

URBAN RESOURCES INITIATIVE

Detroit, Michigan

Between 1965 and 1990, Detroit experienced a population decline of 600,000 people. This resulted in to a large number of vacant homes in the city. The problem became so severe that, in 1989, the city instituted a widespread demolition program to remove the “dangerous and abandoned” buildings. Consequently, Detroit lost 60,385 housing units, leaving 65,000 vacant lots in the city (Detroit Free Press, 1989). These vacant lots were often used as illegal trash and waste dumps. As a result, many Detroit neighborhood groups came to regard the vacant lots in their area as among the top problems in their communities.

The vacant lots, however, also provided an opportunity for Detroit communities. Through the Michigan State University’s Urban Resources Initiative (URI), Detroit communities have begun to reclaim vacant land and use it for innovative forestry projects that offer economic, social and environmental benefits.

The Urban Resources Initiative, a program of the Department of Forestry, is a community forestry program that operates using a bottom-up approach to address community needs. The program is funded by the Kellogg Foundation and the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Forest Service. Its funding will carry through September of 1996, at which time URI will close operations. The impermanence of the organization is borne out of the organization’s primary objective that it provide resources for community sustainability by emphasizing community participation, ownership and responsibility of the projects.

Community Involvement

The Urban Resources Initiative and participating communities have designed a wide range of projects based upon the economic and social needs and resources within the community.

When a community is interested in starting its own project, it requests technical assistance from URI staff. Once the community decides to embark on a project, it conducts an in-depth needs assessment. The needs assessment identifies all of the goals, concerns, limitations, and resources of the

community. Everything from one resident’s expertise in landscaping to the availability of another resident’s lawn mower are accounted for. This reliance upon the talents and knowledge that already exist within the community is a key to creating community ownership and empowerment. Each community decides upon the focus of its project, who it wants to be involved in the project, whether the project will have a focus on youth and/or seniors, and whether the project will have an economic benefit to the community.



URI’s involvement in the project is determined by how much technical assistance the community members feel they need. Assistance usually includes providing a list of possibilities from which the community will make the final decision (e.g., the types of projects that could achieve the goals of the community or the appropriate tree species for a specific project). At the heart of the project is active community participation and decision-making.

Benefits of Reclamation

Many community groups have a small core of people who do most of the work. While it can be difficult getting younger residents to participate in their activities, teens and young adults often contribute to the tree-planting projects. Since the projects require regular maintenance, they provide participants with a constant reminder of the contribution they are making to the community. Experience indicates that the people who are involved usually remain dedicated over the long-term and eventually become active in other community activities.

The projects are mostly in very low income neighborhoods, and, while the forestry projects may be small, they can provide a source of seed money for future community projects. Some alternatives that have been tried include: planting community orchards, community tree nurseries, and Christmas tree and timber lots. Because the projects are only 3-4 years old, they have not yet reached a point of economic maturity — where trees can be harvested or orchards will bear fruit.

Planting trees in urban settings helps reduce air pollution, increases shade, and

decreases the temperature in the surrounding areas in the summer. They also attract birds and butterflies and other desirable wildlife. The reclamation of vacant lots is working to prevent the illegal dumping of chemicals and construction debris, as well as providing safe places for children and community members to congregate. Through the Urban Resources Initiative, vacant lots that were once viewed as dirty or dangerous are now important assets to the communities.

Sampling of Projects

Prairie Street: The first URI/neighborhood project was planted by the Prairie Street Block Club. This project includes nitrogen fixing shrubs that are enriching the soil for future community garden projects, shade trees, under which the Block Club has been meeting in warm weather, fruit trees to educate the neighborhood children about how fruit grows, and a natural fence blocking illegal dumping from the alley.

Appoline Street: Appoline Block Club members have worked together in a community garden for the past several years. Block Club president, Alice Dye, works with the children of the neighborhood, teaching them about plants and ecology while working in the garden. The children have a vegetable stand where they sell their produce to their parents for a nominal fee and utilize the profits for other community projects or common benefits such as a summer picnic. To lessen the use of pesticides and chemical inputs, the Appoline Club surrounded the community garden with nitrogen fixing shrubs and will be working with the Wayne County Cooperative Extension’s 4-H urban gardening program to acquire further skills and information on organic gardening.

Burnett Street: The Burnett street group was most concerned about a large vacant area that covered nearly the entire northeast third of their block. The vacant area was the result of a large fire that destroyed seven homes. After the fire, the lot became overgrown with weeds and grasses and was often the site of drug sales and other illegal activity, according to the block residents.

To increase the safety of the area as well as provide a “nature path” for potential environmental education programs, the community built a woodchip path lined by 90 trees of species used by the Michigan timber and paper industries. The group may later choose to harvest some of the trees for sale as firewood or timber.

