Urban farm planned for former housing project site

Nate Smallwood | Tribune-Review
Project Manager, Sarah Baxendell, takes people on a tour of The Hilltop Alliance Hilltop Farm site in St. Clair on Thursday, Aug. 24, 2017.

Rev. Maurice C. Trent Jr. remembers walking the streets of St. Clair Village when the former Pittsburgh housing project was a notorious haven for drug dealers, gang activity and murder.

“I buried a lot of young men from up here,” said Trent, pastor of nearby Lighthouse Cathedral church. “To have an opportunity to have young people come here and learn in a productive manner is an awesome thing.”

The Hilltop Alliance is partnering with foundations and government to transform a portion of the vacant, 107-acre site into an urban farm. Public officials, civic leaders and residents gathered there Thursday to acknowledge the first phase of development.

“This will include onsite food production and sales, youth and new farmer education programs and community growing areas,” said Aaron Sukenik, the alliance's executive director. “Upon completion, it will actually be the largest urban farm in the United States and ... just two miles from Downtown.”

Organizers plan to dedicate 23 acres for farming and about 70 acres of hillside as a nature area with trails. The Housing Authority of the City of Pittsburgh is planning to develop the remaining acreage for housing.

Allegheny Land Trust President and CEO Christopher J. Beichner said his organization has agreed to buy the property. It will lease the 23 acres for farming to the Hilltop Alliance and maintain the 70 hillside acres as a conservation area.

“What they would pay is the appraisal price, and we are in the process of getting an appraisal,” said Housing Authority Executive Director Caster Binion. “We're about 99 percent finished with that appraisal.”

He declined to speculate on the price.

Sukenik estimate it would cost $1 million to finish the farm's first phase, including planting areas, sheds and greenhouses. Future phases would include installation of utilities and an events barn. It will take about five years to fully develop the farm, according to project manager Sarah Baxendell.

The Henry L. Hillman Foundation, PNC Foundation, Birmingham Foundation, Heinz Endowments and Neighborhood Allies has pledged financial support, according to the Hilltop Alliance.

Linda Piso, 57, of Knoxville, who lived in St. Clair Village until age 10, said a drug epidemic in the late 1980s and ‘90s destroyed what had been a great place to live.

St. Clair Village was built in 1950 and once featured more than 450 housing units. The Housing Authority demolished the buildings in phases from 2006 to 2010.

“I had the best childhood up here,” Piso said. “I'm all choked up and my heart is fluttering to think about what they're planning up here.”
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