

**Ensuring an Arable Future:
Policies Recommendations to Support Food Sovereignty in Detroit**

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Introduction

We call for a radical shift, using urban agriculture as a tool for liberation, promoting healthy communities, and moving beyond food security to food sovereignty. The city of Detroit and other institutions have an opportunity and obligation to support urban agriculture, thus we are proposing reparative policies recommendations that would support community members carrying out land stewardship. Throughout this document are multiple recommendations and suggested policy strategies the city of Detroit should take into account when amending different ordinances surrounding urban agriculture. All of the recommendations stated were reinforced through the interviews and knowledge of farmers around Detroit. This document uplifts their words and is made for the people, by the people.

Revision for the Land Value Tax Plan To Protect All Forms of Urban Agriculture

Context:

“Currently under this plan, urban farms, community gardens, and community spaces will not be affected by the Land Value Tax. They are deemed community space under the proposal.”¹

Policy Recommendation:

We recommend that husbandry space is added to the plan as a low-tax area type in addition to properties with buildings and community land spaces. We advise that gardens that are not large enough to be considered urban farms and raised bed gardens on parking lots are added as spaces within this husbandry space category.

Additionally we suggest that the city of Detroit specify the uses of said garden spaces so that negative agents cannot purchase land without the intent of allowing it to contribute to community growth. Finally, the departments that are tasked with the operation of taxation and permits need to establish clear communication channels for community members to understand its processes.

Why:

We value the positive impact that this land tax can offer to urban growers and to homeowners within the city. This act will increase taxes on land lots and decrease the property taxes by reducing Operating expenses charged. The issues that could potentially arise are ambiguous application processes for aspiring landowners who want to purchase a lot. The process for applying for land is complicated and unfortunately departments are not well equipped to communicate effectively with each other in regard to

¹ <https://detroitmi.gov/departments/office-chief-financial-officer/land-value-tax-plan>

documentation, permits, and this can lead to a sharp delay which makes it difficult for farmers to actually acquire the land.

Adding Quails and Rabbits to the Animal Keeping Ordinance Proposed City Code Amendment

Context:

The Detroit City Planning Commission is currently working toward establishing a new city code to allow people to keep chickens, ducks, and bees on their property². This undertaking will play a crucial role in bolstering food security, advancing agricultural education, and fostering economic opportunities, as noted in previous community meeting presentations.

Policy Recommendation:

We recommend including quails within this same animal keeping ordinance in addition to the other animals already included. We also suggest including rabbits within a future expansion to the ordinance if okayed by community feedback.

Why:

We believe this expansion aligns with the overarching objectives of the Animal Keeping Ordinance and strengthens the positive impact of the proposed amendment. We acknowledge that the current proposed amendment is built upon the years of previous conversations and feedback from the community, but we believe that rabbits and quails as food sources are currently less known and therefore less advocated for but no less valuable, as these animals represent highly efficient and sustainable sources of protein. Community members should have the option to raise quails rather than or in addition to chickens and ducks.

Some notable advantages of having quails compared to chickens are:

- (1) Quails are smaller than chickens, requiring less space for housing and roaming³. This makes them well-suited for urban environments or areas with limited backyard space.
- (2) Quails mature faster and reach egg-laying age (at 6 weeks)² sooner than chickens (18 weeks)⁴. They also have a shorter incubation period for eggs. This means a quicker turnaround time for obtaining quail eggs or meat.
- (3) Quails are known for their efficient feed conversion⁵, meaning they require less food to produce the same amount of meat or eggs compared to chickens. This can result in lower feed costs for quail farming.
- (4) Quails are known for their resistance to certain poultry diseases⁶.

Keeping rabbits for food, also known as cuniculture⁷, is a convention that is practiced around the world. While this may not be currently very common in Detroit, the option to have meat rabbits should be provided by the ordinances as there are many advantages to cuniculture such as

² [Animal Keeping Ordinance](#)

³ [Quail Farming: An Introduction](#)

⁴ [How Long Do Chickens Lay Eggs? Goals for Laying Hens](#)

⁵ [Feed Efficiency of Selected and Nonselected Japanese Quail Lines](#)

⁶ [Raising Quail vs Chickens](#)

⁷ [Cuniculture](#)

- (1) Rabbit meat is lean and has high nutritional value. It is a good source of protein, essential amino acids, and minerals like iron and phosphorus⁸.
- (2) Rabbits are known for their efficient feed conversion, meaning they can produce a significant amount of meat with relatively low amounts of feed⁹.
- (3) Rabbits have a high reproductive rate, with short gestation periods and large litters. This results in a quick turnaround for meat production⁹.
- (4) Rabbits can be raised in relatively small spaces, making them suitable for urban and suburban environments⁸.
- (5) Rabbit farming generally has a lower environmental impact than larger livestock operations.

Rabbits produce less methane and require less water and feed to produce a unit of meat¹⁰.

Acknowledging that rabbits can become invasive if released into nature, policies around proper containment of rabbits for husbandry would also be appropriate to pursue.

