

Summary of Public Comments

*From January 30, 2012
Kickoff & Visioning Meeting*

Introduction

The following is a summary of public comments submitted at the January 30, 2012 Urban Agriculture Rezoning Kickoff and Visioning meeting held by the Boston Redevelopment Authority and Mayor's Office at Suffolk University, 73 Tremont Street, Boston, MA.

Ideas and suggestions for the urban agriculture in Boston were elicited through breakout groups (about 150 persons), questionnaires (20 persons), and index cards, (11 persons). In all instances, the following three questions were used to prompt responses:

1. What do you imagine when you think of the future of urban agriculture in Boston?
2. How do you see urban agriculture impacting your quality of life?
3. How can the City and the BRA help you stay involved?

Summaries of the responses to each of the three questions are provided below. In many instances, summaries have been grouped by topic for ease of reference.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Even though the focus of the Urban Agriculture Rezoning Project is on how the Boston Zoning Code can be amended to support urban agriculture, comments were submitted at the Kickoff and Visioning meeting on a wide range of food and urban agriculture that are beyond the purview of the Zoning Code. For example, a number of comments were made related to the provision of land and other resources to expand food programs in the City. Comments that are beyond of the scope of the Rezoning Initiative will be made available to the Mayor's Office of Food Initiatives for consideration as future possible food policy and program initiatives are considered.

QUESTION 1: WHAT DO YOU IMAGINE WHEN YOU THINK OF THE FUTURE OF URBAN AGRICULTURE IN BOSTON?

Education and Training

Many individuals and groups noted both the need, and potential for, training and education related to a variety of aspects of urban agriculture. Examples included:

- The opportunity to **train children and** youth in a various aspects of urban agriculture, providing both **job and "life" skills**.
- Some suggested **after school training programs**.

- A number of groups suggested the creation of a “**start up kit**” to help individuals and families start their own farms.
- Some groups pointed to the need for education around specific issues such as soil safety and the keeping of chickens and bees.
- Still others suggested **getting colleges/universities involved** in programming and use of local food in school cafeterias.

Jobs and Economic Opportunity

Many said that they felt urban agriculture should increase both jobs and business opportunities for Bostonians, including training in farming as well as the business of farming, especially for youth.

Soil Safety

Soil safety was mentioned several times. Some mentioned the need for **strict regulations** to ensure safety around contaminated soil. Others mentioned the need for **information and education**. One person challenged the stated City policy to promote the use of raised beds and imported soil over the testing of native soil.

Year Round Food Access

Some suggestions were made that the City facilitate opportunities for winter markets and winter CSA’s to improve year round food access.

Specific Agricultural Activities

Composting

One of the most frequently mentioned and sought after activities were composting to make the most productive use of organic waste. Suggestions included:

- Residential, curbside pick up for composting (including prohibition on organic waste in regular trash collection).
- Subsidies to encourage composting.
- Allowance of offsite materials to be blended with materials produced on site in order to promote proper composting.

Rooftop Agriculture

The desire to allow rooftop agriculture was mentioned often.

Community Farms

Many participants mentioned the need to expand community gardens in the City, especially in some neighborhoods, well as the idea for community space/kitchens for food processing (i.e., Jamaica Plain Community Kitchen at the Brewery complex.)

Animal Husbandry

Many groups and individuals mentioned the desire to see the City allow the raising of chickens in back yards. While some felt chickens should be by right, most did not specify. One group suggested that neighbors be allowed to raise chickens collectively.

Beekeeping

A couple of groups and individuals felt that beekeeping should be allowed or that the city should be “bee-friendly”.

Vertical Farming

To make use of limited space in the city, several groups mentioned that they would like to see vertical farming.

Diverse Farms

Suggestions were made that the city support diverse farming types and models, appropriate to Boston’s culturally diverse population.

QUESTION 2: HOW DO YOU SEE URBAN AGRICULTURE IMPACTING YOUR QUALITY OF LIFE?

Health

Many participants mentioned the benefits of having better access to “fresh, healthy food”, including helping to stem an obesity crisis.

Community Building

Many groups alluded to the major contribution that urban agriculture could make to building neighborhoods and healthy communities by bringing neighbors together in shared activity.

Environmental Sustainability

Many talked about the environmental benefits of urban farming, from increasing green space and improving air quality to reducing heat islands, greenhouse gases and the solid waste stream.

Social Justice

Several of groups mentioned the economic and environmental justice benefits of urban agriculture, particularly in terms of putting fresh healthy food into the hands of those who might not otherwise be able to afford it.

Crime Prevention

Some individuals and groups said they felt that urban agriculture could help reduce crime by activating vacant lots and employing people--especially youth.

Neighborhood Improvement and Beautification

A number of comments were made to the effect that urban agriculture could improve the aesthetic quality of life in neighborhoods by adding greenery, particularly on vacant and abandoned lots. Facilitating the provision of fresh, healthy food in neighborhood **corner stores** was another suggestion for enhancing neighborhood quality.

Negative Effects

Remarkably little was said about possible negative impacts of urban agriculture on quality of life. However, one group commented that the City play a role in educating the community about composting, keeping of chicken, beekeeping and both to help prevent nuisances and to dispel negative perception..

QUESTION 3: HOW CAN THE CITY AND THE BRA HELP YOU STAY INVOLVED?

In general, comments were made that successful efforts demonstrated through the Kickoff and Visioning meeting—ample outreach and notification; ample availability and dissemination of project information; efforts to inform and educate about different aspects of urban agriculture--should be continued. Specific areas of interest included the following:

Information Dissemination

Participants seemed to feel that the initial outreach for the project had been effective, and that it should be continued. Particularly, participants felt that information, both about content and process, should be made readily accessible and widely disseminated. Regular updates were recommended. Specific media included Facebook, Twitter, project webpage and blogging. Some suggested that the city set up a kind of web based clearinghouse of information. There was also a suggestion for live streaming of the Working Group meetings.

Transparency

An open public process, characterized by easy access to all information—including information about content and process--was a theme of a number of group comments. Working Group proceedings and recommendations should be transparent; dates and times of all meetings should be posted online, and e-mail lists should be used to update the public the Working Group's progress.

Neighborhood Meetings

Some suggested that meetings be conducted in Boston neighborhoods *earlier* in the process than shown in the schedule presented on January 30th and that Working Group meetings take place in Boston neighborhoods.

Home starter or "start up" kits

Several groups suggested that the City create a home gardening "start up kit" to help first time gardeners figure out what to do.

Other Events

It was suggested that the City sponsor additional events similar to the talk by Will Allen. While large scale events involving nationally known speakers carrying a significant speaker fee may be difficult to pull off given limited City funding, the City and Working Group may want to consider sponsoring talks by experts on specific urban agriculture topics (such as composting, the keeping of chickens and composting) to both help the community learn more about how to pursue these urban agriculture activities as well as to inform zoning recommendations.

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