

When Sustainable Systems and Social Justice Diverge

San Francisco Urban Agriculture Policy falls short of serving both Citywide food access goals and underserved neighborhood's justice goals

Jeffrey Betcher

When I am with other Bayview Hunters Point residents who possess a genuine sense of connection to our neighborhood and neighbors, I sometimes feel I'm in the presence of a miracle.

Change-makers are reshaping the physical and social environment around us ... and often around their own "siloed" agendas ... at warp speed. Despite all the public participation attempts and rhetoric, few real decisions are left to residents, even when the results of those decisions would affect no one else.

The miracle I sense may be more community-generated than divine.

In the context of massive externally-generated change, community emergent efforts like [Quesada Gardens Initiative](#), [Literacy for Environmental Justice](#), [Hunters Point Family](#) and others are exceptional. These groups empower residents to define their environments in tiny ways, here and there: a hyper-local public gathering space, a floral garden, a micro business, a children's play space, a dog run, a community mural, a social history project...

This community-building¹ and resident empowerment approach was challenged in San Francisco by urban agriculture legislation that brought the full force of local government to the little patches of Bayview Hunters Point dirt we have been using to foster social cohesion against a storm of change.²

¹ "Community building" is a strength-based process that emerges from a community's grassroots. It can empower people to define the place they live, work or play whenever that definition does not create a barrier to some greater good. (Also see "subsidiarity.") The goal of urban community building is to raise social cohesion, create safer more livable places, and foster understanding between people and across class, race, gender, sexual orientation, citizenship status, country of origin, and other lines that often keep residents of gentrifying urban neighborhoods divided.

² The ordinance passed and was signed in to law, making it easier for anyone who wants to grow food on "underutilized land," whether the land is located in a neighborhood where they've put down roots or not, to do so. Goals embedded in the legislation included regressive

The legislation reduces community builders' ability to empower underserved communities to define a sliver of their environment during a time of massive change that is far beyond residents' control. It rendered the right of local communities to determine the best use of the odd lots of public land near them more precarious.

If you don't know what San Francisco's Bayview Hunters Point residents are grappling with, here's a taste:

- The neighborhood is doubling the size of its population, and redevelopment zones combine to represent the largest urban redevelopment project in the country.
- Socioeconomic trends beyond residents' control are straining class diversity as long term, low income, working class, working poor and other vulnerable residents are pressured out.
- The pursuit of "change" is infectious with new arrivals and investors as our shared history of social justice struggle and our culture of concern for vulnerable communities becomes more memory than practice.

New Urban agriculture legislation in San Francisco is likely to affect affluent and poorer neighborhoods differently.

While it was intended to help residents in more affluent but land scarce neighborhoods find gardening space, poorer neighborhoods like Bayview Hunters Point contain much of the "underutilize" land in question.³

In Bayview Hunters Point, just the suggestion of a narrow governmentally-defined use of land can be disempowering to residents. While advocates for urban agriculture, parks, canine companions, natural habitat restoration, playgrounds and other agendas vie for space, residents here face additional concerns. As external policymakers design and develop our neighborhood, we struggle to connect to the place we live, preserve

policies that may work for City Hall and urban agriculture policymakers, but which challenged those who believe residents near those plots of land should have the authority to define their uses.

³ Under the terms of the legislation, land in Bayview Hunters Point and throughout the City will be audited for urban agriculture use. The audit and incentives for the use of audited land will not consider other sustainable or just land uses aside from gardening. Local communities will need to advocate for themselves all the more strongly should their needs not align with government policy. (See "[Executive Directive on Healthy and Sustainable Food 09-03](#)", pages 7 and 8)

our unique culture and history, and defend the rights of long term residents and marginalized neighbors to shape their own future.

The new policy could improve City services for those who want to create a food producing community garden. It creates a governmental Urban Agriculture Program, and moves the City toward a more strategic approach and better accountability where that is needed.

However, the specific goals of this new City program are far-reaching, and could have unintended consequences for Bayview Hunters Point. One legislated goal now in place is the creation of ten new gardens on public land. Other goals include auditing City-owned buildings, incentivizing property owners, and streamlining the public land use application process all for one use of space: urban agriculture.

There is no mention in the legislation about what might happen when residents living near a public land asset want to use it for another purpose that they feel is worthy of the sustainable, livable and just community they hope to create.

Construing land use narrowly is unfortunate for community builders in Bayview Hunters Point as we watch our neighborhood become less familiar, and as vulnerable populations are pressured out. **In Bayview, it's often our bold but relatively humble attempt to shape the odd plot of shared urban space near where we live, space that no one seemed interested in before now, that gives us a rare sense of agency over our futures and the environment outside our front doors.**

Ironically, community building projects here often include food production. Gardening space often goes unused. Other land uses emerging here that might have been considered in tandem by policymakers include safe places for kids to play, inviting areas for pets and caretakers to socialize, art that signifies important aspects of place-based social history, meditative or sacred spaces, informal businesses, and more.

The up-side to the recent legislation's land use policy is limited. Food system advocates have come to understand that the City's little patches of dirt will never total up to an economically viable food system, and that the best outcomes of urban gardening projects have to do with education about food issues.

The down-side to a governmentally mandated and citywide systems approach to promoting urban agriculture, which seeds one use of that odd plot of shared urban space over others, is significant. It undermines nongovernmental resident empowerment efforts and community building principles that honor unique hyper-local needs and existing strengths. While projects that result are sometimes non-food-

related, they invariably contribute to health, wellness and sustainability as much as food production.

Residents of most other San Francisco neighborhoods may not miss the right to define their immediate environments, especially when the legitimate “greater good” of promoting food gardens is considered. **For folks in Bayview Hunters Point, narrowing the options can mean the difference between reinforcing residents’ experience of marginalization on the one hand, and a functional community we feel a part of on the other.**

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Chronicle / Kurt Rogers

www.QuesadaGardens.org

What do you do when the block you live on has been so choked with drugs, substance abuse 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 the bus stop. But that changed in 2002 when **Annette Smith and Karl Paige** started planting flowers and vegetables here and there around the 1700 block of Quesada. Other residents jumped in to help them, and to create art, share history, organize block events, and commit to working together to strengthen the community where they live. Together, they formed the Quesada Gardens Initiative, changed their world, and inspired all those around them. Their grassroots approach to sustainable social and physical change in the place where they lived, and the consensus processes that they and other residents developed remain the guiding lights for dozens of newer projects that have emerged in the heart of Bayview as part of the Quesada Gardens Initiative network.