

Sol Price Center  
*for Social Innovation*

# Positioning Communities for Sustainable Urban Agriculture

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*with David Gastwirth, Eric Lardy, Janet Little, Junjie Liu, Clari Montes, Andrew Tunks, and Michael Valentine*



Social Innovation Policy Brief  
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# Positioning Communities for Sustainable Urban Agriculture

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There is an obvious community appeal to transforming a forgotten, vacant lot into a green space filled with food and flowers. Beyond breathing life to forlorn spaces, urban agriculture is associated with a host of social, civic and health benefits. Community gardens are places where neighbors develop mutual understanding by working side-by-side and talking face-to-face. They are laboratories where young people learn science and nutrition with their hands in the soil. Local gardening can even diminish crime by eliminating dark spaces that give cover to criminals.

This brief describes a study of community gardens carried out by a team of researchers from the USC Price School of Public Policy under the supervision of Professors Juliet Musso and Diane Yoder, assisted by MPA student Rachel Madewell. The focus was to catalog the successes and challenges associated with neighborhood councils in the San Diego neighborhood of City Heights, and to recommend strategies to build on current successes.

## UNITING A CITY DIVIDED

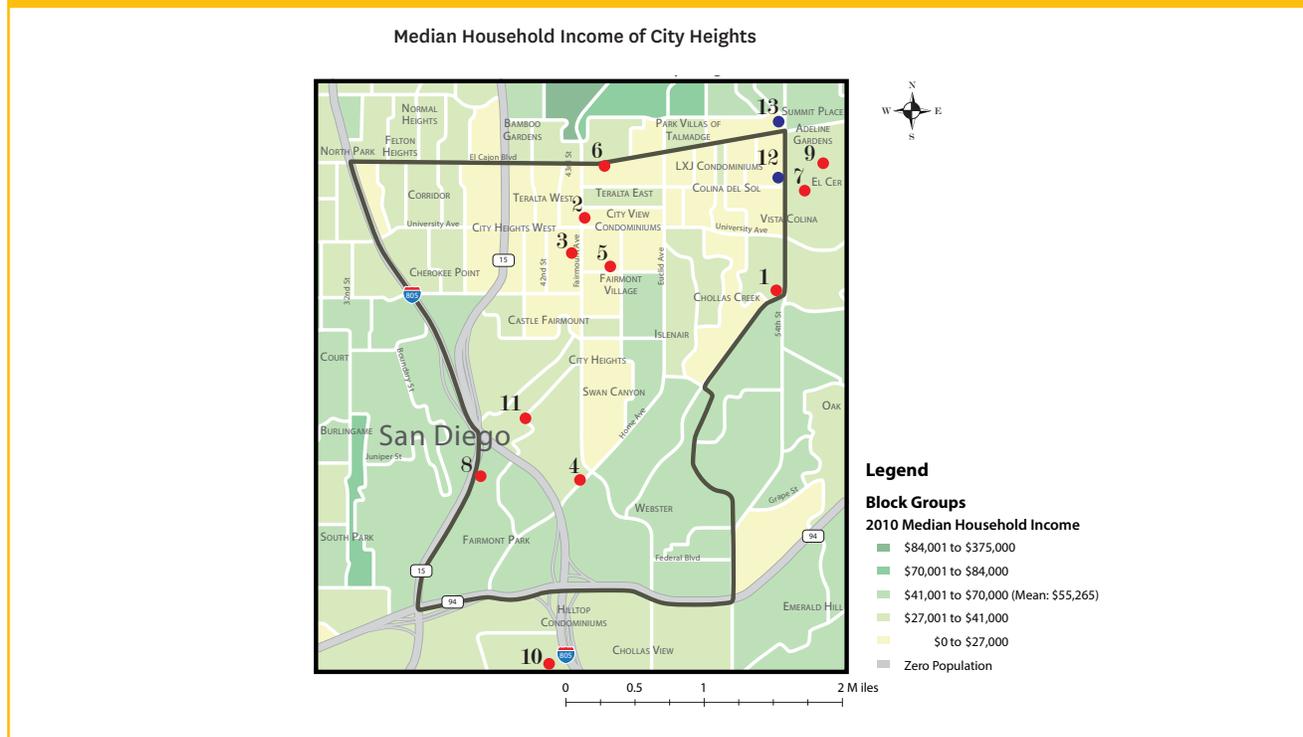
City Heights' once-thriving retail district began to decline when shopping centers opened nearby, chipping away at the area's core enterprise. Over time, a host of urban ills – chronic unemployment, high rates of poverty and high crime – set in, leading the City Council to declare a state of emergency for City Heights in 1990.

One difficulty City Heights faced was the construction of a highway that ran directly through the neighborhood. Houses and businesses were cleared for the freeway resulting in a neighborhood divided. The first community garden was proposed as a way to bridge the divide that was created by the construction. Furthermore, as a port of entry for newcomers to the United States, City Heights has found that community gardens are a means of culturally integrating refugees and creating social connections in a city where 37 percent of the population has emigrated from 63 different countries.

