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

By **Abigail Shah**

Deseret News

Published: Thursday, March 18, 2010 12:23 a.m. MDT

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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.

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"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.

4 photos



Laura Seitz, Deseret News

Claire Uno, executive director of Wasatch Community Gardens, is excited about the opportunity to help more people plant gardens.

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