Enhanced Land Purchasing Accessibility and Transparency

Context:

The Detroit Land Bank Authority (DLBA) is a municipal organization focused on repurposing vacant and blighted properties in Detroit. It employs various sales programs, including auctions, Own It Now, and Rehabbed & Ready, to facilitate accessible homeownership and land purchases.

Policy Recommendations:

We suggest enhancing transparency in the DLBA land purchasing process and establishing additional urban agriculture specific opportunities for Detroit residents to acquire land in coordination with community feedback. Below we outline potential changes to meet these goals, but overall we suggest DLBA leadership works directly with urban farmers in Detroit to translate these ideas into action to meet specific community desires. We propose that DLBA implements a transparent pricing system for all land-based marketed properties. This should include clear criteria for determining the value of the property.

On top of that, we recommend that DLBA creates new property purchasing pathways that are specifically designed to better support urban farmers. Particularly, we suggest that DLBA creates a demonstrated stewardship pathway and a confirmation of agricultural use pathway. A demonstrated stewardship pathway would be for farmers that currently use property for agriculture but do not own the land. A confirmation of agricultural use pathway would require buyers interested in purchasing land for urban agriculture to confirm their intended use during the application process. This confirmation could be legally binding, ensuring that the land is utilized for its intended purpose and discouraging speculation. In both pathways, farmers are given priority in the land purchase process.

Moreover, DLBA should establish a clear and detailed process for reviewing and approving land purchase applications, where they provide specific and transparent reasons for the denial in cases where an application is denied, ensuring that applicants understand the criteria used in the decision-making

⁸ [Game meat, rabbit](#)

⁹ [Rabbit as a meat producing animal](#)

¹⁰ [Cuniculture](#)

process. Additionally, we propose including data on sales of land for urban agriculture in quarterly reports.

Why:

Enhanced accessibility and transparency in land purchasing are fundamental for the success of urban agriculture in Detroit. By increasing access to land for local farmers, the policy serves to benefit urban agriculture efforts while also contributing to preventing speculation, ensuring that the land is used for productive and community-oriented purposes. Current lack of land ownership leads to the inability to make permanent investments in infrastructure. Our recommendations aim to foster higher rates of ownership allowing for the construction of permanent structures, fostering stability and long-term investment in urban agriculture projects. The proposed changes also respond to the expressed need for clear, consistent, and transparent land purchase policies, which are vital for the development and growth of urban agriculture in Detroit.

Communication Best Practices

Context:

The City of Detroit has hired its first Director of agriculture amidst accusations of a lack of knowledge and thought in the way of urban agriculture. Detroit is a city rich with urban agriculture knowledge and a long history of food sovereignty organizations, activism, and land use.

Policy Recommendation:

We recommend that all relevant city staff be trained and held to a standard of communication with Urban Farmers including:

- Transparency about any lack of knowledge on behalf of staff
- Onus on City Government to learn more about urban agriculture and compensate experts for any education they provide
- Regular Check-ins and consensual site visits with the community about what they need from the City

City-level institutions would benefit from more urban-agriculture focused administrative staff starting with:

- A Detroit Land Bank Urban Agriculture Administrator
- An Urban Agriculture Administrator for the Buildings, Safety Engineering, and Environmental Department who is focused on improving the permitting, inspection, and acquisition process at an administrative level

Why:

Training city staff is important as it will equip them with the necessary knowledge about urban farming which they may otherwise lack. Being open about knowledge gaps can lead to productive conversations, avoidance of unproductive decisions, and minimization of potential misunderstandings. Especially in a city with a rich history in urban agriculture and food sovereignty, there is a wealth of expertise that can be tapped into. The recommendations also place the responsibility on the city government to learn from these local experts, thereby creating a more engaged, informed, and invested administrative body.

Regular, consensual check-ins and site visits allow government agencies to understand the needs of the community firsthand and adjust their approaches accordingly. This direct channel of communication fosters mutual understanding and cooperation, and ensures that the initiatives being carried out are tailored to the community's needs and preferences.

The creation of urban agriculture-focused positions within city institutions is key to ensuring administrative awareness and oversight of this vital sector. A dedicated Urban Agriculture Administrator in Detroit's Land Bank would provide specialized attention to land use issues related to urban farming. Similarly, a dedicated Urban Agriculture Administrator for Buildings, Safety Engineering, and Environmental Department would ensure that the permitting, inspection, and acquisition processes are convenient and conducive for urban farmers. These positions would navigate the specific challenges inherent in urban farming, thereby leading to more effective, efficient, and informed decision-making.

Brownfield Recommendations

Context:

The State of Michigan and the City of Detroit have, in recent years, but millions upon millions of dollars towards new developments and redevelopments that remediate and “de-blight” lots that no longer serve their intended use due to their contaminated or vacant status. In conversations about water policies and the unfair pricing of agriculture use of municipal water, we were reminded over and over again about the remediation of land that is baked into the urban agricultural mode

Policy Recommendation:

Community Level:

- Work with an attorney and other advocacy groups to make the case for urban agricultural projects to qualify for brownfield funds.
- Gather community knowledge about the best way for the City and State to structure grants to help with the remediation activities behind urban agriculture.

