

SAREP Final Report
8/15/2012

**Urban Agriculture in Public Parks: Assessing a Model of Nonprofit-City Government
Collaboration in Oakland, CA**

Jessica Watson
University of California, Santa Cruz
Department of Anthropology
jessicawatson@gmail.com

City Slickers Farms
City of Oakland, Department of Parks & Recreation

Oakland, Alameda County, CA USA

Total funds received: \$5,000

OBJECTIVES

- (A) Codify the history of the project – tell the park's “life history” - recognizing that different participants may have very different perspectives of what occurred.
- **OBJECTIVE 1.** Interview City Slicker Farm employees, City of Oakland employees, neighbors, and park users about the process of the park development.
- (B) Evaluate the project's community outreach. How was it conducted, what were its goals, and was it successful in reaching multiple segments of the surrounding community?
- **OBJECTIVE 1.** I will conduct a survey with park users and surrounding residents to determine their understanding of the project and how they had been approached in the past.
 - **OBJECTIVE 2.** Interview staff and community participants about the outreach process.
- (C) Evaluate community participation in the project.
- **OBJECTIVE 1.** I will analyze volunteer records and determine whether volunteers to the site came from the surrounding community, and rates of involvement.
 - **OBJECTIVE 2.** I will interview current volunteers about their motivation for involvement.
- (D) Understand whether the Union Plaza Park measurably impacted food security in Oakland.
- **OBJECTIVE 1.** My survey will determine neighborhood food security levels and frequency of fruits and vegetable consumption. I will also access records of site productivity and analyze its overall effect on City Slicker Farms' ability to distribute fresh vegetables in surrounding low-income communities. City Slicker Farms estimates that this farm will increase their overall farm output by 40%. I will be monitoring how this influx of produce changes their distribution methods, whether more families actually receive food, and whether their weekly farm stand changes in response.

SUMMARY

The study evaluates a collaboration between nonprofit and government entities to create an urban farm in an Oakland city park. This research examines the Union Plaza Urban Farm project's community outreach, impact on food security, and applicability as a model. Methods included community surveys, in-depth interviews, and participant observation as a volunteer at the urban farm. The research found that initial community outreach by the nonprofit, City Slicker Farms, was conducted but that communication with the neighborhood diminished once construction began. This caused confusion about the time line and purpose of the project as challenges arose that halted construction, resulting in some suspicion on the part of neighborhood residents. When surveyed, park users and local residents reported that most of their information about the project came from personal interactions with nonprofit employees and neighbors, and not from signs, flyers, or emails. One eventual solution to clarify communication channels and answer neighborhood questions was to move the nonprofit's primary channel for food distribution, their donation-based farmstand, to Union Plaza itself every Saturday. This increased the weekly presence of nonprofit employees at the site and the interactions with local residents, who could now clearly see how the vegetables were used. This research evaluated the urban farm's impact on local food security, and found that local need was high, with 20.5% of those surveyed lacking the money for food on a weekly basis. However, the project's the current overall food security impact was low (due to infrastructure problems at the site and internal reorganization of the nonprofit's other market farms in 2011) but the potential

for greater impact in the immediate future was high. The survey of park users and local residents showed a 27% increase in use of the park after the addition of the urban farm. Through in-depth interviews with employees of the nonprofit and the City of Oakland, I identified challenges that arose and the most effective solutions they encountered, which are consolidated to four more widely applicable points in the Potential Impacts section of this report. These lessons focus on methods of outreach and cross-cultural interaction, communication between nonprofit and government employees, clarification of city processes and reporting structures, managing expectations and maintaining momentum. The research concludes that the Union Plaza Urban Farm project can be effectively applied as a model elsewhere if these lessons are followed closely.

SPECIFIC RESULTS

Objective A1: History of Union Plaza Urban Farm Project

The project's history was compiled from in-depth interviews with a range of employees of the nonprofit and government departments involved in the process of creating the urban farm, in addition to public documents published on the farms to date such as web sites and City Council resolutions. In addition, I spoke with a large number of neighbors and park users about their experience with the urban farm project. I present a shortened form of the project's history here.

City Slicker Farms (CSF) is a nonprofit organization focused on food justice for West Oakland, an area with a high concentration of low-income residents and low access to supermarkets and healthy foods. CSF has been converting empty lots and yards into gardens for a decade. In 2006, West Oakland's Councilperson, Nancy Nadel, proposed a unique collaboration between City Slickers and the City of Oakland. The plan was to use public funds to allow the nonprofit to turn a city park into a market garden; the produce would then be distributed free or sold on a sliding scale to neighborhood residents. The park City Slicker Farms was offered, Union Plaza Park, was in a traditionally low-income area of West Oakland, near several scrap metal recyclers. It was used by primarily African-American local residents who would gather to play dominoes or chess. Scavengers would also congregate in the park, as well as those who were homeless. In the last decade, several condos have been built in the neighborhood, attracting a more affluent and mostly white population. Local developers and owners of the new condos were concerned about crime and homelessness in the area, and didn't feel comfortable using the park themselves, so they had been pressuring Nadel to "clean up the park."

