

**A Pilot-Scale Inner-City Community-Based Gardening Program
to Improve the Social and Economic Welfare of the Residents of
East St. Louis, Illinois.**

Justification

East St. Louis

East St. Louis, Illinois, is a very troubled city with depressing statistics. Seventy percent of the people of the city are on some form of public assistance, and nearly half of its residents are unemployed. The city has the highest murder rate per capita in the U.S. and the highest infant mortality rate in Illinois. Drug operations and prostitution run openly while gang activities terrorize neighborhoods. Numerous environmental problems such as PCBs and heavy metal contamination are present from building rubble, neighboring industry and automobile exhaust. Cancer and other disease rates have reached record highs. The City government is in tremendous debt and basic services are limited. East St. Louis is a city in desperate need of all forms of assistance.

Operation New Spirit

The East St. Louis Community Fund was created by the U.S. District Court as a foundation to help improve the quality of life for the East St. Louis community. The Fund decided in 1991 that their number one priority was to clean up the City and commissioned a plan. The plan, which was adopted by the East St. Louis City Council on July 31, 1991, was dubbed **Operation New Spirit** by Mayor Gordon Bush because it called for a coming together of the community to solve its problems.

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The concept of Operation New Spirit was spawned to physically clean up the City and rid it of its trash, debris, derelict structures and excess vegetation, and to give the residents a sense of hope, a spirit of community and a coming together of neighborhoods to solve problems. As the area was cleared of debris, vacant land resulted. Productive utilization of this land soon became a goal of the Community Organization Unit of Operation New Spirit. The Community Organization Unit, which was already involved in coordinating neighborhood participation, presented the concept of urban homesteading to citizens of East St. Louis at a neighborhood meeting. Citizens present at the meeting voted unanimously to go forward with the idea.

The outpouring of support of the people of East St. Louis for Operation New Spirit has been substantial. Many equipment needs have been made available through equipment loans and donations. Illinois Department of Transportation has provided equipment and equipment operators. The State of Illinois offered labor and equipment that could be spared from regular operations. Caterpillar Corporation has donated equipment valued at \$800,000. Union Electric has donated trucks. St. Clair County Highway Department donated a truck and driver. These donations have been to date for the clean-up effort, but it is hoped that some of the equipment will be made available to the gardening project.

Need Statement

An urban gardening program is being proposed to help the residents of East St. Louis improve their social and economic welfare. Gardening is one strategy for using the available land in the city. The success of an urban gardening program is dependent upon a number of components.

Community involvement in the coordination and implementation of garden programs is a primary component of these programs. However, other ingredients are needed which require human and financial resources.

In East St. Louis, as a result of the work of Operation New Spirit and the Community Organization Unit, community involvement has been mobilized. The community-based process whereby participants are identified has already been engaged. Land is available in the city and specific lots will be selected. Once the lots have been identified, the soil will be tested for contaminants and nutrients prior to planting. Supplies including seed, plants, fencing, fertilizer, hoses and garden tools are all essential to begin the program. Education and training of gardening participants in the areas of production, harvesting and nutrition needs to occur concurrently with planting activities. A marketing component to determine niche market crops as well as marketing outlets for produce is necessary for economic success. Finally, documentation of program components and successes, as well as failures, is important for the expanded project and future endeavors.

A pilot program is needed to test the feasibility of large, urban gardening program in East St. Louis. A pilot program will more easily allow for problems to be addressed in the implementation phase. The pilot program would provide valuable insight prior to expansion into a full-scale program.

Background Information

Despite the challenge of lobbying for space, creating fertile, healthy soil out of toxic rubble, coping with a landscape dominated by concrete and asphalt and starting anew when gardens are vandalized, the potential of

urban gardens has already been proven in numerous locales across America. Local communities are initiating and expanding gardening programs through self-help, with support provided by city and county governments, as well as private organizations, universities and state agencies. During the past 10 years, in cities from New York to Oakland, California, from North York, Canada to Austin, Texas, vacant urban lots have been taken over by organized community groups (Gold, 1985). Where buildings once stood, now sunflowers and squash may grow.

"Boston Urban Gardeners" help organize community gardens in low-income neighborhoods and public housing developments. "Green Guerrillas" (New York) help community groups with public greening projects.

