



POLICY BRIEF

The Use of Publicly Owned Vacant Land for Community Agriculture: How North Carolina Municipalities Can Provide the Necessary Policy Framework for the Production of Food on Public Land

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Community Agriculture provides a plethora of social and economic benefits. Although cities across North Carolina have the ability to purchase locally and regionally grown fruits and vegetables, most produce consumed in cities is imported from elsewhere. For example, in 2012 the residents of the Charlotte’s metropolitan area spent \$762.4 million dollars a year on fresh fruits and vegetables. The region produced an estimated retail equivalent of around \$100 million of those same fruit and vegetable products. This represents a significant opportunity for the expansion of locally grown produce within the city and its surrounding metropolitan region to fill that \$662.5 million gap in demand.¹

Since the 1990’s North Carolina has lost 9,000 farms and millions of acres of farmland.² The geographic gap between food production and food demand has led to the creation of substantial food deserts across the state, now identified by the North Carolina General Assembly as a significant problem. Food deserts are "urban neighborhoods and rural towns without ready access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food."³ In North Carolina, there are at least 349 food deserts across 80 counties, negatively affecting over 1.5 million state residents.⁴ These residents are more likely to suffer from obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease due to decreased access to nutritious food.

Resilient urban ecosystems that encourage small-scale agriculture production for health and economic prosperity highlight an essential opportunity in North Carolina. Communities across the state contain unoccupied, publicly owned urban land that could be utilized for sustainable regional food systems. Community agriculture can be used to bridge socioeconomic divides and create short and long-term positive economic and social impact (benefits enumerated in table below).

Privately managed market gardens and non-profit community gardens are two types of community agriculture that provide solutions to North Carolina’s diminishing regional food system and increasing number of food deserts.

| Economic Benefits | Economic & Social Benefits | Social Benefits |
|--|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase property values • Boost economic development, create for urban farmers • Reduce city’s vacant land maintenance costs • Reduction in food import costs • Generate revenue from produce sales | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce blight / crime • Mitigate farmland loss • Meet demand for produce • Mitigate storm water, decrease pollution, increase infiltration • Reduce disease and health-care costs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase food access • Reduce food deserts • Increase access to locally-produced nutrition • Mitigate diet related health risks; • Nutritional education • Create aesthetically pleasing green-spaces • Increase civic engagement |

POLICY SOLUTIONS

There are multiple policy solutions for community agriculture on vacant publicly owned land. Eleven states and Washington, D.C. enacted twenty-two bills between 2012-2014 that encouraged community agriculture by providing public vacant lots to community groups and property tax exemptions for community agriculture on private land. States such as Missouri and California encourage community agriculture through property tax incentives, whereas other states introduced bills rooted in the social and economic advantages of community agriculture. California, New Jersey, New York, Tennessee, West Virginia alongside various municipalities passed legislation that encouraged the sale and use of fresh produce from community agriculture initiatives (see Appendix 3).⁵

One policy solution emerges when municipal governments provide blighted publicly owned vacant land to community groups/non-profits through a permitting process.⁶ A municipality may maintain a list of the vacant blighted lots within its limits (see Appendix 6), and invite community groups/non-profits to apply to utilize the land for a specified amount of time. When municipalities use permits, they are issued for free or at a nominal rate, and can be re-issued so long as the group follows the guidelines, if any, suggested by the municipality. Permit systems require distribution and enforcement by a municipality, but allow municipal governments to maintain records and enact regulations. This approach is successfully utilized in High Point, N.C. and Richmond V.A.

Another policy solution appears when municipal governments provide a portion of in-kind services for community agriculture such as waiving the initial water hook-up fee, or providing water, and mulch. These services act as financial barriers to community agriculture in low-income communities and for non-profit community groups. A municipality's investment in community agriculture via in-kind services can allow districts to prosper, adding to the neighborhood's value; deterring crime by providing more "eyes on the street"⁷, increasing community health, community engagement, and social capital. The environmental and social advantages can be similar to those of municipally funded parks.⁸

A third policy solution includes "Urban Agricultural Zones" on public land, as established in Missouri. These zones allow individuals to grow produce on tax-exempt land, in which the municipal government provides a portion of in-kind services. In addition to creating a nutritious food source for community members, community agriculture mitigates storm water runoff, reduces pollution, and increases infiltration.

