

EAST BAY EXPRESS

June 16, 2010

GARDENING EDEN

Susan Beck says urban gardens can improve people's health, create green space, provide jobs, dampen crime, and revitalize Cherryland. That's a lot to ask of a few plots of land.



County Supervisor Nate Miley, Shanale Allen, and Susan Beck break ground at Dig Deep Farms

By Anna McCarthy

On April 19, the Ashland/Cherryland Garden Network broke ground at its first urban farm site, temporarily leased to it by the Alameda County Fire Department. The department had hoped to use the property for fire engine maintenance, but was never able to secure enough money to do so. So when the network approached it with the option of transforming the plot into community farmland, "we thought, well, if that's what it was meant to be, then that's what it was meant to be," firefighter John Torres recalled.

Now one of six sites that are together officially called "Dig Deep Farms," this .2-acre property is the largest plot of land the network has yet obtained

permission to farm. Bigger than it appears from the fence that separates it from the sidewalk, the narrow, citrus-tree-lined property abuts Fire Station Number Three on 164th Avenue in Ashland, an unincorporated area between San Leandro and Hayward.

By the day of the groundbreaking, ten newly hired urban farmers had roto-tilled long mounds of dirt in preparation for spring planting. And when the ceremony began and Susan Beck stepped up to the mic, she thanked the workers for their effort. Amplified by a tinny speaker, Beck's voice was shaky but firm: "This project began when I approached Sergeant Marty Neideffer with a small grant for neighborhood gardens and this book," she said, holding up a hardback copy of *The Green Collar Economy* by former White House advisor Van Jones.

There was a time when not only Ashland but this entire region was known for its green-collar economy. Back in the 1880s, it boasted the East Bay's highest concentration of fruit tree orchards, thanks to Alameda County's first commercial farmer, William Meek. The properties around Meek's mansion, which he built in 1869, came to be called "Cherryland" because they were dense with cherry trees.

Cherryland and neighboring Ashland, San Lorenzo, Castro Valley, and Fairview are still known today as the "Eden Areas." But most are no longer as idyllic as that name suggests. As industrialization heightened in the 1940s, development quickly turned the region from farm to suburb. Migrant workers were ghettoized in these unincorporated neighborhoods due to racial prejudice in the housing policies of nearby cities.

Today, the majority of Cherryland and Ashland residents are Latino and working-class, and boast some of the worst health statistics in the Bay Area. For instance, county statistics say Cherryland residents are 86 percent more likely to die of diabetes

than residents of any other part of the county. Their overall mortality rate is 48 percent higher than the countywide average, with heart disease the leading cause of death.

There could be any number of reasons for this: demographics, poor health education, lack of access to public health resources. Whatever the cause, in 2004 health problems in unincorporated western Alameda County were so bad that County Supervisor Nate Miley declared a local state of emergency, and began the "Eden Area Livability Initiative" as part of an effort to fix up the place.

That initiative partly marks Susan Beck's entrance into Cherryland politics. Today, she is at the helm of a growing group of stakeholders known as the "Ashland/Cherryland Garden Network," which recently landed about \$65,000 in funding to hire a dozen full-time employees to initiate and maintain six local sites now secured for urban farming. The group found allies in Supervisor Miley and Sergeant Marty Neideffer of the Alameda County Deputy Sheriff's Activities League.

The network's relatively rapid progress is proof that something in its strategy struck a chord. "The velocity at which this project has come to fruition is unheard of in community-county partnership," Beck said at the groundbreaking. "And that's only possible when the people in charge take things personally."

Indeed, the proof was right there in the crowd, which consisted of firefighters, police, community members, political supporters, and passersby. The network secured funding, created jobs for community members, and started planting on otherwise unused land, accomplishing more in a year than similar activists in Oakland have been able to do in ten.

But the million-dollar question is whether these efforts can take root long-term. Network leaders hope to create so much food that the farms will pay for themselves. But longtime urban agriculture advocates say the dream of building a self-sustaining food system is more complicated than it sounds.

As hype mounts around the panacea potential of urban agriculture, it seems like every city in America is vying to rejuvenate via a return to its agrarian roots. But is this movement sustainable?

After all, urban gardens are tasked with a long list of lofty expectations that include improving health, reducing obesity rates, remediating the soil, creating green space, dampening crime, providing jobs and education, increasing property values, nourishing potential spin-off businesses like restaurants and bakeries, and even making money.

It's a hefty load for a few small plots of land.

Susan Beck isn't daunted by the challenge. During an early-February tour of her neighborhood in Cherryland, an unincorporated square mile bounded by Ashland, Hayward, San Lorenzo, and Castro Valley, she walks to the house next to hers, which is blighted and empty. The windows are boarded and a swath of weeds skirts the front door.