"Philadelphia Green", a community outreach program of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, establishes community garden projects on leased vacant lots. "Seed to Shelf" and "Summer Sprout" (Ohio) both assist community gardening groups. University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service helps community groups locate resources for food gardening projects. The "Seed Exchange" program in Chicago offers a pilot program to help inner-city residents plant new gardens. "Self Reliance Center", Minneapolis, works with the Cooperative Extension Service to provide garden plots for low-income community groups. A community garden group has been established in Los Angeles. The City came up with money for materials and a summer program to hire young people to clear the land. Chicago has an expansive urban gardening program. They provide assistance through workshops, organization and fund-raising, but strive to get as many communities involved as possible to assure that the project stays in the hands of the workers. The Horticultural Society of New York has a Food for Life program with a goal to teach and help gardeners grow

and preserve nutritious food crops. The Society holds workshops and contributes professional assistance plus tools, seeds and plants when needed.

Community gardens tend to bring neighborhoods together in constructive, productive activities involving both young and old (Gold, 1985). Gardening and horticulture are therapeutic, increasing well being, especially in people with physical or mental limitations (Rothert, 1985). Community gardens restore a sense of pride in neighborhoods while providing a release mechanism for the frustration generated by inner-city life and improving the appearance of the area (Lovero, 1985). Gardening is contagious and encourages more commitment to the neighborhood and environment (Earnest, 1985). As gardens grow, so does the commitment from members of the community who begin to care about how their environment looks and how to find solutions to other problems (Earnest, 1985).

Community garden projects have been successful in other cities. Even though other models are available to follow, every city and situation is unique. Unlike the cities of Boston, Chicago and Philadelphia, East St. Louis is a city in population decline. The best strategy for East St. Louis needs to be determined. A pilot program is proposed to examine a strategy prior to implementation of a large program as well as to provide an opportunity to initiate the project on a small scale while additional funding is being sought for full implementation.

Objectives

Program Goal

The goal of the project is to improve the social and economic welfare of the residents of East St. Louis, Illinois, through an inner-city community-based gardening program.

Program Objectives

1. To establish a pilot-scale inner-city community-based gardening program with components of: production, marketing, nutrition, job training, intergenerational activities, alternatives to incarceration, youth programs, and senior citizen activities.
2. Examine the pilot program as a model for a large scale urban renewal project.

Pilot Program

The pilot program will consist of two components. The first component will be working with the neighborhood groups which have volunteered from meetings with the Organization Unit of Operation New Spirit. Three community garden lots and a minimum of 15 participants will be part of the pilot program. Individual kitchen gardeners will also have the opportunity to have their garden soil tested and may be part of the training sessions.

The second component will be a demonstration garden. This garden will be modeled after a program in Atlanta. One aspect of the demonstration garden will be to show how best to grow typical, family style vegetables. The rotation will begin with spring crops, followed by summer

crops, then fall crops, and ending with a winter cover crop. Organic methods will be demonstrated, including the use of pest- and disease-resistant varieties, crop rotation, biological control and mulches.

Another area of the demonstration garden will hold various crops such as soybeans, millet, peanuts, etc. The will give school children the opportunity to see various crops and how they grow.

To demonstrate how to utilize limited garden space, a container garden and raised bed garden will be demonstrated. Flower varieties will be planted. This will attract many adult visitors.

A separate children's garden project is planned. As part of a summer youth program at State Community College in East St. Louis, urban children will plant and tend small eight by eight foot plots. This will teach them work habits as well as production techniques. Pride will result as they take their produce home.

Annual harvest contests and garden shows have been very popular with other gardening projects. Gardeners compete for prizes and get ideas from each other as well. Newsletters have also helped to maintain enthusiasm during slow months. These will be a part of both components of the pilot program.

The pilot program proposed here is the first year of a larger, multiyear project. In subsequent years the number of activities, gardens, participants and school projects would significantly expand. Additionally, plans call for greenhouse renovation and use, and senior citizen activities. It is also hoped that Horticulture as an employment option may be a program offered in the schools.

The goal is to eventually turn the program over to the people of East St. Louis and have it become self-supporting. Ultimately, that is the measure of true success.

