

MEMORANDUM

CITY OF GRAND RAPIDS

Date: October 31, 2022

To: Mark Washington, City Manager
Kate Berens, Deputy City Manager

From: Kristin Turkelson, Planning Director

Subject: Urban Agriculture Committee – Committee Recommendations

Background

In 2017 the City's Urban Agricultural Committee was established. The thirteen (13) member advisory committee was assigned the following duties and responsibilities:

1. Educating members of the public about the benefits of growing, processing and distribution of food and other products through agricultural activities within the City of Grand Rapids.
2. Providing leadership and expertise to policy makers in the development of public infrastructure necessary for increased urban food production, processing and marketing.
3. Providing guidance on policies associated with the extension of appropriate farm-related services and opportunities to urban growers.
4. Advising and assisting City efforts to integrate health, nutrition, food production, food access and agricultural economics.
5. Help develop policies that integrate urban agriculture and urban planning.
6. Conduct such special studies or projects as the Mayor, the City Manager or the City Commission may request.

Shortly after the committee's formation, the members created a vision statement, which reads:

Grand Rapids' Urban Agriculture Committee educates and empowers the community to grow and enhance our local food system, quality of life, and public health. The Urban Agriculture Committee will accomplish this by providing an infrastructure for policy review, recommendations, and guidance on urban agriculture.

To achieve this vision, the committee established several goals, including:

1. Complete a comprehensive review of current city ordinances related to urban agriculture, review national best practices in urban agriculture rules and ordinances, and develop recommendations for the city to incorporate into its rules and ordinances.
2. Commit to intentional and meaningful public engagement for public review, education, and awareness.
3. Develop consistent visual messaging to promote urban agriculture and create communication plan to educate and share ordinance revisions with community.
4. Secure more resources to support the work of the Urban Agriculture Committee.

In June 2021 the Urban Agriculture Committee completed their review of current city ordinances related to urban agriculture and finalized their recommendations for policy changes.

The focus of this memo is on Goal 1 and specifically, to evaluate implementation strategies associated with each recommendation.

Research & Engagement

It should be noted that the Committee's recommendations were informed by four (4) years of extensive research on best practices from communities around the country including Austin, Minneapolis, Chicago, Portland, Madison, Seattle and Holland. In addition, the Committee collected 165 surveys and conducted multiple community engagement sessions. This work assisted in categorizing priorities and shaping policy recommendations

Committee Recommendations

Within the Committee's report, there is an overarching recommendation that the City's policies recognize and support urban agriculture on both a residential scale as well as an organizational scale. Residential scale urban agriculture supports individuals and families seeking to grow food in their backyards for themselves. Organizational scale urban agriculture would support "farmers, non-profits, schools, churches and other organizations that are seeking to grow food for profit, to address food access needs, empower the community through food-based education, or to otherwise farm in an urban environment as a vocation"¹. That premise is apparent within each of the Committee's recommendations that are organized into seven (7) categories: accessory structures, backyard chickens, backyard livestock, bee keeping, composting, farm stands and edible landscaping.

Accessory Structures

In general, the Committee recommends that the City to adopt policy that allows greenhouses and hoop houses, and regulate them independently from other accessory structures such as garages and sheds.

Backyard Chickens

In general, the Committee recommends that the City simplify and streamline the regulations and permit fee structure. In addition, they would support a more predictable application process by removing the neighbor notification and permission process.

Backyard Animals and Livestock

In general, the Committee recommends that the City develop ordinance requirements that clarify what can and cannot be done relative to the keeping of livestock on private property. The Committee would also like to permit the slaughtering of farm animals (including chickens).

Beekeeping

In general, the Committee recommends that the City modify the existing beekeeping ordinance to make it more permissible to keep bees but support a required flyaway barrier.

Composting

In general, the Committee recommends that the City increase the flexibility on composting in terms of bin material and location. In addition, the Committee recommends that the City implement a citywide pick-up program for compost bin distribution and rebate programs.

¹ Page 4. Urban Agriculture Committee Report.

Farm Stands

In general, the Committee recommends that the City modify the Zoning Ordinance to expressly permit farm stands subject to certain requirements.

Edible Landscaping

In general, the Committee recommends that the City amend relevant ordinances to require edible landscaping on private property and within the City’s rights-of-way. The Committee also recommends that the City allows individuals to harvest produce from edible landscaping grown on publicly owned land.

