Public Lands in Community Hands

Using Public Land for Urban Agriculture in San Francisco's Excelsior District



Introduction

On a rainy January day in San Francisco, an elected representative, a community organizer, an environmental conservation advocate, and a city employee went for a walk in a local park. As they walked past playing fields and over a hill, they hardly noticed the weather. They were too busy discussing their plans to build a farm in a large, grassy area no one was using.

Increasingly, people are looking for ways to eat more local, sustainable food. Some are taking the next step of planting their own fruits and vegetables. Growing food in the places where people live, work, and play supports healthy eating, community resilience, and food literacy. But not everyone has their own plot of land.

State and local governments own about one-tenth of the land in the United States, or almost 200 million acres.¹ Across the country, local governments and community stakeholders are having important discussions about how to use public land to best serve community needs and interests. Using public land as a place for residents to grow food is one way to steward this resource for the benefit of the surrounding community. In places where there is insufficient privately held land for people to use to grow food, it makes sense to use public land for urban agriculture – a term that encompasses food-growing practices in cities, suburbs, and small towns. Community gardens, school gardens, and large-scale urban farms all fall under the umbrella of urban agriculture.

To develop a successful urban agriculture project on public land, both the local government and the community have to support it. This case study presents a model of successful collaboration between the many partners involved in an urban agriculture project. The City and County of San Francisco supported urban agriculture through forward-thinking laws and policies. And an innovative local partnership, the Healthy Food for All Initiative, helped keep the community's needs at the forefront of a plan to bring urban agriculture to an underserved neighborhood in San Francisco.



What can this case study do for you?

Growing food on public land is not without challenges. The paperwork, relationship building, and coordination required may seem daunting, especially in places where growing food on public land is a new idea. Even if your local government has policies that support using public land for urban agriculture, you still need to understand how land-owning agencies interpret and apply those policies. It may also be hard to determine which people and organizations have goals that align with yours. It can be difficult to find allies in conversations about land use, which can be particularly tense in places where longtime residents are wary that new development may lead to their displacement. Using public land for urban agriculture can benefit the public, but it requires taking an entire community's needs – and residents' sometimes conflicting interests – into account.

The lessons learned from this venture can help you start your own urban agriculture project in a way that prioritizes community engagement. Use this case study and accompanying checklist to assess your community's political landscape, find allies, build partnerships with local residents, and develop a game plan. By making the right connections and identifying common goals, the groups and individuals involved in this case study turned a vision of a public urban farm into reality. Their story can help you no matter where you are in the process, whether you want to get urban agriculture started on public land or keep existing projects thriving.



Why grow food on public land?

Growing food on public land provides unique opportunities and benefits to communities.² For example, in cities with high land values, public land may be the only space affordable to nonprofit and resident groups, which often struggle to compete with market rates to buy or lease private property for growing food.

Governments can make public land available to food-growing groups at minimal cost. And as governments challenged by stretched resources look for creative ways to reduce expenses, agreements with community and resident groups to grow food on public land can offer a way to share maintenance costs. Beyond simply paying for upkeep, urban agriculture can create green spaces that provide ecological services and monetary savings to municipalities. For example, gardens can mitigate storm water runoff, thereby reducing treatment plant loads and pollution of waterways.³

Finally, urban agriculture can contribute to a range of social and health benefits. It can promote community engagement, resilience, and social capital.^{4,5} It can also support crime prevention by putting underutilized space to use and increasing "eyes on the street"^{6,7} (a term coined by urbanist Jane Jacobs to describe the crime-prevention effect that neighbors and residents have when they are able to watch over space). It also provides moderate exercise for people of all ages.⁸

See ChangeLab Solutions' guide to growing food on public property, Dig, Eat, and Be Healthy.



Growing food in the City by the Bay

The San Francisco Bay Area's temperate climate makes it possible for anyone to be a gardener – at least in theory. Many city residents find they're missing one critical element: space to garden. With a population of more than 800,000 occupying 47 square miles, San Francisco is the second most densely populated large city in the United States, after New York.⁹ Many residents don't have a sunny windowsill, let alone a yard. What space there is has become exponentially more expensive in recent years as real estate values have risen.

