PLANNING FOR APPROPRIATELY SCALED AGRICULTURE IN PROVIDENCE

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Introduction to Urban Agriculture

If we are to redevelop and strengthen our local food web, agriculture at a variety of scales must be nestled into our region. In Providence this requires the calibration of planning and development policies to allow and promote appropriately scaled food production in diverse neighborhoods. Affecting this kind of change requires new language in Providence’s Comprehensive Plan, followed by corresponding changes to the City’s Zoning Ordinance, and new practices in affected city agencies.

The concept of agriculture in an urban setting often raises eyebrows. As food production has industrialized its integration with the city has become harder to fathom. Nevertheless there are a variety of scales of agriculture that fit urban spaces and serve a variety of urban needs. The figure below illustrates these various scales across a rural to urban transect. Transects have been used by ecologists for some time to understand natural systems. The urban design firm of Duany Plater-Zyberk, a leader in the Congress for the New Urbanism, brought the concept to world of planning and land development. The Foodstuff Transect illustrates that just as certain forms of residential or retail development are appropriate in each T-zone, there are also appropriate forms of agriculture.

DPZ uses such Transects as part of a radical new approach to land use regulation known as the SmartCode, a replacement for traditional zoning. It is a testament to the growing recognition of the importance of urban agriculture that DPZ’s Foodstuff Transect proposes food production across the region. The Transect diagram provides great terms and definitions for the various scales of production. This common language and the Transect should be very important tools as we work to change local regulations.

We are concerned with urban agriculture at three scales: hand tended agriculture, such as CityFarm, community gardens, and backyard gardens. The Foodstuff Transect shows that these forms of agriculture are appropriate in Providence.
Note: Providence neighborhoods range from T4 to T6. Only a very small portion of the city would qualify as T6 – Urban Core and many neighborhoods such as that surrounding CityFarm would qualify as T4 – General Urban

The Current Situation

- The Comprehensive Plan does not recognize the diverse forms of Urban Agriculture.
- Previous Comprehensive Plan goals were not accomplished.
- Current Zoning does not address any aspect of urban agriculture.
- The proposed Zoning Ordinance increases the difficulty of developing community gardens within residential neighborhoods.
- The proposed Zoning Ordinance does not address hand tended agriculture.
- Parking requirements and the illegality of overnight parking result in the paving of prime garden space in backyards.

Providence took the first step towards bringing farming to the city in the 1992 Comprehensive Plan. In the section titled, Providence Tomorrow, the plan states that “we must continue to improve the urban environment by expanding ... the development of Urban Farming.” Unfortunately, urban agriculture received only one other mention in the document. A mid term goal was set for the Department of Planning and Development (DPD), the City Plan Commission, the Mayor's Office, and neighborhood groups to develop a citywide plan for community gardens. Such a plan was never completed. The Comprehensive Plan also fails to address access to safe tillable ground in backyards, nor does it address hand tended agriculture.

The current zoning ordinance does not mention community gardens or hand tend agriculture leaving them in a state of limbo. From 2004 to 2006 the city worked to develop a new zoning ordinance. Under the proposed changes, Community Gardens would become a by right use in all zones except R-1, R-2, and R-3. In these single family to three unit residential zones the development of a community garden would require a hearing to receive a special use permit. This draft has been tabled until a citywide neighborhood visioning process allows the city to update its Comprehensive Plan.

Farming as a business, utilizing hand tended agriculture, is not addressed as part of the “development of urban farming”, in the policy portions of the 1992 Comprehensive Plan. Farms are also not addressed in either the current or proposed Zoning ordinance. DPD staff suggested that the city's Zoning Enforcement Officer would not target existing farms. Nevertheless the legal safety of farms like CityFarm and Red Plant is uncertain in the event that an abutter complained to the city. It should be noted that DPD’s tolerance only exists if the farms are growing plants and not raising any animals, such as chickens.

For individuals attempting to grow food in the city, the biggest challenge is to find land to till. In neighborhoods with dense but detached housing units, current parking requirements and the illegality of overnight on-street parking result in entire back yards being paved. The proposed zoning ordinance reduces parking requirements, but this may not uncover much land. It is quite likely that the amount of pavement is a reflection of the amount of parking landlords believe is necessary to rent their units, given that on-street spaces cannot be utilized at night.

Strategies

The following are strategies that should be undertaking to make Providence both a haven and a model for appropriately scaled urban agriculture.