"They don't plan to do anything with this house," she said, throwing up her hands. "What I'm saying is: let's bring in some kids to garden this sucker."

Beck sees gardens everywhere. For her, envisioning gardens also means envisioning her neighborhood's first produce market and, ultimately, a better Cherryland overall — one with more jobs, better public health, and reduced crime rates. Beck's utopian vision relies on the county looking to a new model of economic growth — one that relies less on housing and more on urban gardens.

Beck had only just crossed the street from her house when she stopped in front of a small plot of oxalis flanking a shabby-looking row of one-story studios. Pointing out the similarly weed-laden plots beside each doorstep, she said, "All of this could be growing food for them."

Walking behind the studios to a partially cemented space in the backyard that could have easily fit six cars, she continued: "At current density levels, they could build more units in the back. They could build a two-story box back here and fit in a whole bunch more people. But we'd like to see this be food for the folks who live here. And maybe even for a little community market."

Thanks in part to books like *Fast Food Nation* and *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, the so-called food-justice movement had already exploded well before the Obamas broke ground on the White House vegetable garden. The East Bay is at the

forefront of the movement, as home to author Michael Pollan and chef Alice Waters, who tout the importance of healthy eating; and Van Jones and Bryant Terry, who are helping show the nation that environmentalism and food consciousness aren't just the domain of upper-class white folks. In her book *Farm City*, author Novella Carpenter demonstrated that even the cementscape of West Oakland isn't such a bad place for a farm.

Some food-justice advocates have been working to localize food production for years. Take Brahm Ahmadi; roughly eight years ago, he and a cohort of young activists had a vision of opening the first large-scale grocery store in West Oakland. The produce-centered grocery would be a healthy beacon among the plentiful liquor stores that had helped the neighborhood earn its designation as a "food desert" in some circles. The shelves would be stocked with local produce from urban gardens and other nearby farms. Community members would be able to find employment at the store, which would boost the local economy and up the price of real estate for the area. It was a beautiful vision with big potential impacts and a seemingly simple on-the-ground strategy.

But six months later, after doing some homework, Ahmadi was forced to rethink his approach. The grocery business, it turned out, is high risk, low margin, and extremely complicated.

Like Ahmadi, Beck hopes to help provide a healthier diet to Cherryland and Ashland residents. And, like Ahmadi and his colleagues discovered eight years ago, Beck has discovered that there are plenty of challenges to overcome.

When Beck first entered the food-justice movement, she had just bought a house in Cherryland and moved there from Oakland with her family. But her dream of living in a quaint neighborhood full of green space was quickly squelched when she noticed the parcels around her home being transformed into high-density housing developments. Beck says she couldn't sit by and watch as green space began disappearing around her home, parcel by parcel.

After starting what she called the "Laurel Avenue Preservation Project," Beck managed to successfully fight a few development projects while simultaneously becoming a regular gadfly at county planning commission meetings. Since that time, she says, the project has broadened to cover all of Cherryland and Ashland.

During this time, she became active in the Cherryland neighborhood association, and she and association president Ruth Baratta began leading a group of community members interested in transforming the western Eden Areas into the East Bay's next garden district. They called themselves the "Gardeners of Eden."

In 2008, Beck became one of nine **Koshland Fellowship recipients from the Cherryland/Ashland areas, all chosen by the [San Francisco Foundation](#) for their civic leadership.** The stipend they received from the fellowship, a total of \$300,000 to be distributed evenly over the following five years for neighborhood improvement projects in Cherryland and Ashland, meant that she had the seed money to realize the Gardeners' vision of growing food for the community. Armed with the new funding and support from the other Koshland fellows, Beck reached out to community leaders like Sergeant Neideffer and to urban gardening experts in Oakland to make the most of the funding.

In January, Beck used some of her grant money to begin mapping out available parcels of land, both public and private, that might be leased or donated for gardening. Eventually, she envisioned hiring a small group of community members to initiate and maintain farms located on parcels either donated or leased by willing supporters. The network would start by selling the produce in the form of home-delivered boxes and, eventually, as the vision goes, sell from a storefront. Long-term, she hopes the abundance of produce grown in Cherryland gardens will become a way to address the unemployment problem. With so much food, she imagines, Cherryland could even become a job-training hub.

"Not only job training; like, we're going to teach you how to hammer a nail," she said. "But giving people opportunities to be trained in jobs in areas they would love to be involved in. People can get involved in gardening, or go into the community garden cafe and become a chef, or a restaurant manager. Our little community here would be a training ground and then the businesses would be a natural outgrowth of the training."

