HOW TO PROMOTE THE USE OF COMMUNITY GARDENS FOR ATHENS-CLARKE COUNTY

This Memo will examine how urban Community Gardens are created, the benefits they provide, and suggestions for ways that a municipality such as Athens-Clarke County can promote their creation and use. This paper will also summarize the major components of the Garden City concept developed by Ebenezer Howard of London in 1898, and attempt to apply those concepts to Athens-Clarke County.

BACKGROUND
A community garden is a term used to describe small urban gardens in which individuals who do not own land can either rent for a small fee, or utilize at the discretion of the landowner, individual plots for the production of produce and ornamentals. Such gardens have played an important role in western culture since the English allotment gardens of the 18th century (Walters 2003). In the U.S. the “Victory Garden” movement of WWII notably produced over 20 million gardeners contributing 44% of the produce consumed in America in 1944 (Warner 1987). Though “Victory Gardens” were broader in scope than community gardens, their success is indicative of the social organizing capacity of garden movements.

The purposes and benefits of garden movements through history have varied from civic benefits such as self-sufficiency, dignity of labor, and economy, to a sense of patriotic duty, to a belief that urban aesthetics induce civic pride (Walters 2003). Today, community gardens have been widely studied as catalysts for community-building. In a 1982 national Gallup Poll, 76% of survey respondents stated they would like community gardens to be a permanent part of their communities (Patel 1991).

CREATION
Perhaps the most notable difference between historic garden movements and community gardens proliferating today is their initiation with individual gardeners and communities, rather than charitable or governmental organizations. A literature review of community gardens indicates that most gardens are begun by a small group of individuals who request or stake a claim to unused, vacant lands (Walters 2003). One such example is the unnamed Family Housing garden on the campus of the University of Georgia. This garden was begun in 1999 as a direct result of repeated requests by housing residents for a place to garden. The head of the Grounds Department granted the request and by 2003 the garden occupied eighty-four 4x12’ beds (Walters 2003).

Land tenure is perhaps the most sensitive issue affecting community gardens. Of the 6,020 community gardens reported in a 1998 national survey, only 5.3% had permanent land tenure through ownership or held by a land trust (ACGA 1998). This tenuous nature of land occupancy has been the cause of many community garden losses. Non-profit organizations
and government entities have played a critical role in facilitating more permanent land tenure as community gardens have grown in popularity, use and sophistication.

**BENEFITS**
Several formal studies have quantifiably assessed the broad community benefits of community gardening; however, most discussions in the literature examine anecdotal accounts of the social benefits afforded host communities.

**SUBSTANTIAL ECONOMIC BENEFITS BY CONSERVING FOOD DOLLARS**
Several studies have attempted to assess the financial benefits of community gardens in supplementing food inputs. In a study of community gardens in Newark, New Jersey in 1991, the potential dollar value of community food plots after input costs was estimated at $475 per garden plot (Patel 1991).

**ADDRESSING CURRENT / FUTURE FOOD SECURITY ISSUES**
Hunger is still a social dilemma and health concern amongst many urban poor and is expected to continue as urban populations swell. Much of the literature on urban agriculture clearly demonstrates the enhancement of the urban food system when community members discover new access to affordable healthy foods (Blair, et al. 1991). Such systems impart “self sufficiency” and long-term community organizing benefits.

**COMMUNITY GARDENS INCREASE ADJACENT PROPERTY VALUES**
A study of community gardens in New York City found that community gardens have, on average, a significant positive effect on surrounding property values (Ioan and Been 2006). These findings were particularly true in the poorest host neighborhoods with property values increasing 9.4% within five years.

**SOCIOLOGICAL AND PHYSIOLOGICAL BENEFITS**
Horticultural therapists have researched the psychological and social benefits of gardening in varied populations from patient care to those in incarceration with consistent evidence that such activities reduce stress, fear, anger and reduce blood pressure and muscle tension (Brown and Jameton 2000).

**COMMUNITY COMPOSTING TO REDUCE CITY’S SOLID WASTES**
Yard and food wastes make up approximately 30% of the waste stream in the United States. Composting most of these waste streams would reduce the amount of Municipal Solid Waste (MSW) requiring disposal and provide a nutrient-rich soil amendment for the garden. (www.howtocompost.org). The composting process can also break down many chemical contaminants found in urban soils (Brown and Jameton 2000). Community gardens are a superb teaching tool for the recyclable value of yard and food wastes and provide a centralized locale for composting infrastructure.

**PROMOTION**
The success of the community garden movement in America has been largely attributed to the initiative of individual community members who have reclaimed vacant lands and transformed them into public resources. As these initiatives have grown in number,
popularity, and organization, they have been successful in gaining broader support from non-profits and city government. The three case studies below provide some examples of ways that local non-profits and local governments have assisted and promoted community garden programs in other parts of the country.

