Farming in Philadelphia?

A Proposal for a Sustainable Urban Farm Incubator

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Sustainable farm site. Mantawna Farm, pictured above, is a 76-acre piece of parkland owned by Fairmount Park and is directly adjacent to the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education. The proposed Sustainable Farm Incubator will allow visitors to see, touch, smell, and taste the value of sustainable agriculture.

Editor's Note:

Last fall, Professor Domenic Vitiello led his Community and Economic Development Practicum class, composed of second-year MCP students, through a proposal to develop an urban farm incubator in Philadelphia. During the semester, students worked with a collaborative client group that included W.B. Saul High School for Agricultural Sciences, the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education, Weaver's Way Community Programs, and Fairmount Park. The following article is the proposal developed by class members Chrissy Caggiano, Emily Dowdall, Leah Fiasca, William Knapp, Christy Kwan, Amina Omar and Amanda Wagner.

Urban Agriculture in Philadelphia

Philadelphia is an emerging leader in the grassroots effort to promote local food and urban agriculture. Citizens practice urban agriculture in innovative spaces such as backyards, rooftops, pocket parks and vacant lots. The intensive plant cultivation and animal husbandry in and around cities allows people to grow food for themselves and

their communities, providing opportunities for health benefits and entrepreneurship.

Evidence of local consumer demand for locally-grown food includes the proliferation of more than 30 farmers markets and farm stands in the city, about 40 restaurants and cafes that use locally-sourced ingredients, and at least 25 specialty stores that sell or process local goods (Fair Food Local Food Guide, 2008). A growing number of institutions are requesting and using local food, while Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs and "buying clubs" have gained popularity. In these programs, participants pay at the beginning of the season to become "members" and then receive weekly deliveries of fresh produce throughout the growing season. Adding to the evidence of demand, many existing neighborhood community gardens in the city are at membership capacity, and several have waiting lists for new members. People from Philadelphia and around the country continually contact these urban farms seeking employment, training or volunteer opportunities.

Additionally, Philadelphia's city government has taken a renewed interest in supporting and scaling up local food and urban agriculture. The Philadelphia Food Charter, announced in October 2008, states that "… Food can be a catalyst for youth engagement and resident involvement in community gardens and farms, a means to advance public and community health through education and access to nutritious food, and a foundation for creating vital and sustainable neighborhoods" (Philadelphia Food Charter, 2008). The Zoning Code Commission has also expressed interest in working with the city government, neighborhoods and the Mayor's Office of Sustainability to establish an "urban agricultural" zoning designation and incorporate urban agriculture into Philadelphia's ongoing comprehensive zoning reform. This would provide formal governmental support for future development of urban agriculture in Philadelphia.

Because of the rising demand for local food and interest in local growing, there are opportunities for increased support for urban growers and food businesses. However, there is no supporting infrastructure that combines access to land, technical assistance for growing sustainably, business development expertise, and financing assistance to emerging urban farmers. This suggests that an "urban farm incubator" would meet a critical need in the Philadelphia region, strengthening the local economy and local food available through the development of new, viable farm enterprises.

Business Incubation Model

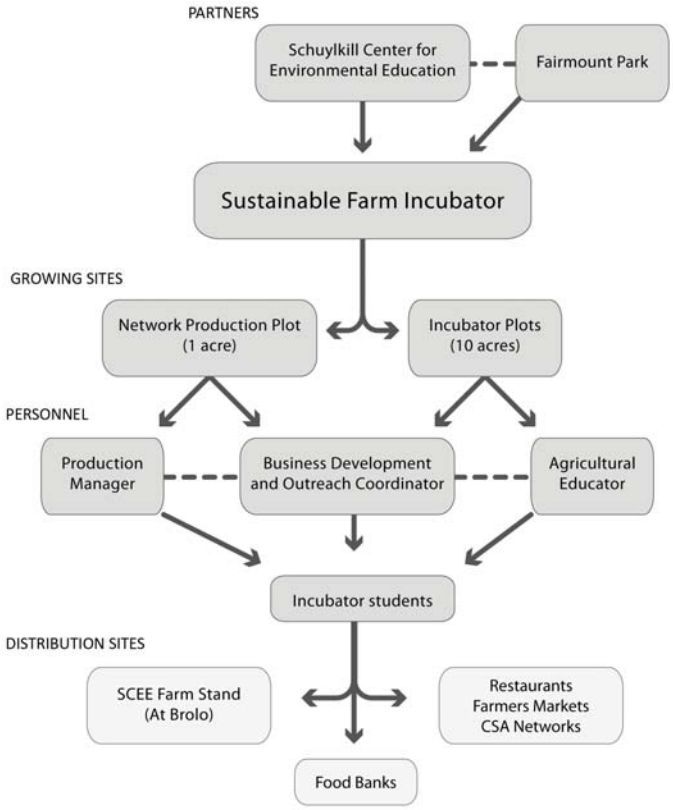
The model hinges on business incubation — a support framework that accelerates the successful development of start-up companies by providing entrepreneurs with targeted resources and services. Business incubators nurture the development of young companies when they need the most assistance, usually in the form of physical space, business expertise, and networking. An incubator's primary goal is to develop companies that will leave the program financially viable and independent. These incubator "graduates" go out into the community and can create jobs, revitalize neighborhoods, commercialize new technologies, and strengthen local and national economies. One study has found that every $1 of public money supporting an incubator generates $30 in local tax revenue alone (National Business Incubation Association).

