

# From Farm to Every Fork

Rewriting the Narrative on Urban Agriculture in Sacramento

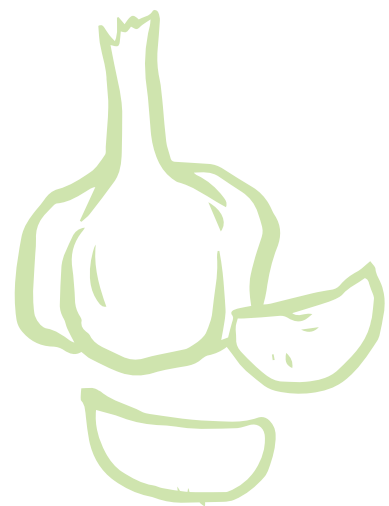
by Heather Gehlert, May 2018





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## Introduction

**A**t the corner of Martin Luther King Junior Boulevard and 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Sacramento, a community garden offers a calm counterpoint to the city's busy streets. With close to 40 plots, a common area, and a fruit tree orchard, it is one of Sacramento's largest community gardens, and its location within the Oak Park neighborhood—a place where fresh, affordable food is hard to come by—represents the city's growing commitment to help its residents eat healthier.

Yet, a closer look reveals that many of the plots in the city-owned and -run garden are overgrown with weeds, and the padlocked iron gate makes it unclear whether residents are truly being invited in or asked to keep out. Several of the plots are vacant. To use them, residents must pay a monthly rental fee, which means that, however well-intentioned the garden is, many people are priced out of participating.

"There's open spots in these gardens that I can't fill," said Katie Valenzuela Garcia, an Oak Park resident, community organizer, and then-consultant for Sacramento's Urban Agriculture Coalition, which is working to improve food access in the city and surrounding county. "When you're an extremely low-income family, coming to a space like this is not really welcome, nor sustainable financially."

By contrast, the Broadway Sol Community Garden, located about three-quarters of a mile north of the MLK space, greets visitors with a brightly colored sign, featuring a hand-drawn vine intertwined with the words "love," "hope," "respect," "trust," "tolerance," and "justice." The gate at the entrance is made from repurposed rakes and shovels, painted vibrant shades of red, blue, and yellow. With just 15 plots, the community-run space is smaller, but it exudes warmth and is easier for the public to access. Residents not only grow food there, they also take community classes, use the garden's outdoor kitchen, and gather with their children, families, and neighbors.



"This is a true community space. Different people have different plots that they're working, and they just kind of volunteer, and they have their space and events. It's beautiful."

Katie Valenzuela Garcia,  
community organizer

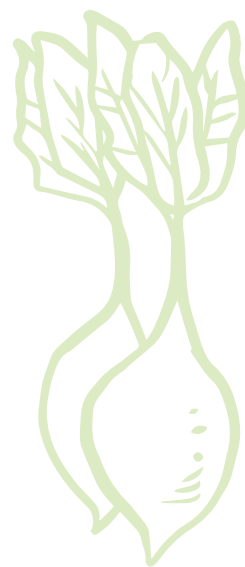


“This is a true community space,” Valenzuela Garcia said. “Different people have different plots that they’re working, and they just kind of volunteer, and they have their space and events. It’s beautiful.”

If the Martin Luther King Jr. Community Garden embodies where urban agriculture has been in Sacramento, Broadway Sol signifies where it is headed. It reflects a shift in how the city and its residents are thinking about urban agriculture—how food is produced, where it is available, who can afford to buy it, who is allowed to sell it, and what this means for the community’s physical and financial health.

A project of the nonprofit Oak Park Sol, the Broadway Sol Community Garden is just one example of how advocates in Sacramento are driving this shift by helping to empower residents to transform their neighborhoods in ways that support health and build community. Moving away from a top-down approach to change, advocates are engaging community members and using a variety of strategies, including policy change and youth development, to make urban agriculture a practice that is available to everyone, not just to the privileged few who have the time and money to participate.

To better understand Sacramento’s urban agriculture practices and how other places might replicate them, this case study explores the steps local advocates are taking to strengthen access to healthy food, highlights the victories they’ve celebrated, identifies challenges they’ve overcome, and shares lessons learned in their quest for a healthier community.







## Why Agriculture?

Located about 100 miles west of Lake Tahoe and 88 miles northeast of San Francisco, Sacramento is California's capital and one of its most historic cities. It is home to Sutter's Fort, made famous in the 19<sup>th</sup> century for sending aid to members of the Donner Party and, later, for its role in fueling the California Gold Rush. Along the Sacramento River, a 28-acre stretch of land called Old Sacramento harks back to the city's origins as a trading center for gold miners. Today, tourists and locals alike can stroll the historic district's boardwalks or visit one of its many museums or restaurants.

