

**Committee on Libraries, Parks, Recreation, and Planning
Rountable on Community Gardens and Urban Agriculture
December 15, 2011**

**Testimony of Steve Coleman
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Value of Urban Agriculture (Overview)

- **Impact of urban agriculture on health, nutrition, economy, education, community reclamation, environment and energy**

Community Reclamation

The District of Columbia has the highest percentage of public green space and the highest concentration of green jobs of any city in North America, yet its poorest residents have little access to healthy food, physical activity, income, or training connected to most of this land. For decades, the only enterprises operating on many of these lands were illegal drug markets. Mounting unemployment in under-served DC neighborhoods, already among the highest in the U.S., has combined with soaring obesity and illness rates in inner-city healthy food deserts to feed vicious cycles of injustice and poverty.

A decade ago, public housing residents without cars in the Watts Branch stream valley in Far Northeast Washington had to cross a violent, drug-infused park and take two buses in order to buy a tomato shipped in from California. They had to go three miles to reach the nearest farm market on the west side of the Anacostia River. Residents unable to make this trek were forced to eat deep-fried meals from carry-outs or processed junk food from “convenience” stores. People growing produce in the only community garden on public land in this entire area of DC were prohibited from distributing this food to the community. Neighbors seeking farm markets instead of the drug markets occupying many parks were informed by city and federal officials that produce sales were prohibited on parkland. Older residents who grew up on farms had to content themselves with stories of the old days when larger DC parks were lined with orchards, victory gardens, and “huckster” carts bearing produce from the farms that once bordered the capital.

But, the story doesn’t end there. Sadly, the continuing weak economy has only further entrenched the food challenges faced by many DC residents. Here are some present-day facts on food security:

- Along with hunger, lack of access to healthy food contributes to obesity and poor health outcomes.

- Wards 7 and 8, which have the District's highest poverty rates, also have the city's highest obesity rates and are home to large "food deserts."
- Of the city's 43 full-service grocery stores, only two are located in Ward 4, four in Ward 7, and three in Ward 8. By contrast, Ward 3 - the highest-income Ward - has eleven full-service stores.
- Only three of the city's 30 farmers' markets are located east of the Anacostia River.
- Many areas of food deserts and poverty have enormous unused land areas that could help advance public health, community greening and revitalization, and revenue and jobs.

This does not have to be, however. Washington Parks & People has, through mission- and community-focused work, seen progress in stemming and reversing some of these trends.

Today people's connections to land, health, food, jobs, and justice are returning in the Watts stream valley, alongside what is now called Marvin Gaye Park -- thanks to a community-government alliance organized by Washington Parks & People, DC's alliance of community greening partnerships, and many other partners. Since 2001, WPP volunteers and trainees removed over 6,000,000 pounds of trash and debris from Watts parkland; cleaned and restored the stream; planted thousands of trees; opened the first new playground in a generation; and reconnected several neighborhoods to the park. After a decade of planning, the 1.6-mile intermodal park trail has been transformed with new links, lighting, patrols -- and dramatically less crime. At the heart of the stream valley, community residents transformed a hillside of drug use and violence into the Marvin Gaye Amphitheater, and neighborhood youth replaced the entrenched heroin market with a farm market that Parks & People has been operating for ten years. Now the park is getting DC's first community nursery and green job training center and a community garden across from the Richardson Dwellings public housing complex.

In spite of this progress, there continues to be a insufficient investment in urban green spaces in economically distressed neighborhoods located throughout the city, particularly many communities located east of the Anacostia River. We believe strongly that the disconnect of residents one to another is emphasized through the residents' disconnect from the land and green spaces in their communities. There are five key areas we think should be considered in tackling how to best meet the needs of DC's most under-served residents, while strengthening our stewardship of the city's underused and undervalued green areas.

National and Public Parks

As in the example of Fort Dupont and Rock Creek Parks, community gardens have become a viable asset for education, heritage and a sustainable food source.

Community Gardens/Permaculture and Nutrition

Parks & People's Community Harvest connects agriculture and healthy food to under-served areas across DC. Thanks to the technical assistance provided by the Community Harvest program, residents of Far Northeast DC have planted eight new community gardens. "Food forest" orchards are sprouting up in the parks. And WPP's Riverside Center at the hub of the park, financed by Washington DC LISC and set in a former nightclub where Marvin Gaye began his career, now offers classes in healthy gardening, cooking, nutrition, and fitness, as well as gateway training for jobs, careers, and enterprises in urban greening, forestry, and healthy food.