During the same time period, the city's community gardens, where residents plant, tend, and harvest fruits and vegetables, have become more popular. So popular, in fact, that demand has outstripped supply; the waitlist for community gardens in San Francisco has 750 people on it.¹⁰ Complicating matters further, some community gardens are on privately held land.¹¹ Landlords may see gardens as a temporary use for as-yet-undeveloped land rather than an enduring part of the neighborhood. This mentality makes existing gardens vulnerable and makes it difficult for new community gardeners to secure a long-term lease.



San Francisco's urban agriculture policy foundations

Space may be limited in San Francisco, but more and more residents are interested in growing their own food. Lack of land for growing food has led to a mounting call for urban agriculture on public property,¹² and for good reason: in San Francisco, the local government owns about one-sixth of the City's land.¹³ The win-win of potential financial savings and improved use of public land caught the attention of city officials, including then-Mayor Gavin Newsom. In 2009, Newsom issued an executive directive, Healthy Sustainable Food for San Francisco, calling on all public agencies "to carry out implementing actions consistent with the goal of fostering local food production in the city."¹⁴ The directive required agencies with jurisdiction over property to conduct a land audit and inform City officials of areas suitable for (or already used for) urban agriculture.¹⁵

The Executive Directive mobilized supporters of urban agriculture to advocate for changes that would support food-growing efforts in the city. At the urging of the San Francisco Urban Agriculture Alliance and other community advocates, the Planning Department proposed amendments to the Planning Code in 2011 to create an urban agriculture zoning designation,¹⁶ which was approved by San Francisco's governing body, the Board of Supervisors, later that year. The zoning ordinance created two categories of food-growing gardens. Urban agriculture projects of less than an acre – including those that grow food for sale – are categorized as "neighborhood agriculture" and allowed anywhere in the city. Projects larger than one acre, designated as "large-scale urban agriculture," are allowed in industrial areas and by permit elsewhere.¹⁷

Finally, San Francisco created the Urban Agriculture Program, which streamlines related efforts across city agencies and makes it easier for the public to get involved in urban agriculture. Prior to the program's establishment, at least seven local government agencies had community gardens or urban farms on their land. Each agency had a different process for starting a project, which led to confusion.¹² Now, the Urban Agriculture Program serves as a central place for aspiring gardeners to request information or technical assistance. In 2012, the Board of Supervisors passed legislation approving and funding the Urban Agriculture Program. After a year of strategic planning, the Urban Agriculture Program opened its doors in January 2014.

Building relationships

The Mayor found a major supporter of these policy changes in the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC). SFPUC is responsible for the storage, quality control, and distribution of the Bay Area's drinking water,¹⁸ a responsibility that puts them in control of an extensive network of pipelines, reservoirs, and treatment facilities. SFPUC is the second-largest landholding agency in San Francisco.¹²

In 2009, SFPUC responded to the Executive Directive in their Environmental Justice Policy, which states that "no group of people should bear a disproportionate share of negative consequences resulting from the operations, programs, and/or policies of the SFPUC" and that staff shall identify initiatives and community partners that support efforts to reduce and eliminate these disparities.¹⁹ Their 2011 Community Benefits Policy builds on this, specifically mentioning devoting resources to "[using] land in a way that maximizes health, environmental sustainability and innovative ideas."²⁰

SFPUC was also an active participant in strategic planning for the Urban Agriculture Program. SFPUC has participated in urban agriculture since 2006, when they partnered with the Sustainable Agriculture Education Center (SAGE) to create the Sunol AgPark, an 18-acre urban farm on SFPUC land just outside of San Francisco. SFPUC's early support of equitable land use policies would justify their involvement in future urban agriculture projects.



The Healthy Food for All Initiative launches



The San Francisco Foundation (TSFF) is a major grantor of communitybased projects in the San Francisco Bay Area. Amid these policy changes, in 2012, TSFF applied to The Convergence Partnership's Innovation Fund, which provides matching dollars to foundations to "unite funding partners in a collaborative effort to accelerate and

support policy and environmental changes that focus on improving the health of people and places."²¹ TSFF received a three-year matching grant from the Innovation Fund to support structural changes that improve access to healthy food in San Francisco. With this funding, TSFF partnered with SFPUC to establish the Healthy Food for All Initiative.