**Seattle, WA - P-Patch Community Gardens**

Seattle’s Department of Neighborhoods administers one of the most successful community gardening programs in the country in collaboration with a not-for-profit, the P-Patch Trust. The partnership provides 44 Seattle neighborhoods with 1900 gardening plots, on a total of 12 acres of land, serving over 4,600 gardeners. The P-Patch program encourages environmental stewardship by only allowing organic gardening practices and provides 7-10 tons of produce to area food banks each year. The program also serves low-income, disabled, youth and non-English speaking populations.

Gardens are located on both public and private lands, and community members are encouraged to scout for vacant, unused land that meet a minimum set of criteria for initiation of future projects. The P-Patch program provides land tenure assistance by working to negotiate five year leases, or identifying private and public open space funding for purchase of small tracts.

*Map of community gardens in Seattle.*

**Madison, WI - Community Action Coalition**

Madison is a college town roughly double the size of Athens and has been supporting community gardens for the last decade. The total number of gardens is actually down to 17 from a high of 37 in 1998. These gardens produce about a quarter million pounds of fresh produce each year. Over 400 families participate, 32% live below the poverty line.

The gardens are supported by the Community Action Coalition which provides a detailed Organizer’s Handbook which describes all aspects of organizing a community garden from composting, to planning and plot fees.

Gardening plots have been incorporated into the city’s plan, and a land trust was formed to secure land tenure.
Portland, OR – Community Garden Program

The city of Portland has administered a city garden program through its Parks and Recreation Department since 1975. The program supports 30 gardens that are managed by P&R staff and volunteers. A non-profit organization, the Friends of Portland Community Gardens was formed in 1985 to support the Community Garden Program during drastic budget cuts. This organization raises funds for improvements and expansion of the community garden system and assists in securing land for gardens.

From these case studies and others around the country, the role of municipal government in the success of community garden efforts has been one of support and assistance to an active community movement on the ground. The UGA Family Housing project is a good example of an effort initiated by community demand followed by institutional support providing access to land and limited resources.

One method for Athens-Clarke County to encourage and support proactive community members considering initiating a new garden project might be a simple identification of unused municipal lands or abandoned sites deemed appropriate for community use. One of the main roles of municipal government observed in numerous case studies was their ability to secure land tenure.

A simple listing and map of appropriate municipal sites with descriptive details would likely stimulate widespread interest and dialogue amongst various communities. Should a community express an interest in a community garden project, the city should be prepared to discuss the viable tenure of such properties. Questions regarding liability may need further examination as The Recreational Property Act (RPA), O.C.G.A. § 51-3-20 et seq. which shields landowners (including public entities) from liability for injuries to people who use the land for recreation does not likely apply. Case law in Georgia ruled that the RPA does not apply to vacant lots in residential areas, nor does it apply if a fee is charged for use of the land (which may be the case if gardeners pay a small fee for their plot) (Abellera 1996).

GARDEN CITY CONCEPT

The Garden City concept was examined as a possible tool to link community agriculture and urban design for consideration as a model for Athens-Clarke County.

Londoner Ebenezer Howard articulated the Garden City concept at the close of the 19th century, a time when the migration of rural populations into industrialized urban areas were creating planning, sanitation, and social justice concerns. The most relevant elements of Howard’s vision to this discussion are his call for a permanent belt of agriculture around the city to act as a barrier to further urban growth and an agricultural “market garden” to the city; control of the entire urban tract (including the agricultural belt) by the municipality; and quasi public ownership of communal lands. The origin of the name “Garden City” is attributed to the fact that under this design no resident was more than 240 yards from a public park (Batchelor 1969).
The Garden City approach was adapted, popularized and implemented in dozens of urban/sub-urban developments in Europe and the United States throughout the first quarter of the 20th century, and its elements can be still seen today in New Urbanism design approaches. This movement was motivated by a belief that improving urban aesthetics could increase civic pride and community spirit. The aesthetics of the city were inherent in the very design itself and emphasized social organization, shared space and accessibility, and an interrelationship between developed and production (or agricultural) landscapes.

The application of these design elements to Athens-Clarke County may prove difficult, as they address a planning framework structured around a city center surrounded by an agricultural belt, all under the complete control of one municipal government. This is of course not the case for Athens-Clarke County which no longer has an agricultural belt within its boundaries. Most recent successful applications of the Garden City concept have been applied to large block subdivisions designed to resemble small towns with multi-use areas around a town center (ie. Andres Duany – new urbanism models).

The potential application of the Garden City concept to individual developable tracts that occur along the urban fringe should be explored further.

CITATIONS


Ioan Voicu; and Been, Vicki. 2006. The Effect of Community Gardens on Neighboring Property Values. Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy, New York University, New York, NY