We provided planning and start-up support for the Common Good City Farm beside public housing in LeDroit Park. We are now working with city and community partners to bring a larger farm to Oxon Run, DC's 130-acre municipal park, in the Ward 8 community of Congress Heights. This program grew out of past work operating the last working farm in the capital, the 150-year-old "Urban Oasis" on the west campus of St. Elizabeth's Hospital, until it closed for federal office construction.

The other side of our Community Harvest program addresses the fact that DC will never have the land capacity for agricultural self-sufficiency, a key need in urban food security is enhancing markets and partnerships with regional farmers. As a result, Community Harvest launched the Local Food Alliance and successfully campaigned to remove the DC government ban on park-based farm markets. This made it possible for new farm markets in several low-income neighborhoods. Parks & People now works with the Healthy Solutions Group to support black-owned farms in the region, as well as other community-supported agriculture.

But our work has just begun. Parks & People's Community Harvest partnerships are evidence of the impact community gardens can have on communities, residents and neighborhoods, and our goal is to secure underwriting that will allow us to connect with new partners and expand our capacity to serve more low-income DC residents needing access to food and land, and lasting policy and system reform for environmental empowerment, food security, health, and jobs.

Education

Education, on the community and on nature, is at the core of what we do.

Parks & People supported the passage and implementation of the landmark DC Healthy Schools Act, expanding youth access to healthy food, farms, and exercise. We also host model community gardening and green service and training programs for numerous DC schools. Now we are partnering on green vocational training with UDC's Community College.

Another way that we offer education is through our incubator and training facilities. Parks & People owns and operates two buildings to train, convene, and incubate community greening partners. The Josephine Butler Parks Center, our 40-room headquarters, helped incubate such food and health initiatives as Community Harvest, Brain Food, the Latino Federation Health Initiative, the Columbia Heights Community Marketplace, and the Community Food Security Coalition. Programs at the Center help advance park-based public health; green workforce

development; and environmental land reclamation, stewardship, and programming. The Parks Center also partners with such community food enterprises as the DC Central Kitchen to host weddings and other private events in its grand public spaces, with the substantial net income helping to underwrite community greening across the city. WPP's Riverside Center has a 1500-square-foot certified commercial kitchen and an accessible 2,000-square-foot hall for classes and programs.

Parks & People established Heart & Soul, a park-based healthy living fitness, nutrition, and reform advocacy program developed for under-served communities, to educate community members specifically of the benefits of healthy living by connecting their health to the health of their environment through a range of culturally appropriate programming including cooking, nutrition, health, and fitness classes, as well as green job training, park and trail support, bicycle repair, and incubation of innovative healthy community food enterprises such as Everybody Eats DC to help people and parks come alive together.

Fitness

Continued disinvestment within communities with the greatest need, specifically Wards 7 & 8, has resulted in widespread poverty, increased violent crimes, drug addiction, greater percentages of youth dropping out of school, increased teen pregnancies, severe under and unemployment ratios, and declining healthcare. The demographics of these low-income communities greatly exemplify the affects of this disinvestment. According to the DC Department of Health's Profile of Health and Socio-Economic Indicators in Wards 7 & 8:

- 38% of its residents report being obese, resulting in diabetes and heart disease; the leading cause of death in Wards 7 and 8.
- 38% and 33% of Ward 7 and 8 residents respectively report engaging in no physical activity.

Certainly repurposing public green spaces and lands can directly impact the availability and access to fitness options for many of the city's residents who need them ost.

Economical and Entrepreneurial

Parks & People's Community Harvest program supports neighborhood initiatives to further urban agriculture, greening, and community reclamation. We accomplish this through garden grants & technical support. To date, we have supported 60 neighborhood garden and greening partnerships in low-income areas through mini-grants, land reclamation, volunteer support, job training, planning and design help, legal counsel, advocacy, promotional assistance, access to our community tool banks, trees and seeds, and fiscal sponsorship as needed. Requests for support are judged by a panel of community agriculture and greening leaders, who also offer guidance and support to those not yet approved for grants. Sites receiving assistance have included parks, playgrounds, recreation centers, vacant lots and other blighted areas, public housing projects, schoolyards, neighborhood gateways and streetscapes, health clinics, hospices, a mental hospital, a youth detention center, a gang prevention home, and a historically black university.

