

Your local park may feed you someday

JC garden gets grant to be demonstration for others

by Kate Rounds

Reporter staff writer

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The Washington Park Association of Hudson County recently received a \$20,000 grant from the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation to install a “permaculture learning garden and apprenticeship program” this year. The 22-acre park they oversee, located on the border of Jersey City and Union City, is part of the Hudson County park system.



Here’s a 101 on permaculture: it’s an approach to designing human settlements and agricultural systems modeled on the relationships found in natural ecologies. Basically it’s sustainable land-use design.



Its tenets include looking at a whole system or problem rather than addressing individual parts, observing how the parts relate, and solving problems using long-term sustainable systems.

“The apprenticeship program is designed to teach community members about sustainability.” – Debra Italiano

The garden in Washington Park will serve as a demonstration garden to be replicated in other parks and gardens throughout Jersey City, Union City, and all of Hudson County.

“A learning garden would include food-growing,” said Debra Italiano, WPA education

committee chair and chief sustainability adviser.

In fact, the initiative is in sync with the city's revised adopt-a-lot law, passed last month, that eased the way for organizations to start community gardens.

Eat up

One of the reasons the city supports urban gardens is their health impact.

At the time, city spokeswoman Jennifer Morrill said, "The expansion of community gardens will offer additional health options for residents. Community gardens will be able to sell their produce at a designated farmer's market."

Residents will have easy access to locally grown foods.

"Fresh produce will now be more available throughout the city for residents to purchase at reasonable prices," Morrill said, "which should promote healthier eating habits."

Permaculture perks

The WPA submitted a proposal to the Hudson County Open Space Commission and received a grant for \$100,000. They will use half that money, plus the Dodge grant, to take on the permaculture learning garden effort.

The other piece of the initiative for which they received the Dodge funding is the apprenticeship program.

"We want to expand education back into the community," Italiano said. "The apprenticeship program is designed to teach community members about sustainability." One way to do that, she suggested, is to have workshops in the park that show community members how to maintain gardens and landscaping.

"Educational forums will inspire additional activity around the urban agriculture movement," she said.

Collaboration is also a major component of the initiative.

Dodge Foundation CEO Christopher J. Dagget, in a letter to the group, wrote, "We are particularly impressed by the urban ag agenda in Jersey City and the array of partners you have helped assemble for this inaugural project."

WPA's partners and stake holders include the Hudson County Planning and Parks Department; Jersey City Planning Department; Green Collar Futures/New Jersey Youth Corps, an apprentice program for New Jersey residents interested in green careers, which teamed up to create the demonstration project; and Big Old Trees, a

for-profit permaculture company.

The WPA plans to work with these and other partners to develop future urban agriculture and sustainability programs.

“The focus will be on how to replenish the soil, how to capture water, how to learn from the experience, how to interact, and how to fit the garden into the culture of the park and the community,” Italiano said.

She’s a fan of the permaculture model of looking at problems as a “whole system framework. “When you sit down at a table you don’t just look at the plate and fork,” she said. “You look at the whole table setting.”

She uses the example of a storm runoff problem in Washington Park. “There was an overflow that was not being managed,” she said. “One way to do that was to create a perimeter strategy, where you build up soil and plantings to capture water so it doesn’t run in the streets.”

Sports field?

In addition, county officials are planning an expansion and renovation of the Cal Ripkin Little League field on the parcel known as Park No. 3 in Washington Park. The WPA is not in favor of the expansion, but has secured an agreement with Union City and Hudson County officials to listen to their proposals for a green design for the project.

The WPA wants sustainability features so that the proposed baseball/football/soccer field will have the least possible impact on the surrounding neighborhoods and ecosystems.

A community visioning committee will be made up of the WPA, the city of Union City, Hudson County Parks Department, and residents of Union City and Jersey City.

“The WPA does not want the sports field because they will take down some 17 80-year-old trees, and it is on one of the busiest intersections in Hudson County,” said WPA President Mory Thomas.

The field is at Patterson Plank Road and Palisade Avenue.

“There are no plans for parking, rest rooms, or traffic,” Thomas complained.

Plans have not been nailed down yet because not all of the funding for the expansion of the field has been secured.

“We are pleased that Union City and Hudson County have invited the WPA to have a seat at the table,” Thomas said.

Learning garden

The Jersey City Board of Education passed a resolution in January to partner with the WPA Education Alliance to develop education opportunities in the area of community sustainability. On the WPA agenda is a series of “creative learning experiences for teachers and students,” Italiano said.

“Once you start the conversation about park stewardship and bring awareness into the community and schools, you can begin to cycle a web of knowledge about how to do things,” Italiano said.

The model for the apprentice program is AmeriCorps, the domestic version of the Peace Corps in which members partner with local and national groups to solve community problems.

Education about sustainability can lead to real jobs for young people.

“As the economy comes back,” Italiano said, “this is something that some can go into, entry level in tree nurseries or the composting business.”

It’s not just agriculture that’s affected by sustainability. It can also affect development.

“You can spawn activity, expand the community-wide conversation, and build out green infrastructure,” Italiano said.

She cites the examples of senior centers and housing projects that can be built to green standards.

Mory Thomas, the WPA president, hopes the Dodge grant will set an example for other funding organizations.

He said, “It is a signal that other major foundations will support the efforts of citizens and community organizations in Jersey City and Hudson County to make our community greener.”

Kate Rounds can be reached at krounds@hudsonreporter.com.