In addition to its rich history, Sacramento prides itself on being a bastion of diversity, with nearly 27 percent of its population being Latino, 18 percent being Asian, and close to 15 percent being African American.<sup>1</sup> Its total population is just shy of a half million, and it is one of the state's fastest growing cities. Yet, for all its assets, the city faces its share of social challenges. According to health department data, about 20 percent of residents in Sacramento County make less than a living wage, and that economic hardship is more concentrated in communities of color.<sup>2</sup> Latino families bear the largest burden, with approximately 35 percent of households below the living wage.<sup>3</sup> Like many major urban areas, Sacramento's history of land use has influenced its current economic reality, with patterns of housing and amenities broken down along racial lines.

How, then, does urban agriculture fit into this picture, and why are community organizers and advocates so passionate about using it as a tool for social change?

Focusing on food, they explain, makes sense for many reasons. First, food is a fundamental, universal need. "If you don't have food in your bellies, you can't do anything else, so I look at it as the foundation of society," said Chanowk Yisrael, who grew up in Sacramento's Oak Park neighborhood and whose family now runs an urban farm from their home in South Oak Park.

Second, Sacramento is a major hub for food research and policy, and food can be grown there year-round. The city has even been dubbed agriculture's Silicon Valley,<sup>4</sup> with an influx of venture capital making it ripe for agricultural innovation.

Third, it is a tool for driving broader social changes and forging community in places that, at first glance, don't appear community-oriented. For example, in Central Oak Park, just south of Broadway, many homes' front yards are fenced all the way up to the sidewalk, a remnant of the 1980s crack epidemic and related crime, which sowed distrust and led many people to fear for their safety and take extra measures to protect their property. Urban ag, advocates hope, can ease these and other divisions.

It's about "putting the 'neighbor' back in 'hood,'" Yisrael said. "Once you start bringing people together around food and eating and being around each other, there's a dynamic that's created that people can accept differences in race, color, and economics and things that divide people—and you can do that over a meal."

What's more, the timing is right. While urban agriculture isn't new, it is having a moment in the United States. The broader food movement is gaining strength and popularity, and farm-to-fork practices are taking off across the country, from Boston to Detroit to Sacramento, which has branded itself as America's farm-to-fork capital.



However, Sacramento's advocates are quick to emphasize that urban agriculture is much more than a feel-good trend; it is a matter of health and social justice. There is a "larger justice narrative" that often gets overlooked in favor of an economic narrative of using urban agriculture to make Sacramento a popular tourist destination, explained Valenzuela Garcia. Currently, the narrative is more, "It's fun and it's exciting and it tastes good," she said, "but we're not really getting down to the brass tacks of, what does it take to make it work in a community like Oak Park and South Sacramento where food access and economic security have historically been really big problems?"

To effectively foster social justice, urban agriculture must be about more than catchy slogans and seasonality. It has to be rooted in a thorough knowledge of a region's history and the way place-making has shaped different communities' relationships to food—and to one another. It must also be equitable.

To that end, advocates are working to transform the city's farm-to-fork narrative into a farm-to-every-fork reality. For example, while the city hosts its annual Tower Bridge fundraiser dinner, a centerpiece of its Farm-to-Fork Festival, for \$199 a ticket,<sup>5</sup> Yisrael Family Urban Farm offers a five-course meal each year in Oak Park for \$25 per person. Yisrael said they don't have celebrity chefs, but the community does have a lot of people with culinary talent, minus the title and acclaim.

It is in this spirit of equity that Sacramento's healthy food advocates have concentrated their efforts in Sacramento's southern neighborhoods, such as Oak Park and Lemon Hill, which are considered food deserts and have high rates of diabetes, heart disease, and other chronic conditions. And their work to dismantle structural causes of inequity has picked up steam recently. The region's great need, along with its solid nonprofit infrastructure, led The California Endowment to select it in 2010 as part of its Building Healthy Communities initiative, a 10-year strategic plan to boost health in 14 of the state's communities that not only have poor health outcomes but also have the potential to change them in ways that create a ripple effect throughout the rest of the state. Between 2010 and 2015, BHC grantees poured more than \$6 million dollars into food access initiatives in South Sacramento, with more than \$3.7 million of those funds coming from the Endowment.<sup>6</sup>



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## Leveraging Coalition Power to Pass Equitable Policies

With support from BHC, advocates' work to expand urban agriculture in Sacramento is wide-ranging, encompassing everything from farmers markets to community gardens to after-school programs. Yet, few efforts have been more central to their agenda—or more successful—than policy change. In recent years, advocates have pushed forward several ordinances that make it easier for people to participate in urban agriculture.