Before deciding to pursue the urban farm conversion, City Slicker employees met with local residents and park users to ask how they would feel about an urban farm in Union Plaza. CSF formed a Community Advisory Panel to involve active local residents. City Slickers realized that they were entering into a neighborhood where tensions ran high between older and newer residents, across race lines, and along class divides. However, they decided that the project would be more beneficial than detrimental to the neighborhood, and would transform the nonprofit's vegetable production capacity by increasing their area of garden space by 40%.

City Slicker Farms (CSF) was awarded a \$100,000 matching grant from the West Oakland Project Area Committee (WOPAC) and secured the matching funds from Pacific and Forest Watershed Lands Stewardship Council, Community Development Block Grants, and Nancy Nadel. The Oakland City Council unanimously passed a resolution on March 31, 2009 allocating the redevelopment funds to create a community market farm at Union Plaza, administered by Oakland Parks & Recreation (OPR). CSF and OPR then entered into a community-based design process.

City Slicker Farms hired a staff member whose job description included coordination of the site construction as well as on-the-ground community outreach. CSF wanted to be sure that everyone who used the park before their development would still be able to use it, and for this reason they came into conflict with local neighborhood associations, who were concerned about crime and homelessness in the area. Yet because the garden's initial construction took away the park's seating area and didn't immediately replace it, the itinerant populations who were regular users of the park also felt pushed out and angry. The nonprofit attempted to be responsive by holding community meetings, but these meetings did not completely resolve tensions.

City Slickers held a barbeque at the site to try to bring together all sectors of the neighborhood and get them talking to one another, which was successful for the evening but didn't seem to have lasting effects on community relationships. CSF at this point had run into significant problems in navigating city processes, especially in receiving a legal agreement, accessing their money when they needed it and hiring laborers and contractors. Their initial time line was delayed and neighbors and members of the Community Advisory Panel were upset by the lack of communication. Around this time, the CSF staff member hired to coordinate the process left the organization. As reported through in-depth interviews with both parties, the organization was unhappy with her performance and she was unhappy with her role in what she came to think of as a project aiding gentrification of the neighborhood. Community outreach during this time was very low.

A high point for community outreach at the site came soon afterward on October 30, 2010 when CSF organized a Harvest Festival marking the beginning of vegetable production at the site and an official opening celebration with community members, which I was able to attend. CSF partnered with other Oakland food justice organizations to provide hot food, pumpkin carving, face painting, music, the regular sliding scale CSF Farmstand, and tours of the Union Plaza urban farm. Although the weather was overcast and drizzly, the festival was attended by about 100 community members from condo owners to homeless residents, as well as Councilperson Nadel and city officials.

Shortly afterward, drainage problems became apparent, which lead to standing water under the landscaping cloth and created anaerobic soil conditions. This problem eventually put the project on hold for parts of 2011 (production was reduced, and then halted in October 2011) while they sought pro bono expertise and troubleshooting from their supporters. In the end, they dug drainage ditches which seemed to allow the water to percolate through the soil again, and resumed harvesting in March 2012.

In May 2012, City Slickers moved its Saturday farm stand to Union Plaza Farm from its previous location at Center and 16th Streets, where it had been located for a decade. This was not a decision that was made lightly, because the farmstand is the primary distribution point for all of the food raised in all of CSF's market farms. Many families rely on the produce provided by it, so there was a long process of informing the public before the move. The move seems largely successful, and is discussed in greater depth below under Food Security Impact.

Objectives B1 & B2: Community Outreach Process

When exploring the possibility of a project at Union Plaza Park, City Slickers began holding meetings with the local residents and stakeholders at Willie Keys Recreation Center, formed a Community Advisory Council of West Oakland residents, and found themselves caught between polarized groups with competing interests.

After funds were approved and all parties had decided to move ahead, CSF hired an architect familiar with community design and conferred with the Community Advisory Council before plans for the urban farm were drawn up. CSF attempted to solicit input from park users, especially the homeless and scavenger communities, by asking the staff member coordinating the project to consult with them. In my later conversations with the itinerant population in the parks, they did not feel included, but it can be a difficult population to reach out to effectively. The project broke ground on November 1, 2009.

