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State Senator looks to amend Michigan Right to Farm Act, let Detroit regulate urban farming



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Detroit receives a fair amount of black eyes in the national press, but its urban farming scene has made it a darling of green thumbs and environmental bloggers.

Despite that growing reputation, Detroit zoning laws do not actually allow urban farming. While small-scale and neighborhood farms operate without interference, city leaders have resisted commercial projects that state law precludes them from regulating.



Courtesy Photo

Hantz Farms hopes to turn vacant Detroit lots, such as this, into the world's largest urban farm.

That could change.

Detroit Democratic state Sen. Virgil Smith is preparing to introduce legislation later today that would exempt the city from a provision in the state's Right to Farm Act restricting municipalities from exercising regulatory authority over agriculture.

Urban farming advocates say the law, intended to ensure all Michigan farmers operate under the same rules, is discouraging Detroit from allowing farms that would otherwise generate jobs and food.

"I see this as something that can bring real economic activity to the city of Detroit," Smith told MLive.com. "I don't think there's any other large urban area that has something like this going on. So we can be very innovative, and I really think this could help feed families and put people to work."

Smith believes the legislation is needed to allow people like Gary Wozniak, whose long-planned **Recovery Park** (<http://recoverypark.org/>) project would put addicts and

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ex-cons to work, to create jobs in the city. Or **Hantz Farms** (<http://www.hantzfarmsdetroit.com/>), which has slowed its plan to create the world's largest commercial urban farm in Detroit as city leaders delay rewriting zoning ordinances.



State Sen. Virgil Smith

The Michigan Farm Bureau is fighting any changes to the Right to Farm Act, not because they are opposed to urban farming, but because the law was designed to protect farmers engaged in accepted practices from the whims -- or sensitive noses -- of local residents and their elected representatives.

"Rather than viewing the Right to Farm Act as a barrier to urban farming, the city should consider how the act could assist an urban farmer," Andrew Kok, general counsel of the Michigan Farm Bureau, **wrote earlier this year**

(http://www.mlive.com/news/detroit/index.ssf/2011/03/is_michigans_right_to_farm_act.html)

in a Free Press editorial. "For example, an urban loft dweller could one day object to the organic compost used by the neighboring community garden."

But Detroit, Smith argues, needs the ability to zone farms and fine-tune regulations because urban areas are not an appropriate venue for all types of agriculture.

"The biggest problem is that we do not want folks having, say, pigs right next door to somebody trying to raise a normal family," Smith said. "We want to make sure this is an organized process that can truly bring economic development to the city."

"I think there's a lot of potential in the city of Detroit. I look at the glass half full. We have a lot of open land. Most cities don't have that. We need to advertise that and tell the world we're open for business."

Smith's legislation, co-sponsored by Whitmore Lake Republican Joe Hune, is expected to head to the Senate Agriculture Committee for discussion and analysis before a potential vote next year.

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I suspect the real economic benefits of this whole scheme is the millions of tax dollars that will be passed out to clean up what is essentially a giant brownfield! Nothing that comes off that land will be edible-at least not safely edible. And Michigan has thousands of acres of actual farm land that isnt being farmed right now-that DONT need a clean up.

But we get into real comedy when we get to the part about putting ex-addicts to work doing stoop-labor at minimum wage. Did ya ever try to pay an addict \$20 to mow your lawn? He'll do his damndest to get the \$20 up front-and NEVER mow the lawn . . then you'll find out he stole your lawnmower, too! This whole thing has to be a joke.

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Not to mention only seasonal work. Like you, I wonder who is really benefiting from this. I have a feeling it is not the community.

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What's wrong with this picture? Other areas of the state and country are turning their farmlands into-multi-billion dollar factories that provide good work for thousands, and produce products for the world. In Detroit, we destroy factories that made products for the world and turn them into farms to provide food for a city.

This is the stuff third world countries are made of. This amounts to an urban plantation- exploiting the poor and disenfranchised, and a joke for the rest of the nation to enjoy. Some unanswered questions: Will people really be better off picking corn for a few dollars an hour? Is the land even safe to grow things in- unless you like tomatoes the size of beachballs.

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luckyspot1

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If it's a bad law for Detroit, it's a bad law for rest of the state. Just repeal the thing.

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lookme (<http://connect.mlive.com/user/lookme/index.html>)

Why are we so beholdng to Detroit? I do not mean it's citizens, I mean the Detroit bureaucracy! The Government appears to be made up of conniving individuals who want to enrich their wealth as well as corporate big shots like the Bridge company, Compuware, Penske, and others? If the people want to farm, so be it@ The land would be better served.

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The city should be broken up. It is too big and too crooked to be dealt with as this large white elephant it has become.

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