

September 28, 2006

By [BOB SEIDENBERG](#) | City Editor

Picture a two- or three-acre farm, with fields and raised beds for fruits and vegetables.

Now picture it in Evanston.

A group of residents are working to bring that bucolic vision to the general community, announcing plans recently to establish an urban farm on a yet-to-be-found underused parcel in Evanston.

Members of Evanston's Food Policy Council hosted an information session recently on the issue. Before the meeting, group members toured the Dawes School "edible garden" that urban farm advocates would like to replicate on a much larger scale.

A second meeting, where group members plan to start laying out steps to bring their vision to reality, is scheduled for 7 p.m. Oct. 12 at the Unitarian Church of Evanston, 1330 Ridge Ave.

Food Policy Council members are serious about the issue and have received "a ton of response" since unveiling the urban farm proposal Sept. 12, said Debbie Hillman, a longtime community activist and one of the council's co-chairs.

The group is not looking to create another community gardens, a successful city-run program under which residents pay to grow vegetables on small plots.

An urban farm would have its own manager and a paid staff that would run the enterprise as a self-sustaining business, she said.

On the farm, fresh organic fruits and vegetables would be grown. The produce could be sold through a farmstand or some other arrangement, Hillman said.

Currently, "being part of a regional food system that produces only 3 percent of local food needs, we are dependent on food that travels an average of 1,500 miles," Hillman said.

An urban farm would produce "local, fresh food for all of Evanston," she said, so there wouldn't be a question whether food was ripe, or safe.

"You're also keeping your food dollars right here in Evanston," Hillman said.

Evanston citizens could learn valuable job skills on a farm that would be transferable to other jobs, she said.

Policy Council members also envision the farm offering vocational internships with collaborating farms, promotion of nutrition and health education for children, and other

benefits, she said.

City Council members have been reluctant in recent years to lend their backing to projects that remove parcels from the tax rolls, given the annual struggles to balance the city's budget.

Hillman said she shares such concerns. She said the group is now exploring sites already off the tax rolls, such as land along the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District's channel, land along the Skokie Swift el tracks and a few unused city parcels.

Six or seven urban farms currently exist in Chicago, Hillman said. The Chicago Botanic Garden in Glencoe recently partnered with the community of Lawndale to create a six-acre farm in that community, she said.

For more information, contact the Evanston Food Policy Council at (847) 328-7175.