



Harvesting Community

How Community Gardens Are Helping to Rebuild Lenoir

Category: Community Building or Partnerships

Jurisdiction: City of Lenoir, North Carolina

City Manager: W. Lane Bailey,

Please consider for an Innovation Award

Please consider for Rapid Fire Sessions

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SYNOPSIS

Intent of the project/program/service

After a loss of 8,000 manufacturing jobs within a period of five years, almost every one of Lenoir, North Carolina's 6,100 households felt the impact of living in a community faced with economic, social, and cultural challenges. The abandoned Singer furniture factory site on College Avenue symbolized the city's sense of loss and need for a new community identity. Within three-quarters of a mile of the Singer site, the following conditions existed: 1) Two elementary schools had an average of over sixty percent of their children on free or reduced lunch. 2) The Lenoir Soup Kitchen, Yokefellow, and Helping Hands Clinic were attempting to serve increased numbers of residents with declining budgets, and 3) Caldwell Memorial Hospital attempted to serve a community whose health outcomes were among the poorest in North Carolina.

As the community struggled to rebuild its economic base while addressing the increased demands for medical service for the uninsured and greater demands on social service agencies, a unique partnership, Caldwell Community Gardens was forged. The Caldwell Community Gardens partnership consists of the City of Lenoir, Caldwell Memorial Hospital, Caldwell County Master Gardeners, and a coalition of faith-based organizations and local residents with a passion for gardening and food security issues.

The first community garden in Lenoir began in 2009 when a group of volunteers led by Sara and Dick Mursch and Marisue Haigler approached the City of Lenoir about finding a location for building raised garden beds that could be used to educate people about growing fresh produce. David Horn, the Vice-President for Business Development for Caldwell Memorial Hospital and a dedicated home gardener, joined the community garden volunteers. A site was prepared and thirty raised beds were built by volunteers on a piece of city-owned land on Beall Street next door to Mt. Pilgrim Baptist Church. Located in an historic African-American neighborhood, the Beall Street gardens were initially viewed with skepticism about whether or not people from all over the community would come into a neighborhood that many of them had never visited before to garden. That skepticism soon disappeared as volunteer Master Gardeners helped new gardeners from all over the city begin planting in the Beall Street gardens. The success of the Beall Street gardens encouraged the volunteers to seek other locations in the community to expand available gardening options to more people.

The City of Lenoir offered the former Singer furniture factory site as an option. The site was not only an eyesore, but also a painful symbol of the economic transition taking place in Lenoir with debris from two fires and tons of broken concrete. The Caldwell Community Gardens partnership was formed and quickly developed a vision for transforming 5.6 acres of the site into the home of Unity Park and Community Gardens which would include 75 raised garden beds, a walking path, and fruit and berry orchards.

Costs

Work began on the site in July of 2010, after the City of Lenoir received a two year FIT Community grant from the North Carolina Health and Wellness Trust Fund for \$60,000. Using matching funds and in-kind contributions from the City of Lenoir, Caldwell Memorial Hospital, and private donations to the Caldwell Memorial Hospital Foundation for community gardens, Unity Park was constructed. The City of Lenoir provided leadership by committing to provide the land, water supply, and staff time to administer grant funds, clear and grade the land, and construct the garden shed. Caldwell Memorial Hospital provided staff time for participation in the partnership, free health screenings to entice people to sign up for garden beds, and a unique duo “Two Men and a Stove,” (consisting of a vice-president from administration and a physician) who presented demonstrations of cooking with fresh produce and herbs that were filmed for distribution on the local public access television programming. Gardeners in the partnership helped created a Gardens Operation Committee that established operational policies for the gardens, recruited gardeners to assist people who were new to gardening, and solicited support and resources for the gardens.

Innovative characteristics and how they improved the organization

Through the efforts of the partnership, volunteers were recruited from the Google server farm in Lenoir to construct the first twenty-five raised garden beds at the park. Other volunteers planted a plot of land in the park with potatoes, corn, turnips, lettuces and other greens—all foods that were distributed to local social service agencies such as the Lenoir Soup Kitchen, Caldwell Shelter Home, and Yokefellow.

In order to make the park as sustainable as possible, the partnership sought assistance from cooperative extension in acquiring and installing water collection cisterns to utilize rainwater for watering the orchard and berry patches. The city’s Building and Maintenance division travelled to the state Arboretum in Asheville to study the garden shed there. Using plans modeled after the Arboretum shed, employees built the shed at Unity Park, incorporating solar energy.

Outcomes

In February of 2012, fifty additional garden beds were constructed by volunteers from the city, the hospital, and citizens. In March of 2012, regional television stations WBTV-Charlotte and WSOC-Charlotte covered the planting of 150 dwarf apple and pear trees in the orchard at Unity Park. Reporters covering the event had both been at the Singer site in 2009 when a major fire at the old furniture factory threatened nearby businesses and homes. In their broadcasts, the reporters commented on “the remarkable transformation” and the “renewed community pride” evident at Unity Park. One of the broadcasts included a quote from a resident saying “This is the new Lenoir,” commenting on the many ways the gardens have brought people in the community together. In June of this year, *Parade* magazine came to Lenoir to do a feature story on the Beall Street and Unity Park Community Gardens. The story is scheduled for publication in August of this year.

Applicable Results and Real World Practicality

The community gardening initiatives in the City of Lenoir have succeeded because of the ways that partnerships have been formed and the trust that has been built among the partners. Each segment of the partnership has brought unique talents and resources to accomplish the shared vision. The partnership brought together organizations who were all challenged to address conditions brought about by economic and social change in their community, but every condition could not be addressed at one time by the partnership with the resources that were available. The partnership learned the importance of narrowing its work plan to objectives that were more strategic at various stages of development. For example, one broad goal had been to measure health outcomes of people who were gardening at Unity Park. The partnership made a wise decision to focus on building the park, developing operational strategies, and recruiting gardeners during the first years of operation. Recruiting and tracking health outcomes will become much more manageable once those objectives are fully realized. Another valuable lesson was the importance of communication among the members of the partnership. The partnership meets at least once a month to share information about Unity Park, but also to share information and ideas about what the various members of the partnership are doing. As a result, communication and trust among partners has been strengthened.

Additional Information

Additional photographs and information about community gardening in Lenoir are available in links from the homepage of the City of Lenoir website at www.cityoflenoir.com.

Active Living by Design chose Lenoir’s FIT Community grant project as a case study in its June 8, 2012 publication available at this link:

<http://www.activelivingbydesign.org/events-resources/resources/fit-community-case-studies>

PRESENTATION STYLE

Description

Members of the Caldwell Community Gardens Partnership have prepared presentations that incorporate the following:

1. Organization of the partnership: how to build partnerships with diverse groups to work to a common civic purpose
2. Construction of the gardens: ways of using “in-sourcing” and volunteers to maximize funding
3. Strategies for attracting gardeners to the program and building community support for community gardening as a means of improving the supply of healthy, locally-grown produce within a community

Presentation Tools

The Caldwell Community Gardens Partnership has developed a Power Point presentation that tells the story of community gardening in Lenoir as well as a short video that features gardeners from Beall Street, Unity Park, and Whitnel Elementary school gardens and some of the agencies and individuals who are the recipients of produce distributed from each of the gardens.

Group Activity Description

Several handouts giving examples of publicity materials, operational procedures, etc. will be available to participants as take-aways from the session.

Live Demonstrations

If the conference set up permits, an adapted version of “Two Men and a Stove” can do a live demonstration with samples of recipes incorporating produce from the gardens.