Rather than balk at the idealism of Beck's goals, her supporters brainstormed about how to make it happen. April Lockett, a local deputy in charge of a new "crime-free multihousing" program in the area, suggested that some of the green areas in these housing units might be used for gardening. Sergeant Neideffer suggested that students at the Deputy Sheriff's Activities Leagues, which he directs, could get involved in leadership training at the gardens.

Neideffer has a personal stake in revitalizing the neighborhood he grew up in. But he also believes the gardens will offer job opportunities to keep people off the street, and offer an outlet for the area's high population of parolees. He said that eventually he'd like to see Santa Rita jail offering the same kind of program as San Quentin's Insight Garden Program, which trains the incarcerated to manage garden plots. If parolees come back to the Eden Areas with the right training, he said, their re-entry will be easier with infrastructure like community gardens already in place.

The sergeant helped secure \$15,000 in grant money to employ ten community members to maintain what is currently six garden sites, all being leased to the network for \$1 per year. Neideffer and the Deputy Sheriff's Activities League were able to leverage this funding through one of Obama's Recovery Act programs called AC Hire, which will match 80 percent of the salaries and employment costs for the new hires because they are all unemployed parents, which is a requirement of the program.

Grant money also is being used to train forty local volunteers with the help of an Oakland-based edible garden company called All Edibles to install eight neighborhood gardens next year. Some of the Koshland Fellowship money is providing salaries for two full-time employees, a project manager and farm manager, to oversee all of the network's projects.

Beck says the store and other potential associated businesses are probably five to ten years down the road from now. But the group is poised to move forward quickly. The question now is whether the land will still be available for cultivation.

Many of the properties that the network mapped as potential farmland were also marked for potential medium- to high-density residential development in the county's latest housing plans. The state requires counties to update such housing plans every five years, and in the draft adopted on March 30, the majority of all the unincorporated Alameda County properties designated for this type of development are located in Cherryland and Ashland.

Ideally, more housing would make it easier and more affordable for residents in these areas to own houses. But the truth is that they are both rife with absentee landlords. Alameda County's most recent health statistics indicate that Cherryland has the lowest percent of owner-occupied households in the county next to Ashland, at just 32.5 percent. Plus, the amount of green space in Cherryland is less than 20 percent of the county's standard.

Beck and other supporters fought hard to see the housing element revised to make room for more green space and infrastructure — like grocery stores, parks, and community recreational facilities — and less housing density. She and other community members argued that Cherryland and Ashland have shouldered an unfairly large cut of the county's development needs for years, and that the area simply doesn't have the infrastructure to support any more. Beck says what the community needs is better health, not more housing.

With backing from the Cherryland Neighborhood Association, Beck called a meeting with county planning commission to discuss the possibility of putting a temporary hold on development in Cherryland to buy time for the community to discuss how that land might best be used to improve livability. In response, the commission drafted an emergency moratorium and added it to the agenda for the following planning commission meeting.

But shortly after the county posted the meeting agenda, an anonymous flyer appeared on the doors of area residents. "YOUR PROPERTY RIGHTS MAY BE AT RISK," read the headline. Then lower down: "The 'Gardeners of Eden,' a small group in Cherryland, has been mapping your property to be used for farming and community gardens. They want to take Cherryland back to a farming community. You need to make your voice heard at the community meetings before it is too late. Stop the 'Gardeners of Eden' from making your property their farm."

Beck still doesn't know who posted the flyer, and said she was mostly disappointed it was so ill-informed despite multiple meetings about the group's plans for the area. Nonetheless, the Cherryland Neighborhood Association decided to pull the moratorium before it was even brought to a vote. Over the long-term, Beck still wants the county to take a more active interest in setting aside green space for urban gardening projects, or at least to include those kinds of projects in residential planning processes.

Of course, Beck is struggling with local government mainly because she made a choice to work with it instead of against it. In West Oakland, Ahmadi admits that the People's Grocery only recently began adhering to the rigmarole of the permitting process. He and his peers often used to avoid red tape by ignoring city regulations altogether. However, without the right kind of research, taking that route comes with its own set of risks.

The red tape comes in part from a concern that toxic city soil won't grow anything but toxic city gardens. A report by the Pacific Institute indicates that West Oakland is one of the three worst Zip codes in Alameda County for childhood lead poisoning risk between 1995 and 2002. That's one reason why Oakland is careful about who is planting what where, and whether it's going to be ingested.

UC Berkeley graduate student Nathan McClintock, who is knowledgeable about soil toxins in Oakland from working on a project that includes sampling soils from 120 different sites in the area, believes there are ways to build healthy urban farms around those risks. McClintock has been conducting an inventory of underutilized parcels of public land in Oakland that could have urban agriculture potential. Part of that project requires ensuring the land won't grow poisonous food.