In March of 2015, the Sacramento City Council adopted an urban agriculture ordinance that made it legal for people to grow and sell produce to consumers directly from their properties and from temporary farm stands as large as 120 square feet.<sup>7</sup> “It’s health, it’s neighborhood, it’s community revitalization,” Sacramento Council Member for District 5 Jay Schenirer said in a short video, describing why the council adopted the ordinance.<sup>8</sup> “These are the types of programs we want, where you just really win across the board.”

A few months later, the council passed another ordinance offering tax incentives for people to convert vacant lots for agricultural use.<sup>9</sup> And in January 2017, following the city’s lead, Sacramento County passed similar regulations, allowing all residents in urban and suburban areas to legally grow and sell produce, as well as keep bees, chickens, and ducks on small lots.<sup>10</sup>

From the outside, support for these ordinances appeared organic, their passages seamless. However, they happened within an important community and legislative context. Early innovators and advocates like Shawn Harrison, founder and director of Soil Born Farms, began engaging the city and county in conversations about urban agriculture in the early 2000s. Then, Sacramento’s healthy food advocates, who had previously been operating in parallel but siloed spaces, began actively coordinating their efforts to build community and change policy.

Their work accelerated in 2010 when South Sacramento was named a Building Healthy Communities site and advocates received funding to form the Healthy Food for All Action Team. According to Harrison, who chairs HFFA, the team was given a “blank slate” and started by developing a vision for healthy food access in Sacramento, which includes a commitment to collaboration and engaging residents.

Then, Harrison said, the group “started to figure out who was at the table and what their skills were and what we really needed to [be] active around education access and food production.” Once those activities came into motion, Harrison said the team began looking at how they could “break up the community in smaller pieces,” with targeted



*“It’s health, it’s neighborhood, it’s community revitalization.”*

*Jay Schenirer, Sacramento council member, District 7*





efforts in specific neighborhoods. HFFA members now include a variety of BHC grantees, including urban farmers, food activists, and organizations, such as Yisrael Family Urban Farm, Oak Park Sol, Alchemist CDC, the Burbank Urban Garden, NeighborWorks, and many others.

Just one year after HFFA formed, their work got a boost from a series of city and state actions that laid the groundwork for future policies changes. In 2011 (with some prodding from advocates), the Sacramento City Council adopted an ordinance to allow residents to establish community gardens on private, residentially zoned vacant lots. That same year, the council passed an ordinance allowing Sacramentans to keep up to three chickens in their yards for small license and permit fees, if they are enclosed in coops and kept at least 20 feet from the nearest neighbors.<sup>11</sup>

Then, in 2012, former NBA star and then-mayor Kevin Johnson, who grew up in Sacramento's Oak Park neighborhood, named Sacramento America's Farm-to-Fork capital. This helped put the city's food system in the spotlight and led Sacramento's Convention and Visitors Bureau to organize an annual Farm-to-Fork week with educational lectures and events. Also in 2012, the governor approved legislation to allow schools and education offices to sell produce grown in school gardens.<sup>12</sup> And in September 2013, the state of California enacted a rule that made urban agriculture easier to carry out in cities with populations of a quarter-million or more.<sup>13</sup>

Against this backdrop, a few months later, a coalition called Sacramentans for Sustainable Community Agriculture, more commonly referred to as the Sacramento Urban Ag Coalition, grew out of HFFA, in the sense that they share many of the same members. Funded in part by BHC, the coalition's explicit aim is to foment policy change. The catalyst for their formation, explained Valenzuela Garcia, was community organizers' collective realization that, despite many policy advances, city code and zoning limitations were still unnecessarily restricting how people could—or couldn't—use their lots for food production.

Together, members of the Urban Ag Coalition, HFFA, and other advocates in Sacramento reified their commitment to reducing barriers to urban agriculture. But how did their vision translate into concrete policy changes? To get a better idea of how the process works, here is a look at key steps leading up to the 2015 ordinances.







## From Vision to Reality

After the Sacramento Urban Ag Coalition formed in 2013, they surveyed the community to find out people's needs and interests and what the ordinances would need to look like for people to use them. According to Valenzuela Garcia, this communication was very "network-driven" and "word-of-mouth." Once they felt they had adequate representation from all the neighborhoods and sectors, coalition members Matt Read and Paul Trudeau began the task of writing the ordinance language, which involved rewriting 70-80 pages of zoning code.