The goal of the Healthy Food for All Initiative is to support a community-driven vision of urban agriculture in underserved San Francisco neighborhoods. The Initiative works in partnership with local organizations to visualize, establish, and operate urban agriculture projects. The projects are on SFPUC land and administered by one or more community-based organizations. Local organizations run the projects and oversee the sites, encouraging community ownership, cohesion, and participation.



Mapping out support for the urban farm at Crocker Amazon

Community partnership in the Excelsior

One of the Healthy Food for All Initiative's projects is located in the Excelsior neighborhood of San Francisco. The Excelsior is one of the most ethnically diverse neighborhoods in San Francisco. Forty-nine percent of residents are Asian/Pacific Islander, 32 percent are Latino, and 14 percent are White.²² More than half of Excelsior residents were born outside of the United States,²² and many of them have experienced growing and harvesting food in their countries of origin.



Excelsior's international diversity is reflected in its streets, which are named after countries and capitals.

Despite these strong ties to agriculture, many Excelsior residents lack access to fresh, locally grown produce. In 2011, the neighborhood had 15 convenience stores but no farmers' markets.²² Even though some of these convenience stores sell fruits and vegetables, community leaders have said that high-quality local produce is out of reach for most residents.²² Having a low income can make it

even harder to find and buy healthy food. Excelsior is one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city, with one of the highest proportions of residents paying more than half their income in rent.²²

To address these food access issues in the Excelsior effectively, the Healthy Food for All Initiative needed an ally that had experience with land use issues, credibility as an advocate for residents, and strong connections to the neighborhood. John Avalos, the elected official representing Excelsior, played an important role in identifying an organization that could fit the bill.

Supervisor Avalos is a longtime supporter of urban agriculture. He first became interested in urban agriculture as a legislative aide, when he worked to secure funds for a community garden. This informed his political platform when he ran for 11th District Supervisor in 2009. Avalos suggested the Healthy Food for All Initiative partner with People Organizing to Demand Environmental and Economic Rights (PODER) to engage the Excelsior community. Working with both groups, Avalos asked to have a site identified in his district and secured \$100,000 in city funding to support it.

PODER



People Organizing to Demand Environmental and Economic Rights (PODER) was well suited to lead the community engagement and advocacy efforts in the neighborhood. PODER, a grassroots membership-based organization in Excelsior, organizes around

issues affecting environmental and economic justice issues, such as air quality, parks and recreation spaces, and affordable housing. While the organization had not previously included urban agriculture in its policy advocacy, members, particularly youth, saw urban agriculture as a natural extension of PODER's environmental justice mission.

The goals of one of PODER's programs, PUEBLOTE, aligned nicely with the goals of the Excelsior project. PUEBLOTE aims to promote equitable land use, which they define as putting "public lands in community hands."²³ According to Antonio Díaz, Organizational Director of PODER, public land is a precious commodity, and PUEBLOTE advocates for it to be developed in ways that serve the needs of the surrounding community. In the past, PODER has done this by working to transform underutilized public lots into places that produce public benefits. Urban agriculture, which provides an opportunity for community engagement and stewardship of a vital neighborhood asset, produces similar benefits.

Their shared belief in equitable land use made Avalos and PODER natural allies. They first worked together on a PUEBLOTE project to reclaim part of a rail yard for affordable housing and recreation space. With Avalos' help, PODER was able to collaborate with community partners, the regional transit agency, and other government agencies to turn the community's expressed needs into a reality. The longstanding connection between Avalos and PODER would prove valuable when the opportunity arose to start an urban agriculture project in Excelsior.

Timeline: Urban agriculture takes root in San Francisco

2009

2006	2007	2008
Avalos wo at a comn	orks nunity	
garden		

2006

SAGE establishes Sunol AaPark on SFPUC land



Avalos becomes 11th District Supervisor

Mavor Newsom issues Healthy Sustainable Food for San Francisco executive directive

SFPUC adopts Environmental Justice Policy

2011

2010

Avalos visits Hayes Valley Farm, an urban ag project on city-owned land

Urban Agriculture Zoning Ordinance passed

SFPUC adopts Community Benefits Policy

2012

Avalos and PODER first work together

Board of Supervisors passes legislation creating and funding the Urban Ag Program

SFPUC helps plan City's Urban Ag Program

SFPUC and TSFF partner to create the Healthy Food for All Initiative

2013

2014

Avalos helps secure a Healthy Food for All Initiative site in his district

Urban Agriculture Program opens its doors

Getting to farm

Community assessment: What is the neighborhood's vision?