Building on the success and impact Parks & People has experienced, we propose the following actions to significantly expand access to healthy food across DC:

Policy recommendations:

1. Simplify the process and add tax incentives for conversion of blighted vacant lots into community gardens, including forgiveness of back taxes on undevelopable lands in return for donation of lands for community agriculture. Incentivize and ease permitting for community farm markets in food desert areas.
2. Revise zoning code and land use regulations with more explicit permissions and incentives for all forms of urban and community agriculture (including reform of regulations on elements such as beekeeping and composting).
3. Invest block grant and other community revitalization funds in ramping up urban agriculture capacity, including community farms and tree nurseries.
4. Encourage broad “food forest” planting on public lands of such native fruit-bearing and habitat-supporting trees as serviceberry, persimmon, and pawpaw, as well as other fruit and nut orchards.
5. Continue to expand community gardens on DC parkland and school grounds, including revitalization of unused greenhouses. Expand youth access to healthy food and farms through the DC Healthy Schools Act and other measures.
6. Expand urban agriculture teaching and job training in partnership with UDC College of Agriculture, Urban Sustainability, and Environmental Sciences, the UDC Cooperative Extension Service and Agricultural Experiment Station, the Community College of DC, DCPS, and Howard University.
7. Invest in nonprofit infrastructure such as Community Harvest program to support and train community residents and landowners in urban agriculture
8. Develop neighborhood farm collaborative for sale of cash crops, to help generate community revenue and jobs
9. Collaborate with DC Water to invest in stormwater catchment systems to irrigate community gardens
10. Launch a pilot program on DC and federal parklands of composting toilets to generate more sustainable and organic local soil enrichment.
11. Harvest urban timber as a cash lumber crop instead of waste, the current volume of which equals 1/3 of the US timber output

12. Work together with the US General Services Administration and the DC Department of General Services and other agencies to identify opportunities for dramatic expansion of community agriculture on public lands. These include such sites as the following:

Arboretum— Over 75 acres of lawns at the Department of Agriculture’s facility

Soldier’s and Airmen’s Home— Dozens of acres of lawns

Saint Elizabeth’s- Replace the farm that was removed from the west campus

National parklands such as Anacostia Park, Kenilworth Park, and the Fort Circle Parks-- hundreds of acres of little used lawn areas.

New Beginnings Juvenile Detention Center in Laurel-- most of 888 acres unused

Models for replication/ expansion

Urban agriculture is booming in DC, yet governmental leadership and investment is needed to help expand and replicate such inspiring models as the following:

Youth and community gardens at DC Parks and Recreation sites

Victory Gardens at Fort Dupont, Glover-Archbold, and elsewhere

City Blossoms sites at schools and park areas

Common Good City Farm

Urban Oasis Farm (former St. Elizabeth’s site)

Washington Parks & People Programs

- Marvin Gaye Community Greening Center- first community nursery
- DC Green Corps job training program
- Community Harvest program – supporting 40 community garden sites across the city

Other models across the country, including Detroit, Oakland, Philadelphia, and New York
Cleveland is now creating a 187,000-square-foot greenhouse for year-round commercial hydroponic agriculture.

Maximizing the potential in and opportunities for people and parks is the core focus of Washington Parks & People. It has been our focus for the 21 years we’ve been working across the District, and we are sure that with your support, it can become a realized goal for EVERY resident in every ward of the District moving forward.

The following award-winning video documents some of our work at just one model site in North Columbia Heights, and the impact it has had on DC’s residents and communities. To make just this one green space possible, the DC Council had to enact two pieces of legislation, and we had to work with seven different city agencies, remove over 45 tax liens, and then wait six months for permits to install the garden. Even after all this, commercial property taxes are still accruing on this non-commercial site.

<<video>>

Thank you for your time and your attention. We look forward to working with this committee, the Council, and the entire city to dramatically expand access to healthy food and community green spaces across the entire city, for the good of our neighbors and for the good of our neighborhoods.