

THE TALKING FARM: A COMMUNITY VOICE TAKES ROOT

By Nancy Maes



Artist's conceptual rendering of The Talking Farm.
Courtesy of Studio Talo Architecture, Inc.

When Evanston resident and community activist Debbie Hillman spoke up at a local planning meeting for EarthMonth celebrations four years ago, she had no idea her voice would bring about a shift toward local food and urban farming in the socially conscious community. She suggested a panel discussion on positive trends in farming and brought together a restaurateur, a grocer, a farmer, an organizer and an educator to share their experiences cultivating and enjoying local organic food. It was a learning process for her too, even though she had experience incorporating native plants during her 25-year career designing and installing residential organic gardens. Fruits and vegetables were not part of her landscape.

Many residents and policy makers listening to the dialogue saw it as a call to action. Hillman says, "It was a wake up moment for me." It wasn't long before she co-founded the Evanston Food Policy Council to nurture new sources of locally grown organic foods as an antidote to the status quo. Hillman points out that less than five percent of the foods on the tables of Illinois residents are grown in the state where soybeans and corn are the major crops. The rest of the food, which travels about 1,500 miles from farm to table, loses precious nutrients and requires fuel that pollutes the environment during its long journey.

While the Food Policy Council members discussed changes that could remedy the situation, they felt they needed a down-to-earth project to prove that urban dwellers can become locavores. Hillman remembers the moment when council member Linda Kruhmin suggested creating an urban farm in Evanston. "The minute we started talking about it we decided we had to do it," Hillman recalls. The Talking Farm took root. It would be a professionally run, sustainable, organic farm offering classes in growing edible gardens and job training for people interested in pursuing farming as a career. Kruhmin was named farm manager. She grew up on her family's

dairy farm in Michigan where the ingredients for dinner were plucked from their garden and now cultivates berry patches in the yard of her Evanston home as well as vegetables on the parkway.

Was this urban farm oasis just the idea of an isolated fringe group or were there other like-minded people who wanted to make a change in how and where their foods were grown?

Councilmembers scheduled a community meeting at Dawes Elementary School where an edible garden has flourished and nourished the pupils since 2004 and proves the possibilities of urban farming. Despite a downpour on the night of the event, more than 80 people braved the storm to attend. With such a groundswell of interest and the willingness of many to dig in and get started, it seemed the time was right to plow ahead with The Talking Farm.

Kruhmin discovered an ideal spot for the proposed urban farm on unused public land owned by the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District on the east side of the North Shore Channel near Howard Street. Kruhmin explains that the cottonwood trees surrounding the southern part, which is about one acre in size, would become part of an agri-forest or edible forest.

Invasive non-native buckthorn – torn out and replaced with fruit and nut trees. Berries and herbs would thrive in the shade of the canopy. On the two northern acres, potatoes, tomatoes, lettuces, peppers and more esoteric specialty produce for restaurants will be planted in tunnel-shaped, plastic hoop houses where they can survive gusting winds and swirling snow. Local elementary and middle school children will cultivate nearly two dozen raised beds for growing ethnic foods or pizza ingredients. Thomas Ahleman, a Harvard trained award-winning architect, read about The Talking Farm in an article posted on a bulletin board in a neighborhood cafe near his office, StudioTalo, in Evanston.

When he discovered that Hillman was a regular at the coffee shop, he tracked her down and offered his services. He has now designed The Talking Farm's learning center and greenhouse based on ideas gathered from public meetings and input from the project's board of directors. "The board is very forward thinking and not interested in creating a nostalgic image of a red barn," Ahleman explains. "The farm building has a sloped glass wall to take full advantage of the sun's energy. The roof has a butterfly shape that will channel rainwater to an iconic water tank next to the building. We will harvest daylight, solar energy and water and plan to produce as much energy on site as we use."

While negotiations to lease the land are in progress and funding is being sought to break ground for the Talking Farm, volunteers with green thumbs, garden tools and appetites whetted for locally grown organic produce were anxious to get their hands dirty. So last year, on a 4,000 square foot unused plot donated by the Evanston Ecology Center at a community garden at Twiggs Park, they got to dig in and create a mini-garden. They dumped wheelbarrows full of sand, compost and dry leaves to improve the boggy prairie soil, built raised beds, collected scraps from local cafes to start compost bins and started seedlings under grow lights in their homes. By the end of the growing season, more than 135 volunteers had happily toiled for about 500 hours; the garden produced 300 pounds of home-grown fruits, vegetables and herbs that were sold to Evanston cafes and at a couple of farmersmarkets. The \$750 in proceeds...plowed back into projects such as "how to" classes where attendees can learn ways to amend soil, grow an herb spiral or cultivate organic kitchen gardens. The Talking Farm project continues to branch

out. The farm's staff is offering advice to Evanston Township High School, which began cultivating a small food garden this spring as a stepping stone in plans for an Edible Acre, and youngsters from Kingsley Elementary School now use the Twiggs Park garden as an outdoor classroom.

"The mini-garden is a microcosm of The Talking Farm," says Hillman who helped plant the seeds for this grassroots project. "I think people are hungry for this." Little by little this groundbreaking project will prove that being a locavore in a city is within the realm of possibility and that urban farms can be a fact of life in the new millennium.

Nancy Maes is a food writer and the author of "Around Chicago with Kids" (Fodors, 2002). she's also contributed to several major Chicago publications, writing about restaurants, gardens and fine cooking.