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Urban agriculture as a tool to help revitalize the city

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A common theme throughout the Detroit Future City framework

By [Sandra Turner-Handy](#)
[Special to the Michigan Citizen](#)

The Detroit Future City Strategic Framework proposes a set of recommendations to transform the city of Detroit by raising the quality of life for residents over the next 50 years.

A thriving and important topic included in the framework is urban agriculture. From planting, growing, selling and transporting, urban ag is an important consideration in the plan and an important catalyst for the city's future.

Urban agriculture is included in each of the Future City framework's six elements: economic growth, land use, city systems and environment, neighborhoods, land and building assets, and civic engagement.

The economic growth element lists food production as one of two emerging industries. It encourages utilization of the urban farming movement and leveraging the expertise of growers to meet the demand for locally sourced fresh food. It envisions training all skill levels to meet the demands of urban agriculture. Creation of economic activity in the food sector (think Eastern Market) can be strategically aligned with other elements and within different land types. An example is a high vacancy area where new housing is not a strategic goal. Instead, large parcels of land might be bundled for an urban farm that employs trained Detroiters who can catch public transportation, since the bus schedule is aligned with start and ending work hours on the farm. Those workers would then have income that can be invested back into the city.

The land use element focuses on multi-functional and productive use of landscapes. Landscapes can create a healthier environment. Cleaner air, water and soil can generate food and jobs. The recommendations combine multi-family housing and landscapes that include community gardens and forests. An example is a multi-family neighborhood where residents share in the maintenance of a community garden thus bringing a sense of community, while improving health with access to fresh fruits and vegetables. A light industrial landscape would include food-processing plants. Another recommendation uses vacant land to generate new knowledge with research plots, aquaculture, hydroponics and urban farms with greenhouses.

The city systems and environment element focuses on city services and environmental hazards. The focus is on waste, water, transit, energy, lighting and telecommunications. The high cost to maintain aging city systems and the lack of environmental safeguards places heavy economic and health burdens on the city's most vulnerable population. Recommendations for resolving these issues will reduce the high cost of health care and the lack of access to healthy food. Utilizing a blue/green infrastructure would allow for heavy rainfall to be captured and redirected to lawns, farms and gardens.

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The neighborhood element begins with the reality that goods and services — including healthy foods — are often purchased outside of the city. Repurposing vacant land to sustain a neighborhood will help alleviate this problem. An example, the side lot program, offers vacant lots at a low cost to adjacent neighbors. Recommendations include incentivizing a local food system that promotes “buy local” for residents, institutions and commercial enterprises. Support for existing local food networks and repurposing vacant land for agriculture are also suggested. Policy recommendations to restrict liquor stores that do not offer fresh food and healthy choices are part of the suggested redesign of neighborhoods.

The land and building assets element focuses on the use of city assets. An overwhelming inventory of land and vacant buildings may be a burden on the city. But if put to productive use, many such structures can be economic energizers. Structures in good condition may be rezoned for light or heavy industry, while dormant properties may be targeted for small and large gardens that help provide healthy food options.

Finally, the civic engagement element recognizes residents as the city’s greatest asset. The recommendations include ensuring residents are at the table during decision-making that will affect their lives.

Raising the quality of life for residents must include strategically repurposing land to provide one of our most basic needs — healthy food.

What a great way to begin our transformation!

Sandra Turner-Handy is a member of the Detroit Food Policy Council and is community outreach director for the Michigan Environmental Council.

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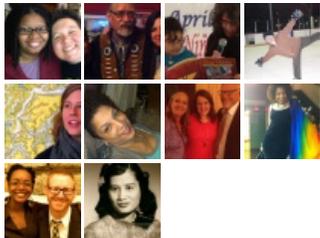
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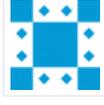
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