Food-related incubators are usually kitchen or processing incubators, though there are some successful farm production incubators like the Intervale Center in Vermont. Regardless of the location along the food continuum from production to processing, a network of food business incubators have identified the following needs: information on business planning, market research and capital access; training and workforce development on best practices in food safety and quality assurance; reduction of start-up expenses related to equipment, product development or market entry; assistance in the development of differentiated products to compete in a complex market; and access to safe and legal production facilities inspected by the appropriate agencies. An incubator addressing those needs will mitigate formidable barriers to food-based entrepreneurship.

The Sustainable Farm Incubator

Vision

The Sustainable Farm Incubator is a proposed partnership between the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education and Fairmount Park that would become an innovative, national model for creating viable farm businesses in cities. Philadelphians and others in the region who are interested in growing food would receive the support, training, and resources to use farming as a sustainable way of life. School groups, community members, and other environmentally-conscious visitors of



Organization chart. The Sustainable Farm Incubator, a partnership between Fairmount Park and the Schuylkill Center for Environment Education, involves a network of growing sites, personnel, students, and distribution sites.

Fairmount Park and the Schuylkill Center would be able to meet these farmers first-hand and learn by seeing, touching, smelling, and tasting the value of sustainable agriculture.

To achieve this goal, 10 acres of land would be transformed over the next five years into small plots tended by emerging farmers. In the first year, the partner organizations hire staff and settle land leasing. The newly hired staff would then develop a curriculum, cultivate the land for the first growing season, and start recruiting the initial class of farmers. The first-year class of emerging farmers would work in pairs on half-acre plots, learning from staff and each other about growing food and farming-business basics such as how to set prices, create budgets, and find customers. The farmers' formal education would be complemented with trips to other Philadelphia urban agriculture hot spots to learn about the variety of urban farming techniques. Over time, the Sustainable Farm Incubator's resource network would grow as more classes graduate from the program. Some graduates would stay to farm larger plots and mentor new classes, while others leave to translate their newly acquired knowledge and begin their own farms in the region. These new farmers could serve as a valuable alumni network, providing future field trip destinations and becoming employers for other farmers. They would also become suppliers for the Schuylkill Center Farm Stand, Upper Roxborough CSA, and local restaurants interested in locally-grown, chemical-free foods.

Partner Organization and Mission Alignment

The program should become an innovative partnership that will weave environmental opportunities with community engagement and economic prosperity. The two organizations involved will bring mutually beneficial assets to the program. For example, the Schuylkill Center's connections to the urban agricultural movement and the Sustainable Business Network equip Fairmount Park to pursue this venture. Conversely, Fairmount Park can provide fertile farm lands that the Schuylkill Center and the incubator would depend upon.

