

Can we grow food and grassroots social capital at the same time?

Jeffrey Betcher, July 2009

It is easy to love the food policy that San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom announced this month. It honors the work of some of the smartest, most progressive food system advocates anywhere. It advances the lofty principle that food “is a basic human right,” and provides a comprehensive set of practical recommendations that spreads the need for a sustainable food system across governmental departments.

Harder to love is the fact that the mayor announced his San Francisco food policy in West Oakland. That choice had to do with the Sustainable Food Shed Summit organized by an East Bay group, the USDA, and Visa, Inc. which attracted food movement leaders. It also may symbolize hazards the policy creates for those working to build community and create sustainable systems and social cohesion at the most local of levels: the streets where we live.

The new policy directs that government agencies throughout the city “encourage” food production on public land, and do an assessment of available and appropriate land.

For community-builders, that is the stuff of restless nights. It forces rethinking the interface between grassroots advocacy of all sorts and our support of local food system enhancements, and causes a reflexive cringe at narrowly defined policy mandates that reduce truly local, community-defined usage of public spaces and other assets.

Citywide policies and systems hold potential to coordinate more elements of a response to the food crisis than highly-localized policies and

If you have an empty lot on your block, one to which your community has come to feel connected, you may have questions.

- Who benefits from food production on your empty lot, food grown there, or jobs created by the project?
- Who and what will a food production project bring into your community?
- What happens to pre-existing uses for the land that have developed informally?
- Who remediates the problems a farm could create for residents living nearby?

systems, though perhaps fewer elements of that response than regional or broader policies and systems. They also may discount the benefits of more localized systems that are sustainable precisely because they were generated by a specific community in a specific place to serve specific purposes.

We can expect reassurances from policymakers that implementation of the policy will attend to concerns, that the community will be involved in every instance of land conversion, that project implementation will come with education, and so on.

We can also expect neighborhood organizers and advocates of grassroots community-building to roll their eyes. They will recall projects that swept through their communities,

leaving behind fallow spaces and a vacuum of citizen investment. They will remember attempts at public education and marketing that were fundamentally patronizing.

“You will love what we’re planning to do on your block, once you fully understand it... once we convince you it’s a good idea. Promise.”

Quesada Gardens Initiative – Truly Grassroots

What do you do when the block you live on has been so choked with drugs, addicts, and violent crime that no one seems to remember better days? If you lived on Quesada Avenue in Bayview Hunters Point a few years back, you would pull down the blinds and dread the inevitable dash to MUNI or your car. But that changed in 2002 when retired residents, **Annette Smith and Karl Paige**, started planting flowers and vegetables here and there around the block.

The **Quesada Garden** is now an award-winning urban garden running nearly 700 feet up the center of the block. The project is growing daily, and currently includes a **stunning mural by Deidre DeFranceaux and Santie Huckaby**, which defines a regularly-used outdoor meeting space, a **Founders’ Memorial Sitting Area** at the crest of the Quesada hill, a landmark **mural by Malik Seneferu and Heidi Hardin**, the **Bridgeview “teaching and learning” garden** on a once-trash-strewn empty space, the mixed-use **Latona Community Garden** on a private lot that had been a magnet for crime and dumping, and the new public space known as **“Crispy Corner.”** These and many developing projects blossom in the heart of a neighborhood where creating and sustaining change once seemed impossible.

Despite critical need for, and interest in urban agriculture and food policy, this set of policy recommendations calls into question one of the

most effective tools the community-builder uses to engage communities: underutilized open space.

Community-builders connect such assets to problems the community itself defines, and tailor strategies that may include food production...but may not. Alternatively, citywide mandates and programs generated at City Hall often set up camp in a target area, and assert a strategy that is, at best, “informed” by those who must live with the results.

There is too much to love about the new food policy not to support it.

However, if you live near a piece of “underutilized” publicly-owned land, you should consider organizing with your neighbors now. A written consensus plan describing the community-defined use of the public asset near you may prove helpful if government attempts to dictate a narrow use defined by people you may never have met.

Leadership in the food movement and community-building movement tend to come from different orientations - environmentalism and public health on one side, and economic and community development or social justice on the other. While our ultimate objectives are compatible, if not complimentary, strategies can be at odds.

Those strategies may merge, over time. Until then, and in the case of the new Healthy and Sustainable Food for San Francisco food policy, the strategic gap could have consequences on the street where you live.

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