

May 20, 2015

Dawn Kamalanathan
 Director, Capital and Planning Division
 Recreation and Park Department
 30 Van Ness Avenue, 3rd Floor
 San Francisco, CA 94102

Dear Ms. Kamalanathan,

The Recreation and Park Commission’s discussion of the urban agriculture program on May 21 provides an opportunity to assess the program’s progress in its first year and to also discuss the program’s future goals and activities.

From SPUR’s perspective, the program had significant success in its first year, including:

Developing a one-stop-shop for information for the public about urban agriculture. The new website and the staff support in answering questions has made it much easier for the public to find information about urban agriculture sites, city resources and regulations. This clearinghouse and “front door” for the public was missing until this year and the program has taken great strides in providing information in an accessible way.

Implementation of the urban agriculture incentive zone legislation. One of the aims of establishing an urban agriculture program was to facilitate coordination among city agencies. The program’s development of an application guide for the newly created urban agriculture incentive zone contracts was a clear example of the program meeting this need. I have forwarded this application guide to gardeners and farmers within the city and counterparts in numerous other cities that are using it as a model for implementing similar programs.

Publication of an annual report. The Urban Ag Annual Report for 2014 provides a much-needed report on the progress the city is making in reaching the goals laid out in the 2012 urban agriculture legislation. The baseline metrics regarding land, resources and budget dollars put toward programs supporting farming and gardening across city agencies included in this first report will be very helpful in tracking progress going forward.

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Looking ahead to the coming year, there are a few areas where the program can have a greater impact by expanding its existing efforts. These include:

Increasing the availability of resource centers. In the past year, the program successfully launched three resource centers providing mulch, compost and seedlings to the public. The resource centers are now generally open one day per month in three different locations and serve a range of urban agriculture projects. Given their popularity, the program could serve more people by expanding the operating hours of these resource centers to be one day per week. Part time staff, potentially contracted through community-based organizations in the respective neighborhoods, could help provide the oversight at each of these sites.

Explore more sites on public land for urban agriculture projects. The most recent report from the Community Gardens program shows that there are more than 750 people waiting for garden plots. Given the tremendous response when the Golden Gate Park CommUNITY Garden opened, with many people who were never on an existing waiting list requesting plots at the new garden, the current waiting-list total likely underestimates the actual demand. The Urban Agriculture Program could help create more spaces for San Franciscans to grow food – whether plot based or communally managed – by identifying promising sites on public land (managed by the Recreation and Park Department and as well as other agencies) and soliciting project proposals from the public, including people who are on the waiting lists for existing community gardens. A proactive effort like this would complement the existing processes that lead to the creation of new sites.

Doing more with the urban ag sites we already have. With more than 120 urban agriculture sites in the city, we have the potential to better utilize existing space. This can be done by ensuring that fallow plots at existing community gardens are offered to people on waiting lists in a timely manner. And, it can also involve more educational programming at existing sites, such as Alemany Farm. The urban agriculture and community garden programs have made progress on both these fronts in the past year, but they could do more with greater staff support. As the urban agriculture annual report points out, the city dedicates the equivalent of 2.16 full-time employees to support dozens of sites, covering more than 10 acres, serving thousands of residents. On one hand, this is an accomplishment. On the other hand, such slim staffing leads to a missed opportunity to have more programming and serve more residents using the existing urban agriculture sites. We encourage the department to consider dedicating more resources and staff to make sure existing sites are being used to their full capacity.

As we get close to entering the new fiscal year, **we urge the department to publish a workplan, budget and goals for the urban agriculture program's second year.** Further, as the program continues to grow, it would benefit from a long-term strategic plan that lays out specific goals and timelines for the next 3-5 years so that the department and public can have shared expectations and a basis for constructive feedback.

Lastly, we commend the department for dedicating an additional \$50,000 from the Open Space Fund to support community gardens. As noted before, having additional staff time to support existing sites would help ensure they are utilized as best as possible. That said, **it is also important that the department clearly account for how the community gardens budget has been spent in the past.** Key to increasing the efficiency of how program resources are used is knowing the details about how the money has been spent in the past. The tally of expenses from FY 2012-13 and FY 2013-14 published in the community gardens report did not offer a full accounting of how the previous years of funding were spent. We hope that the department can publish an updated accounting for the past two years and include a more detailed listing of program expenses, including allocations of staff expense, in subsequent reports.

Thank you for considering our comments. We appreciate the time and effort that RPD staff has put into discussing this program with SPUR staff, our policy board, and with community groups during the past year. We look forward to continuing our work together as the program grows in its second year.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'E. Z.', written in a cursive style.

Eli Zigas
Food and Agriculture Policy Director

CC:

Recreation and Park Commission
Phil Ginsburg, Jake Gilchrist, Melinda Stockmann, and Hannah Shulman