URBAN FARMING IN BALTIMORE CITY: CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

Melissa Poulsen, MPH (mpoulsen@jhu.edu)
Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore MD

NERCRD webinar
June 27, 2014
My work related to urban agriculture

Academic research

- Dissertation research:
  - “Exploring community perceptions of urban farming in Baltimore”

- Other research:
  - “Urban community gardeners’ knowledge and perceptions of soil contamination risks”
    http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0087913
  - “Growing an Urban Oasis: A Qualitative Study of the Perceived Benefits of Community Gardening in Baltimore”

Policy work

- Baltimore’s urban agriculture plan: “Homegrown Baltimore: Grow Local”
  http://www.baltimoresustainability.org/homegrown-baltimore-grow-local
Context: Baltimore City

- Neighborhood decay
  - 30,000 vacant properties
  - 5,000 city-owned vacant lots
Context: Baltimore City

- Unhealthy food environment
  - 1 in 5 residents live in a food desert* including 25% of African Americans

*Food desert is defined as an area where the distance to a supermarket is > ¼ mile, the median household income is at or below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level, over 40% of households have no vehicle available, and the average Healthy Food Availability Index score for supermarkets, convenience, and corner stores is low
Urban farming in Baltimore

- Strong political will to promote urban farming, as it is at the nexus of:
  - Public health (healthy food access)
  - Community development (local job creation)
  - Environmental sustainability (urban greening)
Definition of urban farming

A type of urban agriculture that has a primary emphasis on income-generating agricultural activity
# Two types of urban farming

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Urban community farms</th>
<th>Urban commercial farms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Mission to engage/educate community members</td>
<td>• Entrepreneurial ventures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Located on sites based on their potential to positively influence the neighborhood</td>
<td>• Located on sites chosen for being most conducive to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Often smaller in size (1/2 acre)</td>
<td>production farming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Frequently run as non-profits and rely on volunteer support and grant funding</td>
<td>• Often larger in size (1-3 acres)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Tend to be run as for-profits with paid employees</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Whitelock Community Farm

Photo credits: http://whitelockfarm.org/
Big City Farms

Photo credits: Kim Hairston (www.cityfarmer.info); http://bigcityfarms.com/
KEY CHALLENGES FOR URBAN FARMERS

1. Infrastructure
2. Navigating a social environment
3. Capacity-building
4. Financing & economic sustainability
Key challenges for urban farmers: INFRASTRUCTURE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Solutions &amp; Resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Lack of land tenure                 | ▪ Land-leasing initiatives  
▪ Incorporating community farms into land trusts  
▪ Direct land purchasing             |
| Lack of reliable water access       | ▪ Water access programs  
▪ Development of rainwater capture systems                                    |
| Poor soil quality & soil contamination | ▪ Tool banks, incl. opportunities to use heavy machinery  
▪ Composting support  
▪ Guidelines & standards for testing and remediating contaminated soil       |
Key challenges for urban farmers: NAVIGATING A SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Solutions &amp; Resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Collaboration with existing community groups/organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Engagement of local residents through farm activities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Key challenges for urban farmers: CAPACITY-BUILDING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Solutions &amp; Resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Training needs on agricultural practices</td>
<td>▪ Volunteer and internship opportunities at other farms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Beginner farmer training programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Urban farm incubators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing produce</td>
<td>▪ Urban farmer networks such as the Farm Alliance of Baltimore</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Key challenges for urban farmers: FINANCING & ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Solutions &amp; Resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financing, incl. start-up capital</td>
<td>Loans designed for urban growers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition for grants</td>
<td>Urban farmer networks such as the Farm Alliance of Baltimore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liability and lack of access to insurance</td>
<td>Insurance agents with familiarity with urban agriculture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic sustainability</td>
<td>Demonstration projects</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Suburbanizing” the city?

Important to determine a long-term vision for the scope of urban agriculture, considering:

- Development potential of the available land
- Unique benefits urban agriculture brings to neighborhoods and cities
- Individual projects’ potential for long-term sustainability
Moving forward: Education & Collaboration

“An urban farmer isn’t a rural farmer in the city.”

- Role for Extension in building capacity for urban farming
  - Connecting urban farmers to available resources
  - Helping urban farmers build a realistic business plan
  - Providing expertise on urban soils (re: quality and contamination)
  - Food safety
Moving forward: Education & Collaboration

- What is the role for urban farms in the greater Northeast regional food system?
  - Collaboration between urban/peri-urban/rural farmers to diversify products available to consumers?
  - Marketing of high-value crops to customers outside the city?
  - Collaboration between urban farmers across cities?