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Urban farming: Salt Lake County wants Utahns' help in turning idle land into productive gardens

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SALT LAKE CITY — Everywhere Dallas Hanks looks, he sees wasted land.

Vacant lots growing weeds behind buildings.

Pockets of scruffy growth amid freeway junctions.

Muddy areas bordering county canals.

All of it being wasted.

"Together, these areas are huge resources that can be utilized," said Hanks, a Utah State University doctorate student. "We just haven't thought about it."

Hanks could use some of that land to make biodiesel to run part of the county's fleet of vehicles.

Claire Uno, executive director of Wasatch Community Gardens, sees uses for the land, too. A 4-by-40-foot plot can feed a family of four for at least a year, she'll tell you. And the problem isn't interest; it's availability. The waiting time for even a small plot in one of her organization's community gardens is sometimes six years.

Salt Lake County Councilman Jim Bradley also sees the wasted land, and he wants to let people use it.

As Bradley's urban farming initiative takes shape in the next few months, the measure will bring people like Uno, Hanks and other residents with agricultural interests to plots of land where their plans can take root.

"Salt Lake County has spent \$40 million buying open space for future recreation or preservation," he said.

In all, Bradley estimates the county owns roughly 1,500 acres of open space scattered across its unincorporated areas. But he estimates that number grows to around 5,000 acres when all the land the county is asking cities, special service districts and school districts to donate for the initiative is added.

Some of that land has been marked for specific building projects in the next 10 to 15 years, including recreation centers or county buildings. In the meantime, Bradley says that land should be put to use serving the public.

"The county's goal is to put idle land to productive use," he said. "We already own the land. All we have to do is put it in the hands of people who can do something with it."

That's where Uno comes in.

While working on a master's degree in information studies at UCLA, Uno realized she loved food, gardening and people. Now, she and her co-workers at Wasatch Community Gardens help provide people living in urban areas with the space, tools and, when necessary, education to grow their own food.

Each garden takes on a life and family of its own, Uno said.

At the Grateful Tomato Garden at 800 South and 600 East, each rectangular plot is a testament to the diverse community the garden creates.

One row belongs to a University of Utah student who sells her food at a farmers market. The next row over is tended by an 89-year-old woman whose love of gardening keeps her going after twice breaking her hip. Two plots over is cared for by a young family.

"There's a lot of diversity in age and background," all of which adds to the richness of the garden, Uno said. "It's this really green oasis in the middle of this densely populated neighborhood."

Besides building community ties, Uno and Bradley said the gardens help ensure people have locally grown, healthy food. Uno wants to move forward in planning more gardens and assisting other communities to develop their own. All she needs is land.

"We have a five- to six-year waiting list" for a plot in one of the group's five gardens, she said. "It can be several years until people get that phone call."

Hank's dream needs land, too.

Before falling in love with biodiesel, Hanks was a drug representative for one of the nation's top five pharmaceutical companies. But after deciding he was an "overpaid UPS boy," he quit and started a research company to help solve problems environmentally. He started the FreeWays to Fuel project, which grows biodiesel along state highways, and is growing safflower to make biodiesel on 200 acres southwest of the airport.

If he could get 15- or 20-acre plots of Salt Lake County land, Hanks says he could grow biodiesel to help power the county's automobiles, save taxpayers money and reduce the county's carbon footprint.

"Give me 10 to 20 acres ... and we can do some really interesting things," he said as he eyed open land by freeways or power plants where regular gardens wouldn't grow well. "It's like a Christmas present that we're waiting to unwrap."

Bradley and Hanks agree that biodiesel is especially attractive because safflower and other weeds grow in tougher soil and don't have to be watered but still contribute to a healthy, sustainable process.

Later this month, Salt Lake County officials will make a request for proposals to find out who wants land, where they want it and what they want to do with it. After that, a technical advisory committee will determine need and feasibility of ideas and divvy out plots. Then residents across the county can get digging.

"We're looking at any creative idea that puts this land to beneficial use in a farming capacity and is beneficial to the public," Bradley said. "If you can grow it, we're interested."

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