A fourth policy solution focuses on the economic potential of community agriculture through produce sales at local farmer's markets and savings for gardeners who reduce supermarket produce expenses.⁹ A study of community gardens in Newark, New Jersey yielded impressive results: The Rutgers Urban Gardening group transformed thirty acres of blighted land into 1,900 gardens with the participation of 6,500 city residents and grew produce worth over \$915,000. The initiative composted 4,000 tons of city leaves and participants saved \$4 million over the course of five years by growing produce in formerly garbage-filled public lots.¹⁰ As with many of these policy solutions, this improves blighted pieces of public property, reduces loitering and crime, and increases neighborhoods' property values.¹¹

MISSOURI'S URBAN AGRICULTURAL ZONES

Missouri established Urban Agricultural Zones (UAZ) in 2013 (MOH 542 2013). A UAZ is a "zone that contains an organization or person who grows produce or other agricultural products, raises or processes livestock or poultry, or sells at a minimum 75% locally grown or raised food." Organizations and individuals may apply to create a zone in blighted areas such as abandoned buildings and vacant lots. There are additional provisions in which the municipality must establish a board to advise the UAZ. The UAZ is eligible for property tax abatement for up to 25 years. The UAZ is required to pay for its water consumption, however the municipality covers 50% of the standard cost of water hookup. Additionally any sales tax revenues under 1% from the sale of agricultural products sold in the UAZ are deposited into a UAZ fund, which is managed by the state treasurer. School districts within the municipality can then apply for funds to be distributed to develop

curriculum on farming practices¹² (see Appendix 3). Missouri's UAZ model is one policy solution that contrasts others used by cities like Portland, Oregon, in which community agriculture is permitted in any zone (see Appendix 2).

THE HIGH POINT EXPERIENCE

High Point, North Carolina ranks 5th in the nation in food hardship for households with children, and 9th in the nation for those without. The High Point government, along with non-profit organizations such as the Greater High Point Food Alliance (GHPFA) and Hayden-Harman Foundation, implemented 34 community gardens on city and non-city properties across the greater High Point area. The Hayden-Harman Foundation was granted these 34 vacant lots. Community groups can select a property and apply for a \$1 lease with the opportunity to renew from the foundation on an annual basis (see Appendix 4). The gardens on city-owned lots, for which there is the most data, span 5 properties and occupy 1/5th of an acre in total. Despite their size, during the 2016 fiscal year, these five gardens produced \$18,000 worth of produce. Using these metrics, food production on city owned land within High Point would yield approximately \$90,000 per acre, per year. Blighted city owned land, which is leased to the Hayden-Harman Foundation, has been turned into beautiful green spaces with sustainable gardens. The gardens in these low-income and formerly crime-ridden neighborhoods have become centers for community engagement while decreasing the number of people going hungry in High Point. GHPFA recently secured government financing for a garden coordinator and in-kind services, including mulch and soil, which previously posed as an economic hurdle for many community members.

RICHMOND, VIRGINIA'S APPROACH

Richmond's Community Agriculture Program was established in 2011 as a way to strengthen community ties, provide access to nutritious foods, and combat obesity and associated diseases. The city encourages community agriculture by offering vacant land to non-profits, civic organizations, community groups, and similar entities. Richmond also encourages garden groups to establish policies concerning plot rental with individual gardeners. The gardening coordinator in Richmond acts as a resource for every one and the interactive webpage allows organizations and groups alike to view every available lot within the city and apply for a permit to utilize the lot(s), online (see Appendix 5). The garden group must pay a \$50 initial administration fee, followed by an annual fee of \$25. Groups are accepted on a first come, first serve basis and existing garden groups are given preference to renew. The City extensively outlines what the acceptable structures, mulch, plants and fertilizers are, as well as provides a cost-breakdown of different watering methods. In accordance with city code, Richmond does not waive any fee or installation cost. Additionally, no produce may be exchanged for monetary value unless the group applies for a separate commercial gardens permit, in which they will be contacted by Richmond's Economic and Community Development Department to establish a term with a longer lease.

DEFINITIONS

Regional food system: A method of food production and distribution that is geographically localized, rather than national and/or international. Food is grown (or raised) and harvested close to consumers' homes, then distributed over much shorter distances than is common in the conventional global industrial food system. Generally associated with sustainable agriculture.¹³

Community Agriculture: City and suburban agriculture in the form of gardens, vertical farms, etc. that is located in vacant lots. The community is responsible for maintenance and receives benefits.¹⁴

Food Security: Access by all individuals within a community to enough food for a healthy life.¹⁵

Low Food Security: Reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet with little indication of reduced food intake.

