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Metro

# Zoning changes could produce new farms in Boston

By Matt Rocheleau | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JUNE 24, 2013

 ARTICLE

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PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

**Vernell Jordan, a trainee, weeded spinach at a farm run by City Growers in Dorchester on June 5.**

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Green leaves and sprouting stems cover one neatly piled row after another. A half-dozen workers, several wearing wide-brim straw hats, sit on milk crates in the midday sun, plucking weeds from between the crops of beets, carrots, lettuce, spinach, arugula, kale, tomatoes, peppers, and cucumbers.

“It’s a little piece of country right here,” said Bobby T.E. Walker III, the farm manager.

It feels like a remote rural setting, but it’s not. The one-quarter-acre farm, off Blue Hill Avenue in Dorchester, is surrounded by bustling city life. And it is the type of urban oasis that Boston officials hope will bloom one day across the city.

Proposed new zoning rules would allow for and promote commercial agriculture ventures, which are largely prohibited in the city under current regulations. Urban agriculture would create new business opportunities, the officials say, and tap into the growing demand from consumers who crave locally grown produce.

When it is grown in the city, “It doesn’t come any fresher,” said Walker, whose farm sells to several restaurants and small grocery stores in Boston.

“Our customers can actually come out here, look at the fields, and see where their food’s coming from,” he added. “You don’t get that anywhere else.”

Mayor Thomas M. Menino said that urban farming can also build “a sense of neighborhood unity” while “greening our city.”

This month Boston officials kicked off a series of 11 neighborhood meetings to discuss ways to simplify obtaining approval to launch commercial agriculture ventures. They hope to formally adopt the new zoning guidelines by fall.

Non-commercial gardens, like the backyard plots that flourish across the city, are already permitted. But Boston’s existing zoning code does not address many other types of agriculture. Any activity not addressed is considered forbidden and requires sometimes lengthy, costly, and frustrating appeals.

The new amendment, known as Article 89, seeks to eliminate some of the red tape.

“One of the key points . . . is to create clarity and predictability for farmers,” said Tad Read, one of two project managers overseeing the rezoning effort for the Boston Redevelopment Authority. The agency has spent the past year and a half drafting the proposal with the Mayor’s Office of Food Initiatives and the Mayor’s Urban Agriculture Rezoning Working Group, which is made up of farming advocates, experts, and residents appointed by Menino.

Glynn Lloyd, a member of the working group, knows all about the red tape surrounding urban farming in Boston.

In 2010, he wanted to grow lettuce, mixed greens, and other produce for his catering business, City Fresh Foods, but his vision hit roadblocks that eventually got the attention of Menino. His frustrations helped lead to the current rezoning effort.



PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

**Tasha Harris (left) and Tristram Keefemet with trainees on the farm in Dorchester.**

Lloyd cofounded City Growers, one of two organizations Boston selected two years ago to test urban farming in Roxbury and Dorchester, including the farm Walker manages along Blue Hill Avenue.

So far his venture is breaking even, Lloyd said. The key to making a steady profit is getting access to more land to grow more crops, he said.

Farms and gardens, including those on rooftops, have become increasingly popular in recent years in urban settings, including in and around Boston. City officials said they have gained insights by studying urban farms in cities such as New York, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Seattle, and Minneapolis.

The proposed zoning changes would allow for small ground-level and roof-top farms to be established across Boston without having to go through a public hearing process, which often takes several months or longer.

The proposal includes rules for establishing larger farms, greenhouses, farmers' markets, farm stands, and small composting operations on urban farms. The plan also details how to establish operations for aquaculture, or farming fish and shellfish; hydroponics, or growing plants in nutrient-enriched water; and aquaponics, a combination of aquaculture and hydroponics.

Lloyd said he is pleased with the city's proposed zoning changes.

"They've done a good job balancing the needs of the neighborhood and some of the concerns of farmers in the industry to make sure the rules and regulations aren't too onerous," he said.

The new rules would not cover the keeping of bees and chickens within city limits. The activities are prohibited in most zoning districts in Boston under the existing code.

"This is up to the neighborhoods to decide. If there are enough individuals and organizations in a neighborhood who say they want this, they can petition us and we will respond to that and facilitate a public process," Read said.

The city's zoning commission would get final say on whether to allow chickens and bees in certain neighborhoods.

"If there's strong community support for a change like this, we think the zoning commission would support it," said Read.

*Matt Rocheleau can be reached at [mjrochele@gmail.com](mailto:mjrochele@gmail.com).*

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