Soil can accumulate lead through paint peeling off of old houses, industrial emissions, and previously, before the ban on leaded gas, car exhaust. Lead is an especially nasty toxin as tests may indicate there's no lead in an area one day, and high levels the next because the soil has been turned. Other chemical concerns include zinc, PCBs, industrial solvents, and dioxin.

McClintock suggests it's good to be cautious. "There has to be a certain level of due diligence before you start a garden," he said. Consequently, he suggests that urban farmers conduct a historical survey of the site they're farming before breaking ground to see what types of buildings and toxins may have been on the property.

Barbara Finnin, spokeswoman for Oakland's City Slicker Farms, said her organization follows a number of precautions, like testing for lead in an ongoing manner, and planting gardens in planter boxes instead of putting seeds directly in the ground, depending on what the levels of toxins in the soil look like. Finnin said that it's also important to understand the science of how lead accumulates in plants — namely in the roots, stems, and leaves — which sometimes argues against planting leafy greens or root crops in soil with higher lead content.

For now, Finnin suggested, urban gardeners should generally avoid planting in brownfield sites. Plants like sunflowers and various fungi have bioremediation properties that could potentially suck toxins like lead out of the soil, but Finnin says at this point it's an unperfected science. For one, it can take up to twenty years to bioremediate a site. Also, Finnin asked, "what are you going to do with that sunflower after it's been soaking up all those toxins?"

Like Oakland, the Eden Areas have a history of industrialization and are equally prone to toxic soil, which is why the network is conducting soil-quality tests before planting at all of their farm sites.

Even assuming a healthy harvest of nontoxic plants, political backing, and a monetary jump-start, Beck's network still faces the ultimate challenge: how to sell fresh produce to a community that has had limited access to it.

In July, 2008, The New York Times published a long article touting a new company called MyFarmSF, which designed and installed organic backyard gardens for Bay Area clients who then received a weekly box of fruits and veggies grown from their own backyard and the backyards of their neighbors. It was the kind of business people could get behind — a win-win for the environment and economy alike. Foodies everywhere wanted to see the model work.

But just one year later, the company went under.

Although MyFarmSF's founder couldn't be reached for an interview, online reviews suggest that, in addition to being unable to run a business in which revenues exceeded expenses, the business model failed to predict another challenge that all organic farmers face: gnarled and blemished produce is a hard sell — even at the grooviest of natural food stores.

Eaters accustomed to the unblemished produce that one finds at conventional grocery stores may not be ready to eat the typically smaller, browner, scruffier backyard versions. Creating demand for such products is even more challenging in a place like West Oakland or the Eden Areas, where residents don't even have much access to fresh vegetables.

In West Oakland, Ahmadi has prepared for this challenge to ensure the success of the People's Community Market, which is finally scheduled to open in the spring or summer of 2011 after years of planning. In 2006, armed with eight years of nonprofit experience and a business degree, Ahmadi stepped down from his role as director of the People's Grocery to focus completely on opening the grocery store as a separate entity from the nonprofit.

His business model incorporates a strategic partnership between the for-profit grocery store and the nonprofit People's Grocery, which has sold local produce to West Oakland for the past eight years with street-side stands and affordable produce boxes. The nonprofit end will continue to provide nutrition and cooking classes to community members, increasing demand for the kind of products that Ahmadi will sell at the store. If it works, he hopes to prove that inner-city produce markets can be both a great benefit to the community and an economically viable and sustainable business option.

But the infrastructure to support an urban grocery providing local produce doesn't yet exist. Although Ahmadi would prefer to fill his store with local produce, without local distributors he doesn't think he can depend on local farmers to provide the three most important aspects of a viable grocery store: consistency, quantity, and quality. At this time, he expects that less than 25 percent of stock for his store will come from local urban farms.

Of course, the most challenging aspect of farming — whether small or large-scale — has always been financial sustainability. Big ag relies heavily on government subsidies, and urban ag projects on continuous injections of grant money. But, Beck said, financial sustainability is only one goal that the network is working toward. Right now the group is focusing on whether there is value in land that goes beyond residential development value.

"This is an experiment," Beck said, admitting that the answer to whether the gardens can financially sustain themselves could very well be "no."

Hank Herrera, the current project manager for the Ashland/Cherryland Garden Network, said financial sustainability is going to be the network's greatest challenge. "We have to convert initial investment into a successful business enterprise that generates enough revenue to continue employment for people," he said.

Herrera couldn't specify exactly how the network planned to make this happen. This is now the biggest question on the network's table. But Herrera estimates that Cherryland and Ashland lose millions of dollars per year on residents buying food outside of the community every year, and said he has faith that the quality of homegrown goods will advertise themselves.

"People will taste our stuff and they'll know," he said. "And the word will spread."