Methodology

Objective 1: To establish a pilot-scale innercity community-based gardening program.

Step 1. Identify participants

A community organization unit was formed to get the residents involved in Operation New Spirit by participating in neighborhood organizations. Sister Cecelia Hellman, a Roman Catholic nun, with the assistance of Venessa Marion, leads the neighborhood outreach unit. This organizing effort is under the auspices of Metro East Church Based Citizens Organization (MECCO). The neighborhoods were broken down into blocks and block leaders have been designated. Community meetings occur frequently. The block leaders and neighbors have already been involved in numerous community-related activities dealing with neighborhood clean-up to drug prevention. At several of the community meetings the proposed idea of urban homesteading was introduced. The group unanimously voted to pursue the idea. A meeting to more fully describe the concept and assure community support was held with the community and representatives from Southern Illinois University Carbondale and the University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service. Volunteer participants from this group of committed community members who have expressed interest in and a willingness to commit to such a project will be part of the initial project. It will be necessary to have a minimum of five committed

gardeners per site. Initially, a site will be eliminated if the minimum commitment is not attained. Schools in the participating neighborhoods will be contacted to arrange for the school activities. Through the Community Organization Unit, school children have already been involved in flower bed preparation and Earth Day plantings.

Sheriff Mearl Justus and Doris Tally from the Sheriff's office have instituted a program for first time offenders as an alternative to incarceration. Under their supervision, first time offenders could be utilized to do the laborious work of initial plowing and cultivating.

State Community College has previously offered summer programs to educate as well as keep youth off the streets. State Community College would be a resource for identifying or recruiting participants for this activity.

Step 2. Identify land.

As a result of the Operation New Spirit clean-up, the City was divided into 20 neighborhoods. To date, three of the neighborhoods have been cleared of debris. From the cleaned-up neighborhoods, available lots will be identified for gardening projects. Three lots approximately 30 feet by 100 feet will be selected and designated for the pilot project. Additionally, Dr. Cynthia Pace, President, and Dr. Jerry Hoff, Director of Technical Training, State Community College in East St. Louis, have offered support for and land on the college's property for both a large demonstration garden as well as a summer youth program.

Step 3. Testing the soil

In many areas in the country where urban gardening programs have taken place, soil contamination with heavy metals and toxic organics has

been an issue. Toxic metals leach into the soil from building rubble (especially from lead in paint) and from neighboring industry and automobile exhaust. East St. Louis is not believed to be an exception due to its history of industrial activity and pollution. For this reason all land to be utilized in this phase of the project will be tested for heavy metals and toxic organics, as well as pH and nutrient analysis. The Illinois Department of Agriculture Laboratory in Centralia will test the soil, but funding must first be obtained.

Step 4. Obtain equipment and supplies

Seed, plants, fertilizer, hoses, gardening equipment, and fencing, among other things, are necessary to begin the pilot program. Large equipment such as tillers, tractors and trucks are needed for some of the initial land preparation. Fortunately, much of the large equipment is available but funds are needed for the smaller supplies and equipment.

Step 5. Education/training

A home gardening workshop series consisting of a minimum of seven sessions will be offered and required of gardening participants. The sessions will be led by the project coordinator but resource people from Southern Illinois University Carbondale, the Cooperative Extension Service and the University of Illinois will address the topics. Sessions will address an array of gardening topics including soil testing, fertilizing, varieties, direct seeding, direct planting, pest control, and harvesting, to name just a few. Training will also be offered in producing garden transplants.

The Cooperative Extension Service sponsors a Master Gardener Program. It is hoped that some of the more experienced gardeners will be

able to take part in this program and become master gardeners in East St. Louis.

Educating people to not only produce but utilize nutritious food for household consumption is also very important. Selection, preparation and preservation of produce will also be topics of importance.

Additionally, if funding can be obtained to operate an existing park greenhouse, training in greenhouse techniques will be offered. This is an activity of great interest to senior citizen groups as well as an occupational training option.

In addition to group sessions, a quarterly newsletter will be written and distributed. The purpose of the newsletter will be to educate as well as maintain enthusiasm. Gardening is a year round activity. Newsletter items will include gardening tips, recipes, upcoming events and awards.