Planning Director Analysis

The time and resources needed to implement each of the Committee’s policy recommendations vary. Several recommendations necessitate amendments to the Zoning Ordinance, requiring a Planning Commission public hearing. Other recommendations require amendments to the Code of Ordinance and fee schedule. Some amendments appear to be relatively simple to draft, while others will be more complicated as multiple code sections will need to be updated and cross referenced. The more complex amendments will require more staff time, which must be balanced with current workload and other City priorities. It is also anticipated that the more complex recommendations will require additional policy discussion with City Commission. Lastly, if there is a desire for additional community engagement that will also take time and resources.

Below is my assessment on the ease of implementation that will be necessary to implement the Urban Agriculture Committee recommendations.

ACCESSORY STRUCTURES		
		Ease of Implementation 1 - Minimal 2 - Moderate 3 - Complex
1	Classify greenhouses and hoopouses, not as an accessory structure	1
2	Create a straightforward permit application process	1
3	Establish building material standards for greenhouses/hoopouses	1
4	Establish maximum size of greenhouse/hoopouse	1
5	Regulate greenhouses and hoopouses on an organizational scale through urban agriculture zoning requirements, and not as accessory structures	3
6	Create a separate urban agriculture zoning ordinance, serving urban agriculture initiatives	3
7	Exempt plots zoned as urban agriculture from the required tree cover percentage	3
BACKYARD CHICKENS		
1	Decrease the cost of fee amount to \$25 for a three-year permit	1
2	Uphold rule that enclosures cannot cover more than 50% of rear yard	1 (no ord. changes required)
3	Require notification to neighbors rather than require permission from neighbors	2
4	Decrease or eliminate the minimum lot size for single/two-family dwellings	2

BACKYARD LIVESTOCK		
1	Create a process for temporary animal use for land management purposes (i.e. Goats)	2
2	Create a permit process for backyard animals	3
3	Specify which animals are permitted/prohibited	3
4	Establish defined number of animals permitted by right, noise/hygiene, enclosure/lot line regulations and slaughter regulations similar to chicken ordinance	3
5	Specify ordinance on noise and hygiene	3
6	Specify ordinance for slaughter farm animals (recommend the same as the current chicken slaughter ordinance)	3
BEE KEEPING		
1	Update ordinance to establish flyaway barrier requirement	2
2	Allow up to two hives per lot under 11,000 sq. ft, four hives per lot greater than 11,000 sf. ft, but not less than 22,000 sq ft.	2 (not currently regulated)
3	Create a permitting process. Permit valid for three years, renewal for additional two years	3 (admin burdensome, not needed)
4	No hive within five feet of a property line or within ten feet of a sidewalk	3
COMPOSTING		
1	Expand composting beyond the premises of occupied residential dwelling, allowing schools, churches, community gardens, urban gardens, and other organizations	1
2	Allow organizations to compost more than 64 cubic feet at time	1
3	Allow renters to compost	1
4	Allow for composting on side yards and corner lots	2
5	Allow for homemade compost receptacles	2
6	Consider composting on vacant lots if owner gives permission	3
7	Municipal program: discounted compost bins for residents	3
FARM STANDS		
1	Establish a permit process to establish a farm stand within the City	1
2	Establish an ordinance detailing product offerings, location and lot size, hours of operation, and signage requirements	1
EDIBLE LANDSCAPING		
1	Add edible trees and shrubs to the approved street tree list	3
2	Require that 10 percent of any plantings be edibles, preferably edible perennials, within required Urban Open Spaces	3
3	Require 10 percent of the landscape buffer and/or tree canopy be edible	3

Summary

It is my assessment that the following policy recommendations could be implemented in the short term, based on current staff capacity and with minimal impacts to current workload:

- Classify greenhouses and hoopouses, not as an accessory structure
- Establish building material standards for greenhouses/hoopouses
- Establish maximum size of greenhouse/hoopouse
- Create a straightforward permit application process for greenhouse/hoopouse
- Decrease the cost of the backyard chicken permit fee amount to \$25 for a three-year permit
- Allow composting on properties approved for a school, church, community garden, urban garden, or social service facility.
- Allow organizations to compost more than 64 cubic feet at time
- Allow renters to compost
- Establish a permit process to establish a farm stand within the City

Recommendations identified as moderate or complex will require additional resources and community conversation prior to implementation. With current workload, including the update to the Community Master Plan, the Planning Department does not have capacity to lead those conversations.

Thank you for your consideration of the Urban Agriculture Committee recommendations on policy changes needed to achieve their defined vision to educate and empower the community to grow and enhance our local food system, quality of life, and public health.

CC. Connie Bohatch, Senior Managing Director of Community Services
David Marquart, Parks Director