At the time, Trudeau was busy starting an aquaponics business selling produce to restaurants. He wanted to expand and use vacant commercial property and had heard rumblings about people wanting to do an urban agriculture ordinance, so he sought them out. Meanwhile, Read was in law school and was interning for the Sustainable Economies Law Center—a driver of the state legislation that created tax incentives.

As a starting point, they researched what other cities had done, including Cleveland, San Francisco, Portland, Seattle, and Austin. "It was important for city leadership to see that other places had done it first," Read said.

After conducting this research and meeting with the Urban Ag Coalition to agree on general concepts, such as the ability to garden for profit, Read and Trudeau began drafting the zoning changes. With legal assistance from John Tan of Legal Services of Northern California, they created a working document, which encompassed both 2015 ordinances. According to Trudeau, those ordinances were only separate as far as the voting was concerned.

Although they could have approached the city and asked them to draft an ordinance, Read said, "[The city's] first draft is probably going to be more conservative than your goal as an advocate." He also noted that the process of drafting and passing policies can help people develop skills in advocating for themselves and their communities. "It's a really good opportunity for people to learn about local government and the laws that affect the built environment," Read said.

After the draft was complete, advocates needed to get buy-in from public officials. City staff reviewed the draft and did some of their own research into other jurisdictions that support urban agriculture; then, around May 2014, several coalition members met with city planners, reviewed the zoning changes and got feedback from the city on what would and wouldn't work.



It's important in these processes to have someone who's practicing urban agriculture who can also communicate its benefits, explained Yisrael. "That's me," he said, noting that he discussed his business model as one that could be duplicated. He also explained to planners how urban agriculture can benefit the city as an income-generating activity.

Overall, the negotiation process was not terribly contentious—the ordinances build on previous policy changes and further the city's farm-to-fork branding—but it was not without challenges, either. Read described the process as "unwieldy": "Zoning code is extremely powerful and can regulate minute details," he said.

Among the issues that surfaced were concerns about animals. The original ordinance was modified to remove language to allow people to raise larger animals like pigs and eat the animals they raise. Additionally, several council members raised concerns that gardens and on-site sales would contribute to, rather than alleviate, blight. They feared that rows of farm stands would become eyesores and lead to the accumulation of junk, making people want to stay indoors and potentially even increasing perceptions of crime. As a compromise, the group added language requiring the farm stand structures to be temporary and limiting selling hours to Tuesdays and Saturdays between 8 a.m. and 7 p.m.

To garner public support for the ordinances, coalition members and other advocates engaged the media. While some news coverage was organic, driven in part by the city's farm-to-fork marketing campaign, advocates put out news releases and talking points and leveraged existing relationships with local journalists. They pitched stories and received coverage in the Sacramento Bee, local public radio, and a local weekly newspaper. National and regional papers sometimes picked up stories as well.

Volunteers and coalition members also went to neighborhood associations, gave presentations on the ordinances, and built a strong Facebook presence with more than 2,000 followers. Each of these tactics helped the group to ensure a large turnout at council meetings, and advocates delivered 300 signatures to the council meeting from Sacramento residents in support of the ordinance.

A wide variety of people, including parents, urban farmers, and local nonprofit leaders, testified. With help from Hmong Innovating Politics, a grassroots organization that works with local leaders and underserved communities, especially Hmong and Southeast Asian communities, the coalition was also able to reach immigrant farmers, make sure that the ordinance addressed their needs, and encourage them to testify. As a result, Hmong and other immigrant farmers who participate heavily in urban agriculture, but who previously weren't strongly connected to the rest of the urban ag community, turned out and spoke in favor of the ordinance.

During the testimonies, common themes and values emerged, such as health, equity, hunger, community sustainability, economic vitality, mutual respect, and concern for youth.



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**A wide variety of people, including parents, urban farmers, and local nonprofit leaders testified at the city council meeting.**

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“We need this,” Brenda Ruiz, a mom, longtime resident, and chef, said at the March 24, 2015 council meeting. Ruiz, who is also involved with the California Food Policy Council, added: “I know that this is important. It’s important for families to have access to fresh food; it’s important for families to consider their neighborhoods walkable and social areas where they can convene and share stories around a garden space; it’s important for our kids and young people to see this as normal for folks to be growing food and exchanging over that.”