## NURTURING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

The team of USC researchers found numerous ways in which community gardens, which now number 11, benefit neighborhood residents in City Heights. These gardens, largely found in lower income neighborhoods, provide food, health and environmental education, and foster civic pride and common ground among City Heights' diverse residents. New Roots Community Farms, an initiative of the International Rescue Committee, has become a nationally recognized touchstone for the neighborhood's refugees, helping them to create ties to their new home.

Figure 1: Community Garden Locations in City Heights by Median Household Income (Liu, 2013)



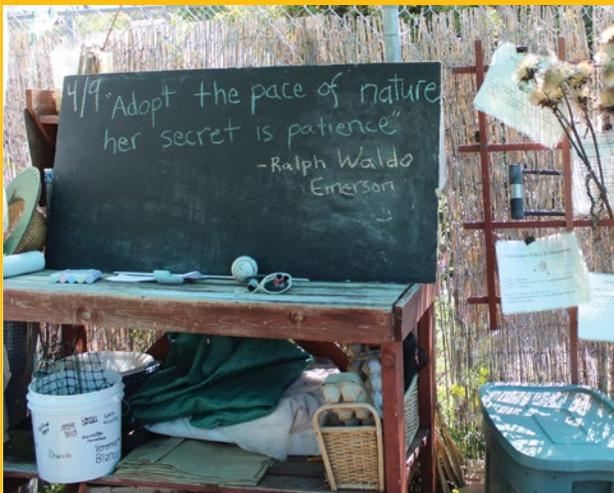
The economic benefits are critical in City Heights, which, in spite of recent progress, still has a lower median income than the rest of San Diego. Community gardens can increase the value of real estate in some neighborhoods, which has a concomitant benefit of boosting tax revenue. In addition, residents who grow some of their food in a garden can save money and may even profit from the produce. The farmers from the New Roots Community Farm, for example, sell 20 percent of their crops to local markets.

The gardens also make nutritional food more readily available in City Heights, which has a preponderance of fast food restaurants and markets that sell processed foods. The researchers found studies suggesting that households with a community gardener are twice as likely to consume the recommended intake of produce. They also note that children who have gardens at school bring ask for more fruits and vegetables when they eat at home.

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Several schools in City Heights have community gardens because they believe they are good hands-on tools for teaching nutrition, sustainability, agriculture, water conservation and even the science of soil composting. The school gardens are both popular and growing. One of them, at Crawford High School, is being expanded to a 20,000-square-foot lot and will also host students from a nearby middle school.

Figure 2: International Rescue Committees' Youth Food Justice Program at Crawford High School (Madewell, 2013)



## BUILDING ON SUCCESS

Twenty-three years after the first community garden was built in City Heights, there is clear evidence they are beneficial to the community. Yet, there remain formidable challenges to creating new gardens.

Many falter from the start because they are not able to get the one thing they must have: land. In communities where gardens are most needed, organizers typically cannot raise the necessary funds to purchase land. Organizers often build on loaned or leased vacant land and face eviction and loss of the garden when gentrification increases land values.

Several of City Heights' gardens are on government land, which requires the groups go through a complicated, lengthy and expensive permitting process, and meet costly government requirements such as benches and information kiosks. Ongoing compliance with government requirements can include periodic reports and inspections. These costs are compounded when garden organizers must contend with several agencies and myriad regulatory requirements.

And then there is the cost. Organizers spent \$30,000 to secure a permit for New Roots Community Farm. Most gardens require a water meter be installed, which runs about \$11,000 in San Diego. The USC research team noted that water prices in arid Southern California drive up expenses, making the plots too costly for some participants.

Even when a group is able to establish the garden, they face challenges of sustainability. Too many rely on a single person to oversee the garden. Gardens may fail when a project champion tires of leadership and no replacement waits in the wings.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Establishing a community garden requires planning, funding, organizational integrity and commitment. One key to success is garnering support in the community. Teaming with organizational leaders helps organizers sustain momentum when they encounter hurdles. Solid partnerships with businesses, government officials and non-profits supply support in fund raising, garnering supplies and helping manage volunteers. One such group in City Heights is the University of California Cooperative Extension, which helps train volunteers in gardening.



The team identified the importance of bylaws that structure decision making and create stable arrangements for management and conflict resolution. Because volunteers are critical to success, garden organizers should cultivate leaders who can contribute to garden management. A skills inventory of volunteers can reveal hidden talents and better pair people to tasks. Creating a solid structure of governance, one that engages volunteers in multiple positions, develops leadership to avoid the risk of reliance on the commitment of one person.

The team recommended that government agencies and expert nonprofits disseminate information, such as guides to obtaining permits and providing key contacts in government. Nurturing an association of garden organizers, they added, would be another avenue to foster information exchange and support.

At least two of City Heights' community gardens have waiting lists, indicating there is untapped demand. Moving forward, the USC team suggests embracing a strategic approach to development, one that utilizes mapping and a community survey to identify centers of need in the community. Organizing nonprofits to mobilize volunteers and develop new gardens from the grass roots is a fertile strategy for City Heights to extend its network of community gardens.

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The USC Sol Price Center of Social Innovation develops ideas, practices, and leaders to enhance the quality of life for people in low-income, urban communities.