As part of the first phase of work with the Healthy Food for All Initiative, PODER conducted surveys and focus groups to determine whether residents would support and participate in an urban agriculture project at Crocker Amazon Park. The site PODER had in mind for the farm is in the park, between soccer fields and a golf course on about two acres of undeveloped SFPUCowned land.



Youth were an invaluable part of the community assessment in Excelsior

To supplement their grant from the Initiative, PODER applied for and received one of SFPUC's Youth Workforce Project Learning Grants, which allowed them to hire youth employees to lead the community engagement efforts. These youth collected more than 290 surveys, conducted focus groups at schools, and interviewed elders in the community. With more than a quarter of Excelsior residents living in overcrowded housing,²² it came as no surprise that respondents wanted more publicly accessible recreation space. But the results of the surveys showed that many residents specifically wanted a community garden. Ninety percent of those surveyed thought a community garden at the Crocker Amazon site was a good idea, and only four percent had access to a community garden on the day they were surveyed.²⁴ Interviews and focus groups yielded a wealth of ideas about how to use the space, including cultural food celebrations, composting, exercise, and socializing with neighbors.²⁴ At the gathering in which PODER shared the survey and focus group results with more than a hundred community members, Excelsior resident Mario Adolfo Muñoz shared this story:

"While door-knocking to survey neighbors around Crocker Amazon Park, we met a man who planted an olive tree when his father passed. He told us that where he's from, olive trees are symbols of peace, because it takes 20 years for an olive tree to bear fruit. If a tree bore fruit, it signified 20 years of peace because groves of olive trees were burnt in times of conflict. I loved learning about how our community stories are connected to growing food in our neighborhood."²⁵

The planned farm site



An aerial view of the neighborhoods and parks surrounding the planned urban farm at Crocker Amazon. The site, highlighted in green, sits between soccer fields, a golf course, and a large public housing site.

Map data @2015 Google

Overcoming challenges by building new partnerships

Based on the community-driven vision elicited by PODER's surveys and focus groups, SFPUC planned to release a Request for Proposals in late 2013 for a farm operator at the Crocker Amazon site. However, this plan hit a wall in the City Attorney's office. SFPUC discovered that the Recreation and Parks Department's (RPD) natural resource management program had designated the chosen farm site "ecologically sensitive." Under that designation, a farm would not be compatible with plans to preserve native grasslands.

As it turned out, RPD had made a mistake when it included the Crocker Amazon site in its preservation plan. While the adjacent McLaren Park fell under RPD's jurisdiction, Crocker Amazon did not. The *Healthy Sustainable Food for San Francisco* executive directive and subsequent policies were critical to resolving this issue "Without a mandate to work together," said Yolanda Manzone, Environmental Justice & Land Use Analyst at SFPUC, "the overlapping authority between the two agencies might have brought the entire project to a halt." Instead, the jurisdictional issue with RPD was resolved in late 2014, with RPD documenting their error and acknowledging SFPUC's ownership of the planned farm site in Crocker Amazon Park.²⁶



Many varieties of native plants and grasses line the trails in McLaren Park.

The government agencies may have resolved their ownership issue, but the project's supporters still faced an unanswered question: Could farming activities be compatible with ecological conservation? The preservation groups that had advocated for the site to be designated ecologically sensitive were concerned about losing a site they felt provided critical habitat. The chair of the local chapter of the California Native Plants Society (CNPS) wrote to Avalos opposing the plan. Because of Avalos' position as an elected representative, SFPUC asked him to lead an effort to find a compromise. He started by meeting with representatives from preservation groups in early 2015. Avalos listened to the groups' concerns, and then shared PODER's vision for the land and

described the community engagement that had gone into the plan. Avalos emphasized to CNPS that the people who responded to PODER's survey were their neighbors – all of them were residents of District 11.

After considering, but ultimately dismissing, two alternative sites, SFPUC and Avalos called a second meeting, this time bringing together representatives from PODER and CNPS. Avalos took the lead again, highlighting what the two groups had in common to set them up for a compromise. With everyone at the table, the stakeholders collectively identified a smaller portion of the original Crocker Amazon site suitable for the project. This area was less sensitive from the preservationists' perspective but still a good place for the farm from the community's point of view. The results of SFPUC's soil analysis indicated that the best place to grow food was actually on the site CNPS had agreed was less sensitive. With renewed enthusiasm, everyone agreed to support this new plan.