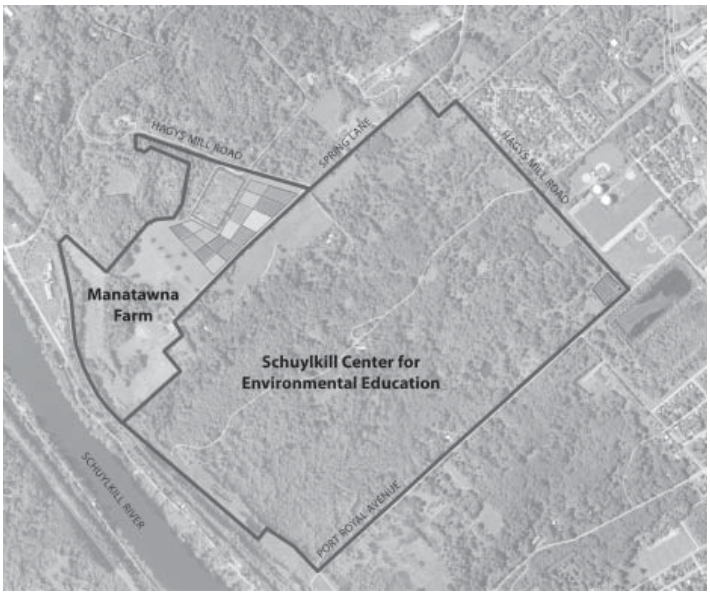
Together, the partnership would:

1. Demonstrate the viability of urban agriculture as an occupation
2. Become a means of preserving and improving the environment
3. Serve as a way to build community through economic and social opportunities

Growing Sites

Manatawna Farm, operated by Fairmount Park, rests along the Schuykill River in Northwest Philadelphia's Upper Roxborough neighborhood and straddles both Philadelphia and Montgomery counties. The farm lies directly north of The Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education. Soil analysis reveals that the area is prime for farmland, mainly consisting of Chester silt loam, Urbana silt loam and Manor loam (soil with organic material).

The Sustainable Farm Incubator would farm primarily in two locations: the Network Production Plot and the Incubator Plots. The Network Production Plot is one acre at Brolo Farm, located on Schuylkill Center property. This plot serves as an intensive production site where all student farmers would work on the same plot to grow vegetables for the Upper Roxborough CSA Network. This location is also ideal for the Schuylkill Center Farm Stand, as it is located directly across the street from the 21st Ward Junior League Complex, home to seven playing fields that serve more than 1,000 children who participate in baseball and softball leagues. The Schuylkill Center Farm Stand would be well-positioned to serve fresh and healthy foods to little leaguers and their families during the height of the summer growing season.



Farm location. Proposed site plan for the Sustainable Farm Incubator in Upper Roxborough. Students will use 10 acres of land south of the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education's community gardens as the Incubator's main production site, with an additional 1-acre plot and farm stand at the corner of Port Royal Avenue and Hagy's Mill Road.

The 10 acres at Manatawna Farm would serve as the main location for the incubator plots. Four acres would be devoted to incubation for first-year students, who would work in pairs on half-acre plots — up to a total of 16 students growing foods specific to their interests. The remaining 6 acres would be used for enterprise, mentoring, and farming plots. These plots would vary between a half-acre to 1 acre, depending on the business proposals generated from the students; they can accommodate a maximum of 12 farms (if all farmers only want half an acre). The land adjacent to the existing Schuylkill Center Community Gardens is a logical next step for converting land into farming. The Community Gardens are already equipped with irrigation lines. Also, as the Sustainable Farm Incubator increases in demand, the program may consider expanding into vacant plots within the Community Gardens.

Personnel

A total of three staff members are required to run the educational component of the Sustainable Farm Incubator. The Production Manager would oversee the growing at the "network production plot." The business Development and Outreach Coordinator would market the food grown from the network production plot to CSAs and local food outlets as well as work with the students of the incubator plots to develop business plans. Lastly, the Agricultural Educator would work on the incubator plots to teach student-farmers the basics of chemical-free food production. These three staff members work together to create a comprehensive education for the student-farmers.

Program Curriculum

The Incubator's curriculum, adapted from successful programs across the country, integrates lessons in three basic categories: 1) chemical-free food production practices; 2) financial and logistics education; and 3) marketing skills. Chemical-free production lessons include crop production and growing methods, botany and crop culture, soils management, natural pest and disease management, and agricultural record-keeping, which incorporates projecting crop yields, seed selection, and crop production planning.

Financial and logistics curriculum elements include business basics, planning, resources on obtaining loans and grants, and the realities of urban agricultural production, such as zoning, permitting, and dealing with neighborhood tensions.

