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Salt Lake County eyes public land for gardening

Government » The county wants to transform more than 150 acres into gardens and farmland.

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Community gardens could soon sprout from dozens of public properties throughout the Salt Lake Valley, breaking soil outside the Holladay Lions Recreation Center, near Riverton's South County Pool and within Sandy's Dimple Dell Regional Park.

These tracts of tillable public land are part of Salt Lake County's urban-farming initiative, which will transform more than 150 acres of unused government property into planting grounds for beans, beets, even biofuel.

It's a return to the valley's agrarian past that County Councilman Jim Bradley championed last summer to put the public's fallow turf to use producing food or fuel.

"Before we put [this land] to some beneficial use in terms of recreation or a park -- which may be long time in coming," Bradley said, "we might as well put it to beneficial use for food production."

Now, the county is getting into the nitty-gritty details of where to put those farms.

Officials identified three dozen parcels this month -- stretching from Bluffdale to Salt Lake City -- that the county soon could lease to commercial growers or turn over to communities for food production.

While the largest swaths would go to commercial uses, the county hopes to speckle the valley with 27 smaller gardens that would offer topsoil to gardeners such as Doug Stark, who grows greens in a community plot in Holladay.

With his garden space slated for a future fire station, Stark says he's looking for land to support the 45 green-thumbed residents now growing crops there. Among the possibilities is the Holladay Lions property, which has 7 acres of farm-friendly land.

Although Stark has room enough in his backyard to raise veggies, he says the public plots cultivate a sense of community and provide a much-needed food source for people including the 13 refugee families who harvested their greens last year from the Holladay garden.

The county now has the space for more gardens just like Stark's. Question is, will officials be able to fill them?

"It is wonderful that the county has all this property," said Claire Uno, executive director of Wasatch Community Gardens. "Now the key component is to see where the community interest is for starting the gardens."

The county staged an urban-farming open house last week that attracted more than 70 people from Midvale to Magna. And program manager Julie Peck-Dabling said her office was swamped by supporters' e-mails.

Officials suspect residents want more land. It's a matter of spreading the message that land is available.

In Kearns, for instance, the county has identified a half-dozen prospective community gardens and a sprawling 40-acre plot in the recently acquired Lodestone Park that could suit commercial food or biofuel production. But even the community council wasn't aware of those potential planting plots.

Kevin Lundy, vice chairman of the community council, said he would favor the expansion of community gardens -- so long as they are well maintained.

"The concern would be that it is not kept up and turned into a weed patch," he said. "That doesn't help anybody."

The county plans to work with Wasatch Community Gardens to ensure that doesn't happen.

Officials are pursuing state and federal grants to get the first community gardens off the ground. Cost estimates range from a modest \$300 per plot to a pricey \$35,000 garden, depending on the design.

While gardeners probably won't get into a public plot in time for a harvest this year, Peck-Dabling hopes the ground will be prepped and ready for 2011.

"We are trying to do it as quickly as we can," she said.

Bradley remains a firm supporter of the program and says 150-plus acres of new urban farmland is a "good start." It will help make the valley less reliant on outside food supplies, put more commercial farmers to work and reduce the amount of transportation for bringing veggies to market.

But Bradley believes more tillable land is out there. The county just needs to identify it.

"Clearly, we want more," he said. "That is not an issue. We want a lot more."

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Room to grow?

Salt Lake County has identified three dozen publicly owned properties that could be used for urban farming. Some are tiny quarter-acre plots that could support a community garden, while others span 40 acres. Information about the initiative is available on the county's Web site at www.slco.org or by e-mailing program manager Julie Peck-Dabling at jpeck-dabling@slco.org.

By the numbers

154 » Number of acres that Salt Lake County has identified for potential planting.

27 » Number of community gardens that could sprout from the county's list.

12 » Number of properties that could be used for commercial food or biofuel production.

1 » Year until many of those properties are planted with their first crops.

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