Sue Vang, with Hmong Innovating Politics, urged the council to adopt the ordinance as an important step toward equity. “Right now, barriers such as zoning restrictions and limited land use hinder our communities’ ability to farm and contribute to the local economy,” Vang said. “The urban ag ordinance can help mitigate these barriers and revitalize low-income neighborhoods, provide solutions to blight caused by unmaintained vacant lots, and, most importantly, connect the very diverse—linguistically, racially, ethnically—communities within Sacramento.” Vang also spoke more personally: “It would also give my family the opportunity to sell the produce that my mom grows in her backyard.”

Robyn Krock, project manager at Valley Vision, a regional nonprofit that works to enhance the livability of the Sacramento region, continued the appeal to equity: “Sacramento has branded itself as America’s farm-to-fork capital. ... But the question that gets repeatedly asked is, are we farm-to-every-fork?”

While the testimony was mostly supportive, some residents and advocates pushed back against the limited selling hours.

“This particular area is, of course, located in a food desert,” Yisreal said. “So, what that means is, Tuesday, if you’re hungry, I can sell you food, but Wednesday I can’t. ... What’s that going to do to the community? What’s that going to do to people who are already impoverished and unable to feed themselves?”

Resident Laura Rubalcaba echoed Yisrael’s concerns. “Think about garage sales,” she said. “Right now we have garage sales—we don’t have two-day limits, and we don’t have limits on which days you can have them. I would say that we don’t need any more limits for urban ag than we have already for garage sales. ... We don’t worry about garage sales dragging down property values.”

After more than two hours of testimony, the council approved the Urban Agriculture Ordinance and, several months later, approved the companion ordinance that creates tax incentives for converting vacant lots for agricultural use.

While advocates said that it is too early to assess the outcomes of the new ordinances, Read noted that the council members’ initial concerns—farm stands becoming eyesores and fueling blight, and an influx of slip-and-fall incidents increasing homeowners’ insurance claims—never came to pass.

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*Robyn Krock, project manager,  
Valley Vision*

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As advocates work to make sure that their policy wins translate into increased participation in urban agriculture, they are simultaneously running youth programs to develop the next generation of advocates and make the future of urban farming more robust, diverse, and inclusive.

For example, at the nonprofit Green Tech Education and Employment, teens participate twice weekly in a BHC-supported program called Teaching Urban Farming, Forestry, and Aquaponics (TUFFA). There, they learn all aspects of growing food, both through soil-based gardening and aquaponics, which involves growing fish and vegetables together without soil. Most of the young participants come from poor families of color, and Green Tech builds in stipends for them.

“Some are living pretty chaotic lives, and they come to get off the street for at least a few hours, so they’re not exposed to the dangers and temptations out there,” said Trudeau, who co-coordinates TUFFA. “Any time we can get them to spend on the farm is good time, and I think they see it that way, too.”

Trudeau said these budding leaders often begin with little enthusiasm for agriculture but evolve as they go through the program: “At first, they only do what they’re told. Then they get more invested and self-motivated. ... They go from not wanting to eat anything green to wanting to take home cucumbers to their mom.”

Another youth program is Yisrael Family Urban Farm’s Project GOOD!, which stands for “Growing Our Own Destiny.” GOOD! teaches young people about urban agriculture and people’s symbiotic relationship with nature through a combination of skill-building workshops, field trips, neighborhood organizing, and other projects, such as converting vacant lots into gardens.

“Young people are taught to grow food, grow themselves, and grow community,” said Yisrael, whose own children, now adults, went through the program when they were younger. “There’s something very empowering about being able to put a seed into the ground and later being able to eat from it, especially if you grew up in a food desert,” he added.

Yet another youth-involved program is Harvest Sacramento, a fruit harvesting activity of Soil Born Farms, which involves mapping fruit trees, picking the fruit with residents, and giving the fruit to emergency food service resources in the community for distribution. Hundreds of youth participate each year.

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Paul Trudeau, co-coordinator,  
TUFFA





Soil Born's Harrison said he sees youth leadership as a growing part of the urban agriculture scene in Sacramento, with schools being a driver of their work. School gardens, cafeteria programs, and after-school activities are all ways to engage young people, and these types of efforts have been growing in recent years.

A prime example is the Burbank Urban Garden (BUG) at Luther Burbank High School, which has a student body that is 97 percent youth of color, according to California Department of Education data. With about an acre of space, BUG is much bigger than most small school gardens. The club meets four days a week after school and offers elective credits, allowing students to connect with nature and learn about seasonality, sustainability, crop rotation, and nutrition. Students maintain and manage the space, which includes a greenhouse, raised beds, and 40 fruit trees. They also do an annual plant sale, watch cooking demonstrations, and develop connections to their community. For instance, a few years ago, BUG ran a farm stand in which students harvested produce and sold it to residents. Through activities like this, students learn about the food system, including food deserts, and social justice more broadly.