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Food Desert: Urban neighborhoods that are greater than 1 mile from, and rural towns that are greater than 10 miles from, ready access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food. This is largely due to a lack of grocery stores, farmers' markets, and healthy food providers, generally found in low-income neighborhoods. (USDA)¹⁷

Non-Profit Community Garden: City property used to grow fruits, vegetables, flowers, and herbs for non-commercial purposes, in which there is no exchange of goods for monetary value.¹⁸

Privately Managed Market Garden: A garden used by to grow fruits, vegetables, flowers, herbs to exchange for monetary value off-site such as at a farmer's market or on-site at a farm stand.¹⁹

RESOURCES

¹ Centralina Council of Governments, Catawba Regional Council of Governments, ASAP (Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project), CEFS (Center for Environmental Farming Systems), and CFSA (Carolina Farm Stewardship Association), "Food Systems Assessment Report." *Connect Our Future*, July 2014.

² Carolina Farm Stewardship Association, "CFSA Impact Report 2016." 2017. Accessed October 16, 2017. <https://www.carolinafarmstewards.org/cfsa-impact-report-2016/>.

³ Definitions of Food Security. Retrieved October 05, 2017, from <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security/>

⁴ Starnes, E., & Whitmire, C. *Legislative Research Commission Committee on Food Desert Zones North Carolina General Assembly* (Rep.). Raleigh, NC: NC General Assembly, 2014.

⁵ *Urban Food Zoning Code Update* [Ordinance No. 185412]. Bureau of Planning and Sustainability, Portland, OR, June 2012, <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/bps/article/402598>

⁶ Dilleuth, Ann. "Community Food Production The Role of Local Governments in Increasing Community Food Production for Local Markets." *Growing Food Connections*, August 2017, 1-12. Accessed October 9, 2017. http://growingfoodconnections.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2015/11/GFCFoodProductionPlanningPolicyBrief_2017August29.pdf.

⁷ Jacobs, J. *The death and life of great American cities*. (New York: Modern Library, 2011)

⁸ ChangeLab Solutions, "Dig, Eat, & Be Healthy," June 2013, <http://www.changelabsolutions.org/publications/dig-eat-be-healthy>.

⁹ PolicyLink. "Growing Urban Agriculture: Equitable Strategies and Policies for Improving Access to Healthy Food and Revitalizing Communities (Full Report). 2012. Accessed October 16, 2017.

http://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/URBAN_AG_FULLREPORT.PDF

¹⁰ Patel, I. C. "Rutgers Urban Gardening: A Case Study on Urban Agriculture," *Journal of Agriculture and Food Information*, 3:3, 35-46, DOI 10.1300/J108V03N03_05, 1996.

¹¹ ChangeLab Solutions, "Dig, Eat, & Be Healthy," June 2013, <http://www.changelabsolutions.org/publications/dig-eat-be-healthy>.

¹² Essex, A., Shinkle, D., & Bridges, M. *Harvesting Healthier Options: State Legislative Trends in Local Foods 2012-2014* (pp. 23-30) (United States of America, National Conference of State Legislatures). Washington, D.C. 2015.

¹³ Foundation, GRACE Communications. "Local & Regional Food Systems." GRACE Communications Foundation. Accessed October 23, 2017. <http://www.sustainabletable.org/254/local-regional-food-systems>.

¹⁴ "Anchorage Spring 2015 Urban Farming Classes." https://epay.alaska.edu:443/C21563_ustores/web/. Accessed October 23, 2017. https://epay.alaska.edu/C21563_ustores/web/product_detail.jsp?PRODUCTID=1165.

¹⁵ Foundation, GRACE Communications. "Food Security & Food Access." GRACE Communications Foundation. Accessed October 10, 2017. <http://www.sustainabletable.org/280/food-security-food-access>.

¹⁶ Foundation, GRACE Communications. "Food Security & Food Access." GRACE Communications Foundation. Accessed October 23, 2017. <http://www.sustainabletable.org/280/food-security-food-access>.

¹⁷ Gallagher, M. \ USDA Defines Food Deserts, 2011. Retrieved September 25, 2017, from <http://americannutritionassociation.org/newsletter/usda-defines-food-deserts>

¹⁸ "Richmond, VA." Richmond VA > Community Garden > Home. Accessed October 4, 2017. <http://www.richmondgov.com/communitygarden/>

¹⁹ "Richmond, VA." Richmond VA > Community Garden > Home. Accessed October 4, 2017. <http://www.richmondgov.com/CommunityGarden/index.aspx>.