I completed a survey of 44 park users and neighborhood residents from July – September 2011, focusing on those within a two-block radius of the park. Survey topics included: community outreach, understanding of the urban farm's purpose, attitudes towards the project, household food security, and demographics. Survey days and times were varied to be as inclusive as possible. 80% of park users and local residents were familiar with the urban farm project, but most initially gained information about it through in-person contact with a nonprofit employee (25%) or a neighbor (23%) or simply by seeing the project happen in front of them. Almost no one gained initial information about the project from attending a community meeting (0%) or from a sign (7%). However, 16% eventually attended a CSF community meeting, and 43% had at one time attended a West Oakland neighborhood meeting. Email did not prove to be a useful method of information dissemination to this particular population of park users and local residents, because only 20% of those surveyed had subscribed to any community listserv.

Through interviews, City Slicker employees recounted the challenges of trying to reach all segments of the surrounding population and expressed the wish that they simply had more time to be on site and to have face-to-face conversations with residents and park users. However, time and money pressures allowed for staff presence on the site 2-3 times per week. It is difficult to determine the amount of staff presence that would be sufficient to disseminate accurate information to the community at large, but CSF believes that community relations suffered from insufficient communication at certain crucial points.

Community Response through SAREP-funded Survey

Survey results showed that local views of the project became slightly more positive over time, with 75% initially supporting the Union farm project, and 80% currently supporting it (as of September 2011). These numbers, while quite positive, can be contrasted with the fact that 96% of respondents generally support growing food in Oakland parks; the lower level of support of this particular park-farm project shows some underlying tensions within the community.

The creation of the Union Plaza urban farm increased self-reported use of the park substantially: 39% used the park before the urban farm was built, but 66% report visiting the park after its construction – a 27% increase. Park use increased for sitting and walking dogs, with slight increases for games and meeting with friends, but uses of the park decreased for organized sports such as football, baseball, or kickball which were no longer possible in the space. (These sports were mentioned in oral histories of the park with local residents from the 1960s and 70s, but did not appear to be happening with regularity in the last decade). Park uses also changed when the public water fountain was removed, and new park rules forbid barbequing, both at around the time that the urban farm was constructed. It is my understanding that these were city-level decisions, yet they became connected to the appearance of the urban farm project and any disgruntlement the new rules generated was therefore directed at the nonprofit.

Objectives C1 &C2: Volunteer Participation

I attempted to gauge participation of local community members in CSF projects by analyzing volunteer records. 899 Volunteers were recorded for all of City Slicker sites, of whom 439 (49%) have addresses on record. 91 of the volunteers lived in West Oakland's zip code, or 21% of those who supplied addresses. However due to the erratic nature of the information provided by the volunteers (addresses are self-reported, and many chose not to supply them) I conclude that analyzing volunteer records, as I had originally planned, is not an effective method of gauging volunteer participation from the immediate community.

I feel my own participant observation to be a more reliable source in this regard. I have volunteered with various City Slicker activities for two years and served as an intern working in several of their market gardens beginning in August 2010. In my experience as a volunteer over the course of two years, I spoke with many volunteers about their motivations, their backgrounds and history. Volunteers interviewed expressed a variety of motivations for becoming involved, from professional farming or gardening aspirations, local neighbors in support of the project, to a homeless man who wanted to be paid for his efforts. A common pattern was that volunteers were recent graduates who had moved to the Bay Area and were figuring out job options; many spoke of their passion for food justice issues. Most volunteers were white, although quite a few were people of color, and most were either not residents of West Oakland or they were recent residents of West Oakland (within two years). Overall I would say that volunteer participation from the surrounding West Oakland community is an ongoing struggle for the organization because low-income local residents are often struggling to make ends meet and do not necessarily have the time or inclination to participate in unpaid volunteer activities. Therefore their volunteer base tends to be young, often white volunteers who are interested in the food justice cause but do not have much experience working with the people who are the targeted recipients of the food grown by City Slicker market farms. This can result in an unintended deepening of the divide between the organization and the surrounding communities if visually they see fences up with white people inside and people of color outside. City Slickers works to combat this ongoing problem in many ways such as ongoing community engagement, redirecting resources to support their Backyard Gardening Program, a stipended youth internship program, and most crucially by working to hire staff who are people of color and who ideally come from the communities where they work.

Objective D1: Neighborhood Food Security Impact

While 45.5% of local residents and park users never experience food insecurity, a significant portion do: 38.5% lack money to buy food on a monthly basis, and in that group 20.5% lack money for food on a weekly basis. 27% of respondents reported eating fresh fruits and vegetables less than once a day. Therefore, the survey determined that a significant number of those surveyed were food insecure and their diet could benefit greatly from increased access to fresh fruits and vegetables grown at the Union Plaza urban farm.

With 3,245 sq ft in raised beds, the Union Plaza Urban Farm is much larger than the other garden spaces currently in production for City Slickers, which total 1937 sq ft (Secret, Herb and Ralph Bunche gardens). Therefore Union Plaza has a high potential to increase CSF's yields and therefore to impact food distribution and food security in the neighborhood. City Slicker's total Market Farm productivity logs were analyzed during the period before and after Union Plaza Farm began producing (in late 2010), and although Union has produced well, its potential has not yet been reached due to ongoing irrigation problems which caused production to halt for part of 2011. Union Plaza Farm produced 3831.7 lbs of produce (2011-2012) – a respectable amount, yet far less than Secret Garden, which is

one-third as large but produced 4,860 lbs during the same time period.