City Level:

- Explicitly codify Urban Agriculture as eligible for City of Detroit’s brownfield funds
- Work with community knowledge to design a grant process that is tailored to the financial life cycle of these unique projects.

State Level:

- Explicitly codify Urban Agriculture as eligible for brownfield funds State-Wide
- Work with existing community knowledge to design a grant process that is tailored to the financial life cycle of these unique projects.
- Establish a brownfield fund that is restricted to urban food sovereignty projects.

Why:

The policy recommendations aim to improve access to brownfield funding for urban agriculture projects in Detroit, a crucial move to facilitate the transformation of vacant and contaminated lots into productive, community-serving green spaces.

Engaging with attorneys and advocacy groups at the community level can help build a compelling case for why urban agricultural projects should be eligible for brownfield funds. This collaborative approach can also ensure that the nuanced needs and experiences of the urban farming community are well-represented.

By synthesizing community insights, both the city and state can structure grants that accurately align with the unique financial needs associated with urban agriculture's remedial processes. This understanding can help create more fitting and accessible funds to foster urban agricultural development.

Codifying Urban Agriculture as eligible for brownfield funds both city and state-wide is essential, providing clear legal backing that empowers urban agricultural projects to operate and thrive within the established regulatory framework. This explicit acknowledgement can solidify the state's commitment to urban agriculture as a critical part of sustainable development and food security.

By taking local knowledge into account when designing the grant processes, the city and state can better ensure that funds are distributed fairly, accessible, and according to the needs of various farming projects.

Lastly, the establishment of a brownfield fund dedicated specifically for urban food sovereignty projects reflects an understanding of urban agriculture's potential to address pressing food security issues, fight against food deserts, and revitalize communities. It is a recognition of the importance of these projects, not just in terms of land reuse, but also in addressing larger social issues related to food access and community resilience.

Next Steps/What We Would Have Done With More Time

Context: The recommendations we placed in this document are some immediate policies amendments that should be considered for urban agriculture in Detroit. However, there are more policy recommendations for future short and long term goals that should be taken into account with the advancement of sustainable food systems and sovereignty.

Recommendations:

Short Term

1. Adjusted pricing and credit system for agricultural water use
2. Addition of other small animals within husbandry ordinance for farmers with regulatory policies around animal care

Why:

1. When speaking with Baba Malik, he mentioned that water bills for farmers are often extremely high, which hinders the growth of food sovereignty in Detroit. Agriculture plays a huge role in filtering water, along with diverting storm water from flooding the streets and aid in its drainage. To solve this issue, farmers should be given a discounted rate on how much they pay for water because of their contribution to the water system in Detroit. There would need to be more research about this topic moving forward, but it would be an amazing opportunity to enhance the work of urban farmers in Detroit and the ultimate goals for food sovereignty and improving liberation through land stewardship.

2. With the addition of quails and rabbits as policy recommendations into the Animal Keeping Ordinance Proposed City Code Amendment, it is also important to consider the possibilities of other farm animals that can be included into the husbandry ordinance in the future. It does not go unnoticed that the inclusion of other animals means more work and regulations to follow when caring for the animals proposed, such as goats, sheep, etc. That is why there should be funding allocated to training workshops on how to properly care for farm animals in a humane and appropriate manner. To ensure there is no abuse or mishandling among animals present at any given farm. The addition of other animals in the future may seem far, but when it comes into fruition, it will no doubt further enhance the food liberation movement that is being cultivated in Detroit.

Recommendations:

Long Term

1. Policies to prevent resident displacement amidst development
2. Paths to communal land ownership to support undocumented community members in Detroit

Why:

1. When speaking to Dolores Perales, she highlighted that there are many residents in Detroit (speaking from personal experience in Southwest Detroit) that rent houses for years, and then will be forced to move out by the landlord if someone buys their home. Displacing them as they struggle to find other housing to support their families. With the rapid growth of gentrification and home ownership of residents that are not from Detroit, there should be policies in place that require landlords to give a warning to tenants with a substantial amount of time so they can find other places to live before evicting them so suddenly. There are many Black and Brown community members in Detroit that do not have the ability to buy their homes, these residents should be protected from these distressing sudden occurrences. Many may think that housing development and urban agriculture are not intertwined but they are, it is all interconnected under environmental justice. Farmers need a place to rest when they are away from working on the land, and if they do not have home, how will they be able to take care of themselves? A community's sovereignty of food, also means their autonomy over community rights like housing and connections to the land and other resources.
2. In Southwest Detroit, there are numerous individuals with undocumented status in the United States, they work hard to sustain their families and make sure their children receive an education. This would also include an education to food and the land as well. Cadillac Urban Gardens is a place where people can attain fresh produce for free, harvested straight from the soil. However, some undocumented residents wish to grow their own food, but do not want to risk their chances of deportation. Therefore, a policy should be established in which there should be easier pathways to communal farm ownership, to aid all residents in farming regardless of their citizenship status. Furthering the values of food sovereignty and community care through the earth.