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Urban Agriculture: Keeping Worcester Fresh

BY MARK A. BORENSTEIN • JUNE 24, 2019

What comes to mind when you think of agriculture? Do you envision sprawling tracts of land in a rural area farmed by generations of farmers? Or do you envision neighbors in a city tending a small parcel of land to produce fresh fruits and vegetables for friends and families? Why not both?

On January 30, 2019, the City of Worcester joined many other large U.S. cities when the City Council adopted urban agriculture zoning regulations aimed at promoting urban-scale farming and agricultural uses. With the input of passionate community members, the City's Planning staff developed regulations to provide a comprehensive framework encompassing all stages of urban agriculture, from the siting of farms or gardens to the sale of products.

The zoning regulations' greatest attribute is their flexibility. The regulations provide for both large and small operations and uses that are primary or accessory in nature.

The zoning regulations provide for three primary uses:

1. Community Gardens – Small-scale gardens (less than 5,000 s.f.) for the use of individuals, neighborhoods and non-profit organizations to grow produce for personal consumption.
2. Urban Farms – Larger agricultural operations (between 5,000 s.f. and 2 acres) intended for commercial purposes.
3. Farmers' Markets – Temporary markets for local producers to sell their products.

In addition to the primary uses, the zoning regulations permit farm stands, yard gardens and on-site composting as accessory uses. Yard gardens (less than 2,500 s.f.) are required to be accessory to a residential use and primarily for personal consumption. Farm stands are permitted as accessory to urban farm and yard garden uses.

Despite the relatively permissive nature of the zoning regulations, the City included safeguards to protect neighbors and the community from being adversely impacted by these operations. For example, community gardens are permitted as of right in all zoning districts, while urban farms are generally permitted in all zoning districts except certain residential districts where the use requires a special permit from the Planning Board. The special permit requirement for urban farms provides an opportunity for the Planning Board and the City to examine the proposed urban farm use to ensure that the use remains in harmony with the surrounding neighborhood. Moreover, urban farms, community gardens and farmers' markets are required to be operated in accordance with all food, health, soil safety, water and other applicable regulations.

While the enactment of these zoning regulations is a big step toward promoting urban agriculture in Worcester, it is important to note that urban agriculture is not new to the City. Many of Worcester's non-profit organizations, such as the Regional Environmental Council and Worcester Common Ground, have been operating community gardens for years and have experienced tremendous success within the community. By clarifying the standards for agricultural activities and farmers' markets, the City has made it easier for urban farmers to begin operations and sell products, which will make fresh, healthy and sustainable food more accessible to residents of Worcester and the surrounding towns.