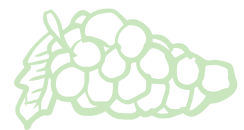
Although most students in BUG are not planning to go into agriculture professionally, it and other gardening programs help students become more engaged in their communities and become strong civic actors, now and later in life.

"As a teaching tool, [food] is so easy to connect to just about any issue," said Todd McPherson, who leads BUG and participates in HFFA. "It's kind of disarming that people don't really expect a community garden or small garden to be a radical site of resistance or building resilience or autonomy. I see it as all of the above."

McPherson went on to say that through programs like BUG, advocates and teachers can tap into young people's rebellious side, to positive effect. "With urban youth, especially communities of color, we can create solutions through the food system," he said.

As part of their BUG experience, many students have gotten a taste of activism. They have learned to go from merely identifying problems to thinking of ways to address them and, ultimately, taking action. For example, when the 2015 urban agriculture ordinances went up for a vote, students expressed their support on social media, and a couple even testified and wrote a letter on behalf of BUG.

This process, McPherson said, helps youth understand the impact of their decisions on the world around them and is "a concrete way to develop leadership skills in general," regardless of what career students pursue after high school. "Leadership is a way to combat broader apathy," he said.



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**Todd McPherson, leads BUG**

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For those who are considering a future in agriculture, the club provides its officers with opportunities to learn about internships and ag-related jobs, look at horticulture programs, and travel to urban farms and food banks. These opportunities can help build diversity in the field.

“Culturally, we need diversity for the field to innovate and excel,” McPherson said. “There are so many jobs in the field that kids don’t know about—that’s a big miss for them and a shortfall of the field.”

In September 2017, Luther Burbank High School launched a new Urban Agriculture Academy, or core learning trajectory, which expanded on the activities already happening in BUG. The Academy, which McPherson helped conceive and plan along with fellow teacher Aaron McClatchy, is the only one in Sacramento City Unified that’s dedicated to agriculture. It provides more of a foundation for students who want to enter an agriculture-related career, teaches students about everything from soil regeneration to carbon farming, and even includes an entrepreneurial bent to help students learn how to set up their own small businesses. While a couple dozen students are involved with BUG, McPherson hopes to get a couple hundred involved in the Academy.

In many ways, McPherson said, the Academy is a revival of the school’s history with urban agriculture. Luther Burbank, which was once surrounded by rural farmland, had an agricultural program for about 30 years. But the program was discontinued in 2008, in part because Sacramento suburbanized and spread geographically, making it harder for the program to stay relevant. The program also met resistance from many immigrant families who wanted to see their children move away from agriculture and become doctors and lawyers. The new Academy will build on the school’s prior agricultural programs but in a way that is more community-focused and relevant to the urban environment.

The Academy will also provide a stable way for Luther Burbank’s agricultural work to stay funded. Previously, McPherson explained, the approach was more piecemeal, with programs like BUG relying on help from local nonprofits and donations from the community to stay funded.

Other school-based, ag-related efforts include the Food Literacy Center, which teaches low-income elementary school students about cooking and nutrition, and a centralized food kitchen, which is being planned to provide students throughout the school district with healthier meals and more scratch cooking. In 2010, the school district created a Healthy Foods Task Force consisting of the district Nutrition Services Department and community-based partners who are involved in discussions about the kitchen. Although a bond measure was passed in 2012 that included funding for the kitchen, the money has gone unused, according to BHC South Sacramento Program Manager Christine Tien. However, a campaign is now underway, with coalition members and the Sacramento Food Policy Council pushing the district to complete the kitchen so that students can start seeing the benefit of it.



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Tien said she hopes to see the food kitchen come to fruition soon, noting that access to healthy food also boosts academic achievement: “If [students] are hungry, they’re not going to perform well in school.”

## Overcoming Challenges

For all their progress, the advocates working to improve food access, build community, and foster health equity in Sacramento have encountered many challenges along the way. Chief among them has been a difficulty in bringing community residents to the decision-making table.

“Resident leadership isn’t as strong as it could be,” said Sharon Eghigian, a member of the Healthy Food for All task force and the community impact manager with the Sacramento Region of NeighborWorks. “I think it’s also hard to figure out the best ways to support residents being leaders.”

Currently, HFFA meetings are held during business hours, so the primary participants are nonprofit leaders and BHC grantees. As a result, youth can’t participate when school is in session, and community members who are running garden spaces are often unable to join. The group has experimented with evening meetings, but turnout was still small, suggesting that the meeting times aren’t the only barriers to participation.