St. Mary’s Street: The St. Mary’s Street block club originally developed a highly innovative project integrating a community

nursery and Christmas tree plantation with an agroforestry garden aimed at enticing adults to the site to supervise the children playing in the remaining open area. Unfortunately, due to difficulties, the Christmas tree lot and agroforestry garden had to be abandoned. After re-evaluation, the community has decided to continue developing the community nursery.

The trees from the nursery will be “adopted” by the residents throughout the community for slightly more than the cost of replacement, thereby ensuring the financial sustainability of the project and additional funding for other community projects. The group will plant a hedge along the back of the lot to impede illegal dumping from the alley and turn the remaining area into a community gathering site. The group hopes to build a barbecue pit and acquire benches, to appeal to adult residents, and leave more open area for the children to use as a playground.

Making it Work—Meeting Challenges

URI staff realizes that for communities to feel ownership of and responsibility for a project, there needs to be active, on-going participation. URI never enters a community uninvited. All projects are initiated by the residents themselves. One project that did not gain widespread community support eventually fell apart.

Making sure the projects are compatible with the community’s needs and resources has been very important. For instance, an older population may be able to maintain a fruit orchard more easily than a Christmas tree lot. Providing communities with additional technical assistance resources, such as university departments specializing in horticulture, has been key to the continued maintenance of projects.

Another challenge in the past was widespread planting of highly invasive tree species. Educating residents about appropriate tree species has been an important aspect of URI’s involvement.

Resources for Future Urban Forestry

Despite the challenges, URI has completed 7 projects within four years and foresees 3 more within its last year. At the time of closure, URI will have available a number of manuals for Detroit communities and for organizations in other cities wishing to start similar initiatives.

The Community Resources Manual includes general information on care and treatment of trees as well as a technical assistance guide. The manual contains about 75 references for sources that can provide more

How To Get in Touch with Urban Resources Initiative

Contact: Maureen McDonough
Department of Forestry
Michigan State University
126 Natural Resources Building
East Lansing, MI 48824

Tel.: (517) 353-5103

Fax: (517) 432-1143

Email: mc dono10@pilot.msu.edu

Web: <http://www.for.msu.edu>

Scope: Local/neighborhoods, urban

Inception Date: 1991

Participants: Citizens, neighborhood "Block Clubs," university program and Extension offices

Project type: Redevelopment, urban forestry, economic development

Methods used: Presentations to neighborhood associations, meetings with interested communities, needs assessment of area, community design of project, donated plantings and materials, maintenance of project by community with assistance, one year evaluation of project

Lessons learned: Projects require active, on-going community participation and dedication to develop community ownership and empowerment over the long-term.

extensive expertise on the care and maintenance of the plots. The manual also contains descriptions of the trees that have been planted in the projects, the different ecological needs of those trees, and the benefits of each species to the community. URI is also developing smaller manuals on specific types of projects such as Christmas tree lots or fruit orchards.

A second publication, *Building Communities—Forestry Partnerships* is written for organizations that want to start a similar initiative within their own city. It contains project descriptions, extensive sources of funding for projects, community organizing hints, and tips on developing similar projects. Also included is a list of tree species and sections that may be reproduced for community group organizing. This manual will soon be published by the Government printing office.

—Community Sustainability Resource Institute



UPDATE

December 1997

The Urban Resources Initiative is now in an evaluation phase. A previous evaluation indicated that the program was successful—especially in providing activities for local children and improving the appearance of the vacant lots. Data is now being collected on the effects of participating in the program for the local organizations. Preliminary findings indicate that the program contributed to improvements for several participating organizations.

A total of 18 lots were developed in seven neighborhoods under the program. It is still too early to determine how successful the projects will be economically. One of the groups, however, sold the majority of the trees from their community nursery to local residents, contributing to neighborhood beautification efforts in addition to raising money for the local organization. Another group chose to transplant the trees to vacant lots throughout the neighborhood rather than use them for fundraising efforts. Improved appearance of those lots has reduced littering in those areas and increased the neighborhood association’s visibility throughout the community. Some fruit has been harvested for use by local families.

Local residents indicate that the neighborhoods benefitted from participating in the program. Residents were encouraged that others made an effort to help them, and were inspired to continue building on that foundation.

The Department of Forestry is continuing to provide technical assistance to the neighborhoods. They are providing information on how to maintain the projects including advice on mulching, winter management, and moving plant materials. The assistance efforts include visits to the neighborhoods, community meetings, and the preparation of maintenance guides for each of the lots.

The project was a pilot study of the feasibility of community-driven forestry initiatives and there are no immediate plans for continuing the initiative. There is a hope, however, that once the evaluation has been completed and the results are reported, non-governmental organizations and natural resource managers in Detroit and other areas will incorporate more community-driven approaches in the future.

—Community Sustainability Resource Institute