Vacant lot on Tucker Street will be newest urban farm

By Meena Ramakrishnan
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A previously empty lot in Dorchester is where a seed has been planted to spur the growth of urban gardens across the city. The fenced land on Tucker Street is where site preparation has begun this week to double the size of the Victory Programs' ReVision Urban Farm flagship site on Fabian Street.

As one of two plots of land chosen by the Department of Neighborhood Development, the garden is a stake in the ground to move its Urban Agriculture pilot program forward. The gardening that happens at the ReVision Urban Farm is exactly the sustainable model the city is trying to encourage, if the effort proves successful.

Since 1990, the ReVision Family Home has supported homeless families with housing, job resources, case work and other related services in addition to providing locally grown fruits and vegetables. The farm and the shelter merged under the ownership of Victory Programs in 2005 and today it serves 22 families. They continue to supply not only those on site but also neighbors who visit their Blue Hill Avenue farm stand during the summer months with fresh fruits and vegetables for sale.

That kind of community engagement has been the focal point in a broader conversation the city is trying to have about urban agriculture, says Director of Food Initiatives Edith Murmane. Since the pilot program began two years ago, talks have been in place around the zoning code and cultivating land on residential, commercial and mixed use plots.

There are several agricultural models the department has considered that are emerging all across the city and state. They come in a variety of forms and have a number of purposes, such as gardening on rooftops or greenhouses; supplying farmer's markets; or employing youth. Murmane says these urban gardens all have the ability to address multiple interests of the city, including hunger, health issues, jobs, green initiatives and sustainability.

"The city has multiple interests that urban agriculture is sort of at the intersection of," she said. "It's what they call a 'triple threat' in that it has the ability to impact all of those areas."

The Tucker Street lot was approved for micro-farming last November, and if all goes as planned, the garden would have its lease extended for the next five years. Jolie Olivetti, the manager of the farm, says it will take about a month to remove trees, level the farm land, raise farm beds and install a new fence before the 18,000 square foot lot can grow crops.

During the colder months, all-organic fruits and vegetables are grown in a greenhouse until the growing season begins in April and ends in late October. The workers and volunteers grow every kind of produce available at a grocery store and even some ethnic markets in order to appeal to all of their customers. The farm also features a Community Supported Agriculture program that offers weekly shares and discounted memberships to lower-income families in Dorchester and Mattapan.

However the Department of Neighborhood Development chooses to identify the progress of the growing space, Olivetti's measures of success remain committed to the neighborhood. The two lots are overseen by a community advisory group comprised of residents, local farmers and representatives from the Talbot Norfolk Neighbors United. From the committee and customers alike, she constantly gets feedback on the status of the garden and what neighbors think could improve.

"For ourselves, our measures of success are... if we're building relationships with our neighbors and what we can do to better serve the community," Olivetti says.