- Influence the Comprehensive Plan Update.
- Remove the Special Use Requirement for Community Gardens in the new Zoning Ordinance.
- Develop model regulations to allow for appropriately scaled Hand Tended Agriculture by a business.
- Repeal the overnight on-street parking ban.
- Spread the Transect based concept of agriculture.

Influence the Comprehensive Plan Update

In September 2006, Providence will begin the update process with a multi-day citywide charrette. This will be the first opportunity to bring knowledge and suggestions to the City Plan Commission. The goal of these workshops will be to understand the city as it exists now. Being present, in support of urban agriculture, can
bring its current presence and the benefits it has brought to the neighborhoods to light. In November 2006, a second charrette will focus on the future of the city. Again this is a time to impact citywide policies to promote urban agriculture. Beginning in January 2007, the charrettes will move to the neighborhood level. This will present opportunities to demonstrate the potential and the reality of urban agriculture in Providence.

We have developed language to be included in this Comprehensive Plan Update. Much of it comes from the Comprehensive Plan of Seattle - “Toward a Sustainable Seattle”.

Modeled on Seattle’s success, we recommend that Providence take a more active role in community garden provision. At a time when the city is reluctant to develop new parks, due to maintenance and policing costs, yet the community seeks more greenspace to provide relief from increased density, community gardens provide an innovative answer. By opening such facilities on city land, the city can create parks with strong constituencies to patrol and maintain them while helping residents improve the quantity and quality of their food. We should work to get this concept into the dialog occurring in parks and environmental planning in the city.

Suggested Comprehensive Plan Language

4.1.1 Land Use

U3 Open Space – Develop policies that allow ethnically diverse traditions of food production to continue with the end result of preserving cultures, instilling a sense of place in each neighborhood, and increasing access to affordable food.

4.4 Natural resources and Environmental Protection

A1 Policies
Support a system of farmers markets throughout the city to provide an outlet for farmers from the city and neighboring communities, thus protecting open space, and to provide residents with neighborhood access to healthy and affordable foodstuffs.

A3 Policies
Create opportunities for people to experience the natural environment by developing, encouraging and preserving community gardens, ...

Establish planning and development guidelines to promote hand-tended, organic agriculture to provide neighborhood access to healthy and affordable foodstuffs, improve water and air quality, and provide visual relief.

Promote inter-agency and intergovernmental cooperation to expand community gardening opportunities and include community gardens among priorities for use of City surplus property.

Remove the Special Use Requirement for Community Gardens in the new Zoning Ordinance

After the Comprehensive Plan is updated and approved by the state, the city will be required to update its Zoning Ordinance (and a myriad of other plans) to reflect the will of the community expressed in the Comprehensive Plan. This will provide an opportunity to make certain that Community Gardens do not require Special Use Permits to be developed. While Community Gardens can easily meet the general SUP requirements, such as not damaging nearby property values or being injurious to personal or community health, the process involves a great deal of time, energy, and money that may be unavailable to both the developers of a community garden and its future users.

Develop Model Regulations for appropriately scaled Hand Tended Agriculture

A special use permit system should be developed to allow new hand tended farms to operate within the city. The regulations would be crafted to insure that the farms would be beneficial to neighborhoods, by providing visual relief, and improving ecological conditions rather than bringing unwanted noise and activity to neighborhoods. The development of such regulations should take into account the opinions of those living near current farms in operation in the city and the needs identified by those who operate the farms. Such a formula
would provide legal protections for the farms, while giving neighbors the guarantee that their neighborhoods will be improved as agriculture comes back to the city.

**Repeal the Overnight On-Street Parking Ban**

The city must develop an overnight on-street parking program as is found in many other northern cities despite concerns about snow clearance. We believe that in the long run, this change will allow for better utilization of paved surfaces and lead to a reduction in pavement coverage of residential lots, thus opening land for home gardeners. Reductions in parking requirements are not enough given parking pressures in our automobile oriented culture.

**Spread the Transect Based Concept of Agriculture**

The Transect provides both a simple and powerful tool to explain and promote an understanding of the many appropriate scales of agriculture. The city has been interested in a SmartCode replacement for current zoning regulations and the agriculture transect is one of many components that can be included in the SmartCode. It is hoped that in the next version of the SmartCode, the agriculture transect will become a standard and required part of the ordinance. By spreading this tool, the concept of urban agriculture will become more readily accepted. With a common language comes common understanding.

**Conclusion**

The next year will provide ample opportunities to direct the direction in which Providence, develops and grows. The strategies in this document provide a tight focus with which to create change to promote urban agriculture. Everyone from urban farmers, to community activists, to planners, and to developers should embrace these ideas to bring forth a sustainable Providence tomorrow.