard. "We're starting to get enough seedlings now that we can share them, too."

Growing the vegetables and flowers is the easy part. But just ask Meekins what the group went through to build a simple greenhouse with donated materials.

It's a three-year tale of permits, reviews, site plan requirements and endless rounds of meetings with the city Planning Commission.

"In the end, what was originally a gift wound up being a \$20,000 hoop house with no heater," Meekins said. "There were a lot of times we really wanted to give up."

Resolving issues such as this are at the heart of Flint's new urban agriculture collaborative, made up of individuals and organizations working to put a green lining on the city's gray cloud of vacant land.

Flint Journal extras Public input meeting on Growing Food in Flint When: 6-

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Policies and laws

It's not that Flint officials are opposed to residents growing their own food in backyards or on nearly 2,800 vacant residential lots within the city limits (a list that's still growing to the tune of about 500 vacant lots per year).

The problem is the laws on the books simply predate the city's new urban reality.

"The zoning ordinance hasn't been revised since 1968, when we were a booming industrial city and didn't have to think about agriculture as part of city planning," said Erin Caudell, a technical assistant for the urban agriculture collaborative and the outreach coordinator for the Ruth Mott Foundation's Applewood program.

"Now that we have a different scenario, we have to do some planning as a community as to what that new reality should look like."

For example, anyone can put up a hoop house behind their home as an accessory structure. But try to do it on a vacant garden lot and you'll end up in the zoning no-man's-land faced by Meekins' group.

And the worst part is everything they went through didn't break an inch of ground for the next group wanting to build a greenhouse on a vacant city lot.

"What the city finally did was give them a variance. That means it's just a one-time exception to the rule. So the next request would have to go through the same process all over again," Caudell said.

"A hoop house can extend your season so you can grow in them almost year-round without an additional heat source. But we don't want to promote something illegal or that difficult to do."

Another example: A neighborhood vegetable stand isn't legal in residential zones, while food can't be grown in commercial or industrial districts.

Perhaps the most controversial change involves chickens, bees and goats inside city limits.

Composted manure from chickens and goats produces high-quality, cheap fertilizer and reduces the need for synthetic chemicals. They can help make a family self-sustaining with eggs, milk, meat and other products. Chickens also eat insects, while goats can replace a lawn mower.

"Some cities are now renting goats so they don't have to mow city parks," said Caudell. "The farmer benefits by putting their goats in a place where they can forage for free, while the city stops paying the costs to mow."

The city needs to hear both sides of all the issues before recommending any changes, said Planning Commissioner Kay Kelly.

"I don't know of anybody who's against people growing their own food in the city but there are concerns that need to be addressed," said Kelly, citing issues such as making sure hoop houses are kept in good condition.



Oscar Durand | The Flint Journal

Johanna Brown of Flint helps Desmond Brown, 3, to plant string beans at a vegetable garden at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Flint, Michigan. They are part of the "Stone Soup," an initiative that started in April of this year and will donate all the produce to the North End soup kitchen.

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Most cities set strict limits on space and numbers for livestock to reduce concerns like smell, sanitation and aesthetics, said Kelly.

"It's a matter of regulating with oversight. But then you come to the issue of who's going to oversee these things? These are not easy questions," said Kelly. "But while they're complex, they're certainly not insurmountable as long as everybody wants this to work."

Soil quality

The Genesee County Land Bank's demolition contract with the city is supposed to include a fresh layer of clean top soil once the building has been cleared away. But too often, the replacement soil is poor and unscreened, littered with chunks of glass and other debris or comprised of untillable clay, said Christina Kelly, Land Bank lead planner.

"Even basic things like garbage pickup need to be addressed. Right now the city doesn't pick up in front of vacant lots, so if people are doing a clean-up they can't just put the bags at the curb. They have to load it up in their cars and take it home or to a neighbor," said Christina Kelly.

The lots also have to be tested for heavy metals and other dangerous contaminants.

"Some lots we can't even take a soil sample because it's like cement," said Caudell.

One solution has been to lay a protective cardboard barrier and cover it with compost -- a strategy that's been successfully used at scores of sites, including a master gardener demonstration garden at Chestnut Street and Home Avenue and a Land Bank site on Third Avenue between Mason and Grand Traverse.

But it can take years to get a site ready to garden.

"We've been trying to put pressure on the city for a couple years but it's been tough. Thankfully, the new administration is working with us on it now," said Caudell. "Unfortunately, we still have to deal with five years of bad demos behind us."

Water

Typically, when a house is torn down, the water main is removed. The collaborative is working with the city to identify potential garden sites so the water access can be left intact.

"Right now, a lot depends on the goodwill of neighbors but not all these gardens are next to homes. Sometimes it's a rain barrel or other water catchment," said Caudell. "We've also been known to bring five-gallon buckets from our own houses in our cars."

One solution is metered spigots on fire hydrants.

"In the past, tapping into hydrants wasn't an issue. Then it wasn't allowed and now it appears to be allowed again so we're checking into that," said Christina Kelly.

Flint Journal extras Regulating Urban Agriculture Chickens and goats
Why allow: Provide eggs, meat and dairy products. Inexpensive, high-quality manure compost replaces expensive synthetic fertilizers. **How to regulate:** Limit numbers and require permits for each animal. Require pens Require setbacks from property lines Restrict roosters Require notification and approval of neighbors Neuter male goats De-horn goats

Hoop Houses

Why allow:

Extended growing season for extra production. Allows gardeners to prepare seedlings. Can grow cold-hardy varieties in winter without additional heat source.

