

Presentation to the City of Toronto Parks and Environment Committee

February 5, 2009

By Rhonda Teitel-Payne, Urban Agriculture Manager, The Stop Community Food Centre

About The Stop

Located in the Davenport West neighbourhood in Toronto, The Stop Community Food Centre (The Stop) works to increase people's access to healthy food in a manner that maintains dignity, builds community and challenges inequality.

This unique perspective brings together a number of approaches in the field of food security, melding respectful emergency food delivery with community development, social justice and environmental sustainability.

The Stop's programs and services focus on the ways food can bring people together to break down social isolation and improve their quality of life. Programming includes community kitchens and dining, urban agriculture, a food bank, drop-ins, civic engagement and pre- and postnatal nutrition and support. All of The Stop's efforts are based on the belief that food is a basic human right.

Urban Agriculture at The Stop

The Stop operates an 8,000 square foot community garden in a local city park, and supports a number of community gardens in the Davenport West neighbourhood. In addition to the new Green Barn project, The Stop is currently conducting a feasibility study for creating an urban farm at a 6 acre site at Weston Rd. and 401 owned by a housing developer.

The Green Barn

The Green Barn is The Stop's new satellite site, a 10,000 square foot sustainable food production and education centre that engages people to grow, eat, learn about, celebrate and advocate for healthy, local food. Located in the Artscape Wychwood Barns, the dynamic redevelopment of the historic Wychwood streetcar barns at Christie and St. Clair, the Green Barn includes a year-round greenhouse, sheltered garden, farmers' market, compost demonstration project, and education programs.

The Stop's Green Barn will be leading edge in every respect, featuring the latest in environmental technology and systems, including grey water recycling, geothermal heating and cooling, and solar energy production. It is being designed with the aim of achieving Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Gold certification, the first heritage project to earn this distinction in Ontario.

Opportunities for Urban Food Production

- Increased public awareness of the importance of local food
- Popularity of farmers' markets, combined with a dearth of farmers to meet the demand (particularly for community-based markets that focus on small, organic farmers)
- People who are very passionate and committed to growing but, for a variety of reasons, can't farm on rural sites – new farmers intimidated by large scale, difficulty of accessing farmland for

new farmers, need to have second job because farm income is insufficient, need to stay connected to urban resources and community

- Bio-intensive farming – you can produce a substantial amount of food in a small space

Obstacles to Urban Food Production – One Policy Example

To my knowledge there is nothing on the books preventing anyone from selling food grown on private land in the city. An urban grower can sell to restaurants, for instance, if they can produce the quantity and consistency that a restaurant requires (although this is particularly challenging).

Farmers' markets are a logical venue, but the regulatory knot around markets restricts the ability to sell urban-grown food. Farmers' markets are currently given an exemption by the Ontario government from the Food Premises Regulation, under the condition that 51% of the vendors at the market are "farmers." When you ask who constitutes a farmer, you either get no answer at all, or you are told that you must have a rural address and a Farm Business Registration number – in other words, no urban growers. Given the shortage of farmers willing and able to sell at markets, it is difficult to maintain the 51% proportion and, based on the information available to market organizers, urban growers may tip that balance unfavourably and cause difficulties for the market. Inconsistency in the application of this policy further adds to the uncertainty.

For both the market issue and land zoning, it's been suggested to me that urban growers should go ahead and grow and sell produce, that they should fly under the radar and not worry about getting caught. This disregards both the investment that farmers put into growing food and the nature of the people who often undertake urban growing. Organic production (the choice of most urban growers) demands a long-term commitment to the health of the soil. It is not very reasonable to expect people to undertake that commitment if their ability to sell and re-coup their costs can be taken away from them at any moment. Many of the people who might gain the greatest benefit from selling produce they've grown, including low-income and marginalized community members, youth and recent immigrants, are also the least able to withstand the blow of investing time, energy and money into an urban plot only to lose that investment due to regulatory uncertainty.

We need a clear-cut acceptance of urban growers as legitimate farmers. The health regulations are a good example of policies that are beginning to move in the right direction – balancing public safety with creating possibilities for community action – now we need to take the next step.

Greenhouses

One of the reasons we took on building the Green Barn was the dire lack of greenhouse space in Toronto. Greenhouses are needed to start long-season crops such as tomatoes and peppers as well as growing food (and keeping gardeners engaged) on a year-round basis. We hope the Green Barn will be an example of how greenhouses can grow food throughout the year while maintaining a low carbon and energy footprint through geothermal heating, local distribution, seasonal production, organic growing methods and composting.

The City can increase greenhouse space both by supporting the construction of new greenhouses and making existing greenhouses more available to urban growers. The Stop and TCGN members have had many years of experience trying to work through institutional resistance to opening greenhouses in

Parks and Rec facilities and schools. Again, strong pro-urban agriculture policies, combined with some protocols for developing relationships between institutions and community growers, will help to transform some of these under-used greenhouses into productive facilities.

People Power

Now I'm going to contradict myself and say don't build greenhouses. For the most part, food doesn't grow by itself. You can build as many greenhouses, urban farms and agricultural learning centres as you like, but they will sit empty if there aren't any people to bring them to life. Capital funding can be attractive for a variety of reasons, but there is little point to building infrastructure if there is no accompanying funding for adequate staffing. Individual urban growers producing for their own ends who are given access to land will increase the amount of food grown in the city. These growers will require training and support, particularly if we want to engage youth, newcomers and low-income earners. This will only be accomplished if we dedicate the human resources needed.