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## Turn vacant land into small farmsteads

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Dan Carmody

**By Dan Carmody**  
[Special to the Michigan Citizen](#)

Not far east of Eastern Market, many once strong neighborhoods have been dismantled. All sorts of proposals have been floated to return the land to productive use. Most of them require great investment or benefit few people.

In frequent walks through this section of town where pheasants frequently outnumber humans, I have meditated in search of affordable ways to create household wealth and re-purpose parts of the city of Detroit. These ideas come to mind:

### The communal model

Based upon the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network's D-town Farm and other larger communal urban gardens, the idea is to locate a central communal garden of five to ten acres in close proximity to homes for participating members of the communal garden. As with existing cooperatives in Detroit, the land and homes would be owned by an association comprised of its residents.

### The entrepreneurial model

Based upon the Detroit Market Garden project, these two- to four-acre farmsteads would be owned by the households that occupy a home on or near the farmstead. Evidence suggests that with proper business planning and crop planting choices, this scale of farming can create half to 2 jobs for each farmstead.

### Minimize cost to repurpose land

Both of these scales lower the cost of re-purposing the previous small lot single-family detached bungalows and two-story homes. Homes can be repaired rather than torn down and the layout can be varied to match the unique qualities of the specific site. Further, the existing streets, alleys, sidewalks and utilities can be left in place and worked around — no need to incur removal costs.

### No need for relocation



When considering possible sites for developing either of these approaches, existing homeowner's rights and desires can be more easily addressed than with larger scale developments.

### Land plus decent, affordable place to live

Partnering with an organization like Habitat for Humanity or another affordable housing agency, such developments could include a renovated home as part of the farmstead development program. With an adjacent and affordable home, urban gardening can support a number of household/business options.

### Sweat equity and grower training

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Habitat for Humanity requires sweat equity that reduces the cost of entry for those that want to own their own home. Similarly, growing food can generate lower cost ways to reduce the cost of purchasing the homestead. Instead of just cash, growers, for example, could make a portion of their crops available to programs that address food access and/or hunger issues.

**Set up to succeed**

These small-holder farmsteads can be challenging for the many residents that need to re-learn gardening skills. Fortunately, Detroit has excellent grower training programs offered by organizations like Keep Growing Detroit, the Greening of Detroit, Detroit Black Community Food Security Council, Earthworks Urban Farm and the Michigan State University Product Center. Rather than cash, farmsteads would be made available to those that have received training and demonstrated their devotion and diligence in producing food. Another great added value to this form of development would be the positive impact of clustering small producers near each other. Shared tools, equipment and knowledge will enhance the success of both options.

**Small incremental overall cost**

Combine low land prices from the public agencies that own much of Detroit's vacant land, low housing prices by tapping into existing programs, such as Habitat for Humanity, with low cost training available from Detroit's grower training programs, easy access to sell product produced on the farmsteads at Eastern Market and Detroit Community Markets, and you have a low cost way to repurpose vacant land and build household wealth.

Over the last few years, public discussion of using land for urban farming has focused upon large-scale operations proposed by financiers, nonprofits and universities. These projects have high initial cost that reduces who can participate in ownership.

An organized small farmstead development program can help create new household wealth in either an entrepreneurial or communal model by reducing the cost to participate in owning a part of revitalizing Detroit.

Matching small farmstead developments to places with diminished density can lower the costs of re-using those parts of Detroit that have lost density and create a path to increased household wealth.

*Dan Carmody is president of Eastern Market and a member of the Detroit Food Policy Council.*

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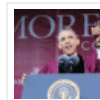
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