

THE CASE FOR URBAN AGRICULTURE & AN OPPORTUNITY TO RE-DEFINE PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE

The Case:

There is an ever increasing interest to provide local produce, the experience of growing food, and an understanding of how we are attached to the land on which we live. Urban agriculture is the best means to support this interest for the majority of the population which lives in cities, and its growth as field of endeavor indicates its perceived value.

In Denver, the opportunity to preserve land for urban agriculture is quickly fading: only 9 of the original 307 farms that once existed in Denver 100 years ago are still in operation. Development pressures and increasing land values resulting from a rapidly growing population are pushing the already less-than-profitable profession of urban agriculture off of its most critical resource: the land. Urban farmers often depend upon short-term land leases, live with uncertainty in land-tenure, and risk losing capital investment costs. This is happening at a time when demand for public services and infrastructure to support a growing homeless and low-income population is continuing to increase. Organizations such as US Department of Housing and Urban Development, American Public Health Association, American Planning Association, and American Society of Landscape Architects have all recognized sustainable food systems and healthy food access as crucial elements to a resilient urban framework.

An Opportunity:

The City and County of Denver, through its Department of Public Works and Department of Parks and Recreation, now has the opportunity to re-define future public infrastructure, to provide health services in addition to recreational opportunities, and to further fulfill the visions of the 2009 River North Greenway Master Plan and Denver's 2020 Sustainability Goals.

The Heron Pond Natural Area includes over 24 acres of upland areas on which a small urban farm (up to five acres) could be situated; other potential urban agriculture elements include passive food forests, herb gardens, and native perennial sensory gardens. A weekly or bi-weekly sliding-scale food market at the proposed Enhanced Plaza of Northside Park would serve over 4,000 people living within one mile of the Heron Pond, including over 2,000 mostly low- to moderate-income residents living in the adjacent Globeville/Elyria/Swansea neighborhoods directly to the southwest. A thriving food market located in Northside Park would provide healthy food access to these families currently living in a food desert while supporting the development of proposed River and Roadway Access Gateways connecting to the South Platte River, and expanding on the vision of the National Western Center to "set a new and higher standard that focuses on the stewardship of our land and investment in our agricultural resources to become a global leader in food production, water, energy and agriculture."

Establishment of an urban agriculture park could be realized through partnerships with other organizations, including Denver's Sustainable Food Policy Council, Colorado Center for Sustainable Urbanism, Denver Housing Authority, and other non-profits. A recent grant application through the University of Colorado Denver's Department of Landscape Architecture - in partnership with Denver's Office of Economic Development and Rocky Mountain Farmers Union - to the Regional Western Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, if awarded, could provide partial funding, and operational costs could also be recovered through sales at the associated food market to be established at Northside Park.

In short, establishing an urban agriculture park at the Heron Pond Natural Area and recognizing the importance of providing healthy food services to an underserved community would provide a valuable opportunity for the City and County of Denver to redefine public infrastructure, increase public health, and create resiliency within the urban framework.

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