The question of whether Union Plaza farm measurably increases food security in the area is also complicated by a new strategy of City Slickers to consolidate their farming efforts on fewer gardens, turning several former farm plots into orchards. This transition happened over the time studied, so as Union Plaza added more produce to CSF's supply, other farms were taken out of production, leaving the supply fairly steady. When total vegetable production for all of City Slicker Market Farms was compared, there was actually a slight decrease from 2010 to 2011, the year when Union Plaza began full production, from 9867.65 lbs to 8768.97 lbs. 2012 so far is on target to maintain productivity levels, not exceed them (overall production was 4581.34 lbs through July 2012). So the addition of Union Plaza produce was crucial to maintaining a steady supply of vegetables for CSF's Farmstand, but has not yet provided the 40% increase they had initially estimated. Overall, I would conclude that while Union Plaza farm has the potential to greatly impact CSF's ability to provide more low cost and free, accessible food to West Oakland, during the period of this study it had yet to reach its full potential.

The move of CSF's Saturday Farm Stand to Union Plaza in May of 2012, in my estimation, had a large impact on community relations and micro-local food security (within the surrounding neighborhood). I volunteered at the Farm Stand before and after its move, and noticed that quite a few regular customers made the move successfully, and that the neighborhood response from local residents and users seemed hugely positive. Many of the homeless people and local homeowners and scavengers who had previously been negative about the project in private conversation did start to get free produce from the stand and seemed quite happy about it. Crucially, prior to the farmstand's move, many park users and local residents had expressed confusion or disbelief that the produce from the farm was going to feed West Oakland residents, so moving the farmstand there provided direct proof that it was feeding local residents, allowing them to tangibly benefit.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS/IMPACTS ON AGRICULTURE AND/OR FOOD SYSTEMS

This study was an evaluation of whether the collaboration between a food justice nonprofit and the City of Oakland to turn a city park into an urban farm could be viewed as a feasible model. The results showed that the project could be viewed as a model, with many caveats. In spite of its many challenges, which were acknowledged by all parties, both the city and the nonprofit involved are eager to see the project as a model for other projects within Oakland and elsewhere. At the same time, both were also hesitant to replicate the project themselves. Both parties found that the challenges resulted in ways the project design could be improved if implemented again in another location. I have compiled fourteen "Lessons Learned" which can serve as a guideline for others who wish to pursue similar urban farming projects in city parks (see Attachment 1). While a few of the lessons are specific to Oakland's particular bureaucratic structure, many could be applied broadly to any collaboration between nonprofits and city governments to create farms in public urban spaces. These include:

1. Clarification of city government processes to approve funding, use of urban spaces, and reporting structures. Urban farming projects by their nature tend to involve multiple city departments and questions of ownership and oversight, which are often murky because similar projects have not been attempted in the past; therefore clarification of legal agreements, major players, and bureaucratic processes at the beginning of such a project is essential.
2. Starting community outreach as early as possible, including wide representation of stakeholders. Identify points of community tension and be sure to hire culturally competent staff who are able to win the trust of different sectors of the community. Be as communicative throughout the entire process as possible, budgeting consistent time for employees to spend on

outreach. If problems arise, be proactive in communicating about them instead of maintaining silence, which tends to create questions and suspicion. Have one staff member consistently there over time for trust building, exchange and dialogue.

3. Understanding that farming is problem solving, so challenges are to be expected and planned for. Set up your expected time line if all goes well – and then double or triple it. If plans proceed faster than expected, it reflects well on everyone involved, but if the project goes slower than expected, the coordinating nonprofit tends to get blamed, even if the slowdown is due to things beyond their control.
4. Cities are motivated to enter into these projects because they are underfunded and thereby understaffed; nonprofits by their nature tend to be underfunded and understaffed. Therefore everyone should expect the challenges that arise from those restrictions, including lack of time for thorough and clear communication. It is beneficial for both parties to set up designated liaisons within the organizations, as well as clear reporting structures, and stated expectations regarding communications at the inception of the project.

DISSEMINATION OF FINDINGS

This report is being distributed to the nonprofit and city agencies involved, as well as via community email lists and neighborhood meetings. The case study is the basis for 1-2 chapters in my dissertation, and will be submitted to academic journals after the completion of my dissertation (early 2013). I will also present the case study at conferences within my discipline, such as the AAAs. I was not able to present at the 2011 AAAs as originally envisioned because I had a baby the month before they were scheduled; however, I hope to present there in the upcoming year.