Finally, the marketing curriculum focuses on skills such as defining the customer base, the importance of creativity in reaching markets, advertising skills, and knowledge of product outlets. The marketing curriculum would also provide a network of connections with local, regional, and national sustainable farm business practitioners.

When winter arrives in Philadelphia, non-growing season activities include a number of indoor educational activities: travel to the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA) annual conference, guest lectures, and workshops with established Philadelphia urban growers. Participants can also enjoy structured time in the greenhouse, testing methods and procedures and growing cold-tolerant crops, as well as classroom time learning about management and seed planning and buying.

Distribution Sites

The main distribution and sales site will be the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education Farm Stand across from the sports league complex. Students can also individually sell their food to local restaurants, farmer's markets, the Upper Roxborough CSA Network, or donate it to local food banks.

Next Steps for Implementation

Considerations

The Sustainable Farm Incubator still has several hurdles to clear before opening as a locally-grown food operation. The first issue is ownership of the incubator and tenure of the land. The partners need to name the Incubator in a way that is appropriate for a partnership farm. Will this be, as the organizational chart suggests, a program within the Schuylkill Center on Fairmount Park property? What will be the particular roles of each organization? Who will the three staff people report to and be overseen by?

Will there be an official lease agreement partitioning 10 acres of Manatawna Farm (over the course of a given number of years) to be used as the Sustainable Farm Incubator? It is strongly suggested that a lease and/or other formal agreement between parties be created.

In terms of funding, what are each of the organizations able to provide as in-kind support in terms of classroom space, advertising resources, hard property (like equipment, vehicles) etc. To reach implementation, a much sturdier funding picture will need to be painted. For example, student farmers may struggle with housing in terms of cost and accessibility to Manatawna Farm. A number of possible solutions were floated during the planning process — including the construction of dorm facilities, which would require substantial capital investment.

Future Research

Both partners have signaled their intention to embark on next steps, beginning with internal organizational discussions, and the students have agreed to continue participating when possible. The organizations will also seek to enlist the support of City Council members and the Mayor's Office of Sustainability as well as potential financial supporters such as the William Penn Foundation. In order to do this, students must continue to keep in touch with the urban agriculture movement both in Philadelphia and cities across the country. Urban and local agriculture is changing vastly, thus making networking a valuable resource to learn innovative and new models of food production.

A clear understanding between the relationship of non-profit management and food enterprises is essential in moving this project forward. Also, for urban agriculture to fully thrive in a city setting, it must be recognized within Philadelphia's zoning code. As other cities move to become more green and sustainable, Philadelphia must adopt a legal structure to cultivate, nurture, and preserve emerging sources of economic, workforce, and sustainable development.

The Process: Lessons Learned

The limits to strategic planning were reflected in concerns voiced by the clients, including the long-term fate of the project given that the Penn students would not be around to assist with implementation or make further revisions to the plan. This reality actually echoes the circumstances of a consultant model for strategic planning and the fact that strategic planners are not project managers; this can be both a strength and weakness of the format. A second weakness related to short-term commitment is that the students' planning process only yielded suggestions — not a definitive plan — for funding. A strategic plan is an excellent tool for starting conversation and understanding how partners' strengths and resources complement one another — but it leaves a lot of hard work to be done.

In his writing on strategic planning, Henry Mintzberg holds that "strategies take on value only as committed people infuse them with energy." Given the experience in Upper Roxborough, this rings absolutely true. This project benefits significantly from partners who are ready to bring the plan to life, infusing a level of enthusiasm and commitment that will make it possible to transform recommendations into action.

Strategic thinking is an essential part of all planning sub-disciplines, from transportation to economic development to design. This project demonstrates how stakeholders can be engaged in choosing a course of action and anticipating positive and negative outcomes. The process of planning a Sustainable Farm Incubator held lessons about the Com-

munity and Economic Development (CED) discipline in particular. Practitioners intuitively seek connections with one another and see how another organization's new program could tie into their own work. The field is concerned with the success of people and projects in a profound way that can become lost in day-to-day activities and pressures. Strategic planning provides an opportunity for a consultant, partner, or staff member to push an organization back on track. The project also highlighted the difficulty for many CED endeavors to make decisions about programming, funding, and channeling energies given the importance of mission and the lack of any one best way to achieve it. For CED practitioners, it is crucial to perceive multiple bottom lines — financial, social, and personal — and to identify and prioritize actions.

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