Transportation issues sometimes hobble people’s ability to join meetings. Additionally, according to Tien, people are more likely to attend when specific campaigns that they feel passionate about are being discussed. It is easier for them to get involved with tangible projects like the ordinances or garden builds than it is to become engaged in more abstract efforts, such as determining the group’s broader strategic plan.

Although residents are rarely present at meetings, Harrison said coalition members do involve the community, gather input from them, and make sure their feedback informs local civic engagement. The idea is to meet people where they are. “It may not be even necessary for them to be sitting at the table with us at this time,” he said.

Connected to the challenge of engaging residents in the decision-making process is ensuring that leadership in the urban agriculture space is as diverse as the people they serve. Valenzuela Garcia, Tien, McPherson, and others indicated that the people heading up advocacy groups and the boards of many urban farming groups are mostly White.

The people involved are “relatively privileged, educated, [and] have jobs that afford them the luxury to meet and do this kind of work,” McPherson said.



To help correct this imbalance, BHC gave grants to a few community-based organizations including Sol Collective and Asian Resources, which were charged with engaging more Latinos, Southeast Asians, African Americans, and Native Americans in leadership positions. Partners tried to reach out to Hmong and Mien farmers, among others, with limited success due to several factors, including leadership transitions, shifts in organizational priorities, and a lack of capacity and interest. After four years, the effort stalled. “We’ve tried, but it just hasn’t stuck,” Tien said.

Complicating matters is a deeply rooted stigma surrounding the work. For example, in McPherson’s youth ag program, some students do not want to get their shoes dirty because of negative perceptions around doing manual labor. “People left lives of doing agricultural work,” McPherson said. “Whether they are immigrant families or African American families, their relationship to agriculture wasn’t necessarily a happy one or a free one. That lives on in a way, I think.”

Yisrael has encountered similar issues. “I’ve had youth tell me, ‘That’s what slaves used to do—I don’t want to do that,’” Yisrael said. “I have had some Mexicans or Hispanics be interested in growing food, and their parents who two generations ago were migrant farmworkers say they don’t want to hear about that because they want them to go to college. So, there’s still a lot of work to be done when you talk about food justice.”

Advocates have also faced challenges in overcoming the city’s label—which some consider pejorative—as a “cow town.” Harrison said both the city and advocates are working to reframe this: “We had to kind of broaden the concept of, it’s not about agriculture. It’s about the food system. ... It’s a combination of the urban and rural and developing a vision where our community can feed ourselves, where it’s equitable, where it promotes health and well-being over time.”

“This is about a dynamic, rich, cultural fabric, in terms of our definition of food,” Harrison added. “The urban environment needs to play a role.”

Other challenges include bureaucratic barriers, such as public agencies moving slowly and having many layers to their approval processes; setbacks due to changes in leadership; a lengthy application process to convert vacant lots for urban agriculture; high costs to comply with the city’s rules, which require people who convert those lots to install a meter, at a cost of several thousand dollars; and low turnout at city meetings designed to help people get involved. And, despite funding from BHC, advocates often face funding shortfalls or lack the capacity to do all the work they would like to do.

Finally, advocates have expressed concerns about unintended consequences, such as gentrification. “We build these nice gardens and everyone says, ‘Oh this looks really nice,’ and then it becomes harder for spaces like that to keep their space because they’re competing with more well-moneyed interests that now want access into these neighborhoods,” Valenzuela Garcia said. The same goes for getting certain amenities, like full-service grocery stores, she explained. Once one comes into a neighborhood, higher-income people want to move in, and that can raise prices and make it harder for longtime residents, especially the elderly, to keep their homes.



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**“I’ve had youth tell me, ‘That’s what slaves used to do—I don’t want to do that. I have had some Mexicans or Hispanics be interested in growing food, and their parents who two generations ago were migrant farmworkers say they don’t want to hear about that because they want them to go to college. So, there’s still a lot of work to be done when you talk about food justice.’”**

**Chanowk Yisrael, urban farmer**

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# Lessons Learned

For each of the challenges they've encountered, advocates have gleaned a wealth of insights to help guide their future work, as well as the work of other jurisdictions eager to make similar strides in reducing barriers to urban farming. Here are a few of those lessons:

## Make it a team effort.

Collaboration is necessary for policy efforts to succeed. For example, when getting people to turn out to testify at the council meetings, multiple groups played a role. "There was no one community organizing group that did the bulk of the work," Tien said. "It was a whole bunch of people saying, 'Can you turn out like maybe five, six people?' And 100 people showed up."