Step 6: Marketing

It is recognized that marketing of produce is a prime consideration in several aspects. In the early stages of the project, the gardening may be solely for household consumption and sharing with the neighbors. In later stages it is hoped that the produce and or transplants will offer an income alternative for the residents of East St. Louis. In this event, crops and market outlets will need to be identified.

Members of the coordinating group are currently collaborating with the Illinois Stewardship Alliance. An objective of this group is to establish a community farmstand in East St. Louis. Their plans are to attract producers to the area to set up a coop/farmstand. This farmstand could be a perfect outlet for produce from the East St. Louis Gardening Project.

Additionally, to be economically viable, a marketing research study would need to be conducted to identify niche market crops and produce that would be attractive to local consumers in the East St. Louis area.

Objective 2: Examine the pilot program as a model for a large scale urban renewal project.

The pilot gardening program will be examined to make an overall judgment about its effectiveness and the feasibility of its expansion into a large scale urban renewal project. The best strategies will be identified. Program strengths and weaknesses will be recorded. Recommendations for program improvements will be made. This step is important to contribute to the data base of similar activities. The model will serve as a guideline for future efforts directed toward such activities. This information will be crucial when seeking funding to implement this program on a large scale.

Personnel

This comprehensive grant is being prepared with the assistance of personnel from SIUC, SIUE, U of I and the Cooperative Extension Service (CES) of the U of I.

Dr. Sue Kohler is a Research Project Specialist in the SIUC Office of Economic and Regional Development. Dr. Kohler has a Ph. D. In Vocational Education and a M.S. degree in Plant and Soil Science. Dr. Kohler will serve as project director and fiscal officer.

Mr. Welle is currently pursuing a Masters of Social Work at SIUC He holds an M.S. in Community Development and Plant and Soil Sciences. Mr.

Welle has extensive expertise in the area of this project. Mr. Welle will serve as the project coordinator.

Dr. John Yopp, Dean of the Graduate School, Associate Vice President for Research and Professor of Botany at SIUC, organized and will remain a part of the project team. Dr. Yopp has been conducting a gardening clinic for residents of East St. Louis for the past nine years.

Dr. Rhonda Vinson, Executive Director, Office of Economic and Regional Development, Adjunct Assistant Professor, Masters of Public Affairs, SIUC, will provide backup support for the program.

Dr. Hea-Ran Ashraf, Associate Professor, Animal Science Food and Nutrition, SIUC, will be involved in the nutritional aspect of the project.

Dr. Mary Davidson, Director, School of Social Work, SIUC, is currently providing a Research Assistantship dedicated to the project as well as backup support.

Dr. Steve Kraft, Agribusiness Economics, SIUC, will be involved in the market study of the project.

Dr. George Kapusta, Department of Plant and Soil Sciences, SIUC, will serve as a technical resource person.

Dr. Bill Seiders, Extension Educator, Community Leadership and Volunteerism, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Illinois, has worked extensively with and will continue to work with the project team.

Wilbon Anthony, Extension Educator, Prevention Education, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Illinois, will assist with the youth project.

Dr. David Whitson, Extension Educator, Farm Business Management and Marketing, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Illinois, will assist with the marketing project.

Renee Robinson, Agriculture Program Coordinator, Illinois Stewardship Alliance, is working closely with the group to establish a farmstand in East St. Louis.

Faculty from the University of Illinois, Departments of Architecture, Landscape Architecture and Urban and Regional Planning have been actively involved in East St. Louis and have offered collaboration.

It is anticipated that many additional Extension Educators from the Cooperative Extension Service, as well as faculty at Southern Illinois University Carbondale , Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, and the University of Illinois will be involved in the implementation of the pilot and the large-scale program.

References

Earnest, Barbara R. 1985. Horticultural Society of New York. Garden, Nov/Dec.

Gold, Donna L. 1985. The Wildest Urban Adventure of All. Garden, Nov/Dec.

Lovero, Margaret M. 1985. A Lot of One's Own. Garden, Nov/Dec.

Rothert, Eugene A. 1985. Chicago Botanic Garden. Garden, Nov/Dec.