How to regulate:

Specified setbacks from property lines and streetfront
 Specific height and size limits for each zoning district
 Require fencing or shrubs as a buffer to adjacent properties

Bees

Why allow:

Necessary to pollinate crops. More beekeepers needed to bolster honeybee

populations decreased by an unknown cause in recent years. Produce honey and other valuable products.

How to regulate:

- Limit number of hives
- Require setbacks from property lines
- Specify minimum lot sizes
- Require a permit

Producing Food for Sale

Why allow:

Creates income for gardeners. Offsets costs to produce fresh, safe food. Local production guarantees local availability. Reduces environmental impact of food production by reducing fuel and transportation costs.

How to regulate:

- Require fences or landscaping as buffers between houses and garden.
- Allow market gardens in certain zones such as multiple-family, commercial, industrial or urban garden districts.

Source: Genesee County Land Bank, Ruth Mott Foundation Applewood and Michigan State University Extension.

What lies ahead

Right now about 60 urban gardens are growing on Land Bank sites through the Clean and Green or Adopt a Lot programs. Many homeowners are growing gardens in their backyards, or on adjacent lots they've acquired at minimal cost through the county's side lot transfer program.

"Then there's all the property we don't own, just vacant lots that nobody's doing anything with and people just farm it," said Christina Kelly, who estimates there are now more than 200 urban gardens of various types. "It's really amazing when you drive around the city in July or August and see mustard greens or beets or corn growing up everywhere."

The Land Bank has hired an urban garden coordinator, while the urban agriculture collaborative is hosting public meetings to gather input from residents on what they'd like to see change -- or not change -- to support or regulate urban farming.

All that information will be presented to the Planning Commission to begin the process of drafting proposed ordinance changes. Public hearings will then be held in August or September before the commission makes its formal recommendations to the City Council for a final decision.

"I'm sure people thought Flint would die when the beaver trapping stopped, just like they think now with GM. Flint is always going to change," said Kay Kelly. "There are so many groups in Flint coming together right now, all determined to improve the quality of life for everyone in so many different ways.

"Yes, Flint is changing. But I believe it's moving forward."

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Posted by **1998pa**
July 07, 2009, 11:27AM

This is a great article. Being from Flint, it's so wonderful to see people excited about bettering the community through gardening. It's equally frustrating to see all the red tape they must go through. Hopefully this article helps to get these outdated regulations reviewed and limited.

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Posted by **Indscurbnsn**
July 07, 2009, 12:16PM

Really looking forward to this as a positive, proactive step for the city. I'd especially like to see this approached at a range of scales. This is a good first step, but what about applying it at the block or neighborhood scale and the challenges associated with them? Also, how's this tapped into the city's and county's economic development? Even beyond the vast potential of local foods, how can things like this be related to bio-fuels, alternative energy, urban redevelopment, etc. It's also good to see the Land Bank participating in some good ol' fashioned stakeholder and community participation.

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Posted by **demeralda**
July 07, 2009, 12:59PM

I would ask that these organizations and the Journal promote ways for out-county folks to get involved. I for one would more than willing to donate some manhours for garden maintenance, but honestly I find it hard to track down the right group, right contact, etc. Everyone in this county has a stake in the beautification of Flint. All you people with beautiful gardens in Davison, Flushing, Grand Blanc and Fenton... couldn't you donate a little of your time and expertise toward making our county seat a little more beautiful? After all, we've all had business in Flint at one time or another.

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Posted by **adamford**
July 07, 2009, 1:25PM

It's not like the Flint City council is opposed to job creation such as urban gardens and other businesses it's just that the Flint city council is so busy with all those other things they do that they don't have time to fix the ordinances.

Maybe some day will get a council that is focused on job creation and not just boosting their ego's with more b.s. ordinances.

It's a tragedy that this took three years but what's more tragic is the 100's if not 1000's of other jobs that were lost thanks to Flint city councilman and our ridiculous and outdated ordinances.

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Posted by **handsopen**
July 07, 2009, 1:28PM

I like it. Keep the good ideas coming.

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Posted by **bearking55**
July 07, 2009, 2:05PM

Wonderful! Finally Flint's officials will help do some GOOD!! (hopefully)
Even if it's only to repair damage done by past bad laws.
The answer is usually LEAVE/give people MORE FREEDOM. Here we see the
unintended bad consequences of too much & too strict zoning laws. but it's
heartening to see the problem being addressed.

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Posted by **oldeastside**
July 07, 2009, 3:56PM

2 things to fix this mess:
1. An updated Master Plan for the City that includes all ordinances being
updated.
2. The Planning Commission setting the wheels in motion on the Chapter 50
ordinance change that needs to be done.
Number 1 is a lot longer process, that MUST be done.
Number 2, if done right, can be accomplished in less than 6 months.
If people ask for the change, the Planning Commission can start the process.
That Simple.

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Posted by **Indscurbnsn**
July 07, 2009, 4:42PM

Actually, oldeastside, number 1 (such as it is) is underway...
Technically, number 2 can't be enforced without a master plan. The city's
gotten around it thusfar though...
I would say at this stage in the game, it's wasted time and money to revise
the zoning codes without a new master plan in place. You can certainly work
to the later while you're doing the former, at the very least. With so many
problems with Euclidean zoning and several new forms available, it's worth it
to take time with this.

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Posted by **guderian**
July 14, 2009, 2:33PM

Yes! That's great! Flint is now free to look like a back street in BomBay.
Horrory! Wait until the vandals find out about this windfall just waiting for the
taking.

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