According to McPherson, the secret is finding people with a "similar vision, who work together well and enjoy each other—who can work on the hard issues but not get so bogged down that they forget to celebrate the victories."

There are practical benefits to collaboration, too. "As an organization that was beat down, but not defeated by the recession, I would say the main way that we survived as an organization was by sharing resources and coming together with other organizations to carry out a project," said Davida Douglas, executive director of Alchemist CDC. "I think for a lot of projects it's necessary in terms of sustainability and feasibility."

## Community work cannot happen from the top down.

For success to be lasting, it's important to work with community, not just on their behalf. "Many times, you have organizations that pop up in communities with solutions or answers, but they're not necessarily tested to see if they work," Yisrael explained. "The best way to get others to adopt and be successful is if you're actually doing it yourself."

To jumpstart the work with residents, advocates can consider partnering with an existing community hub, such as a school, church or community center, Harrison suggested. Then, advocates can "draw energy into that space" and leverage existing community assets and interests to do related policy or organizing work.

## Engage community early and often.

As Eghigian put it, "It's so much stronger when residents are involved from the very beginning." For example, when her group, NeighborWorks, which addresses housing issues, became involved in urban agriculture and decided to organize a farmers market, they did so because residents came to them and requested it. "It wasn't just about food access ... it was about part of our mission is also building strong communities."



### Building trust takes time.

Although they are working harmoniously now, several advocates said that “turf issues” came up when they began coordinating their efforts. “I think it took a good, solid three years for the relationships to actually [form] and trust to be built among all these organizations,” Tien recalled. “I think now they’ve found, in general, a happy medium of how they can complement each other. But it wasn’t like that in the beginning.”



### Understand how history—and race—shape different communities’ experience of an issue.

Without knowing the history of a problem, advocates risk developing solutions that are ill-informed or short-sighted. “Not all [advocates] are aware of structured racialization or institutional racism, and so you end up with unintended consequences,” Yisrael said, noting that when he goes to food meetings, he is often “the only brown person there.”

Yisrael recalled an example of advocates opening a farm stand without fully understanding the community space in which they were trying to operate. Although the farm stand offered healthy and affordable food options, it was surrounded by convenience stores like 7-11 and other vendors selling unhealthy items like fried chicken, doughnuts, and alcohol. “There was no way we could win that fight,” he said.

### Access is more than just a physical issue.

As the farm stand example showed, access itself is necessary but insufficient to create change. Besides the physical barriers to good health, “there’s a knowledge barrier, an education barrier, and an interest barrier,” McPherson said. He and other advocates learned this when they set up a farmers market in South Sacramento and struggled to keep vendors there. They had a dollar match set up through CalFresh to help make it affordable, but not enough people shopped there, and many farmers couldn’t make enough money to continue participating in the market. As such, advocates must be nimble and use multiple strategies, tailored to individual communities, to achieve their goals.

### Don’t feel defeated when victories are small and infrequent at first.

Despite the challenges they experienced in bringing a farmers market to South Sacramento, McPherson and fellow advocates did not give up. You must find ways to “stay creative and make it work,” he said, explaining that when the farmers market started three years ago in one of the poorest, most crime-fraught zip codes in Sacramento, no one thought it would work. Advocates had to be persistent and seed demand. Programs like that are “not something you can just take and drop down in a community,” he said.

Yet, whether it’s establishing a new farmers market or passing a series of ordinances that help remove barriers and reshape people’s ideas about what is possible, McPherson emphasized that these victories speak to “the power of small groups” and show that they can accomplish major feats when they work together and persist in the face of adversity.









Harrison said that he still views advocates' efforts as being in the "building block" stage but that big changes are on the horizon. "As far as [our] overall goal, really what we'd like to see, it's kind of this idea of collective impact," Harrison said. "We would like to see, programmatically, school gardens operating career pathways between elementary, middle, and high schools in the areas of food, health, and the environment. We'd like to see improved ... food access, engagement from the community in that issue, [and] more capacity of the neighborhood to feed itself."

Advocates also want to start tracking the progress they are making. In the long term, this means looking at what Harrison described as "macro indicators of changes in health," such as high school graduation rates, rates of diabetes and other nutrition-related diseases, and emergency room visits associated with these conditions.

Ultimately, Valenzuela Garcia hopes these changes will transform people's ideas about urban agriculture: "Success for me," she said, "would look like a real narrative around food access and the built environment and economic empowerment that recognizes these historic inequities that we've built into our landscapes."

To view video footage of the advocacy work happening to improve access to healthy food in Sacramento, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifKmBEfltrg>.



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