At long last, SFPUC officially named PODER as the site operator, and committed to continue working with PODER to build the site and design programming. Supervisor Avalos also identified an additional \$300,000 from the city's general budget to build out the site.²⁸ Before

What is biocultural diversity?

During the meeting, stakeholders also began to home in on the idea of biocultural diversity as a theme that could unite the interests of urban agriculture and natural resource preservation. Biocultural diversity is the notion that "the diversity of life is made up not only of the diversity of plants and animal species, habitats and ecosystems found on the planet, but also of the diversity of human cultures and languages."27 This idea recognizes that what is considered 'native' is laden with cultural biases, and that people bring their culture into their interactions with nature. Both PODER and CNPS envisioned the Excelsior neighborhood coming together to work on the farm and participate in classes on native plants, biodiversity, sustainable land management practices, and other topics.

PODER breaks ground, the City must first perform an environmental assessment under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). After completing that assessment, PODER will bring design plans for the site to the community. The site is scheduled to be operational by late 2016.²⁹

Stewarding a success at Crocker Amazon

If all goes well, Excelsior will soon have a farm that makes fresh, local produce affordable and accessible to residents. The neighborhood will also have a space for community gatherings and cultural exchange. Avalos' leadership in achieving this compromise was critical – instead of allowing hostility to slow or stop progress, Avalos and the community organizations involved were able to come to an agreement. Every month, a coalition representing all the organizations and agencies meets to discuss their progress and address any concerns that have arisen.

The farm will help teach more people about ecological relationships and the benefits of native plants and insects. As one member of CNPS put it, the urban farm and the native grasslands that surround it will be assets to each other. Everyone involved will enjoy the benefit of connecting urban agriculture and natural resource preservation through community building and education.

The Crocker Amazon site is one of three urban agriculture projects the Healthy Food for All Initiative has taken on. Once the organizational leads have implemented urban agriculture at these sites, the Initiative will focus on other goals, including bringing healthy local foods to underserved communities, mapping regional food-related policy initiatives, and training community leaders to advocate for improvements to these initiatives, with a focus on food justice.³⁰

The systemic changes that the Initiative aims to create will support current and future urban agriculture projects. Specifically, representatives from the SFPUC hope this project will emerge as a model for dovetailing urban agriculture projects and natural resource preservation efforts. Moving forward, the challenge will be to re-create in other neighborhoods the shared vision, community engagement, and problem-solving that successfully brought a farm to the Excelsior neighborhood. Partners will have to figure out what it means to put public lands in community hands across the city – and beyond.

An urban agriculture policy checklist

Ready to get your community growing? Here are some questions to help you make urban agriculture on public land a reality:

Does your municipal code allow for urban agriculture activities?

In some areas, urban agriculture projects require a conditional use permit or are allowed only in certain zones. Check your municipal code to see what the laws are.

Which agencies own land suitable for urban agriculture?

Your jurisdiction may already have an inventory of public land. If not, you can learn more about conducting a land inventory in *Dig, Eat, and Be Healthy: A Guide to Growing Food on Public Property.* When considering land for urban agriculture, the plot's size, grade, sun exposure, and other characteristics may affect whether the project can thrive there. You may also need to coordinate with the Department of Public Health or other responsible agency to test the soil before breaking ground.

What is the relationship between land-holding agencies and the community?

Supporting urban agriculture offers land-holding agencies an opportunity to improve their standing in the community or fulfill obligations set forth in a community engagement policy.

What kinds of community partnerships could strengthen the project?

Establishing a relationship with one or more community-based organizations makes a planned urban agriculture project more likely to serve a community's needs.

How could urban agriculture advance agencies' goals?

For example, agencies with an environmental focus could incorporate urban agriculture into their mission.

How do people find out about urban agriculture opportunities?

Is there a "one-stop shop" for urban agriculture in local government, or are activities spread across several agencies? Are these activities coordinated?

Does your jurisdiction offer incentives for urban agriculture?

Common incentives include tax credits for landowners who allow urban agriculture and water meter installation paid for by the Public Utilities Commission or similar body.

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