

Olympia Farmland Workgroup Policy Recommendations

Land Use and Environment Committee of the Olympia City Council

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Workgroup members

City of Olympia

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Background

The following recommendations were developed to increase access to urban agriculture in Olympia. They build on the first phase of work that resulted from a referral to the Olympia City Council in June 2020 to address the loss of urban agriculture and regional farmland. This work was presented to the Land Use and Environment Committee in July 2021. This second phase of work explored the Comprehensive Plan strategy to “collaborate with community partners to ensure that everyone within Olympia is within biking or walking distance of a place to grow food.” The workgroup mapped access to agricultural resources in Olympia, including urban farms, community gardens, and other places to access locally grown food. These recommendations offer strategies to fill the gaps in the local food system.

Urban agriculture definition

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) definition: “Urban agriculture generally refers to the cultivation, processing and distribution of agricultural products in urban and suburban settings, including things like vertical production, warehouse farms, community gardens, rooftop farms, hydroponic, aeroponic, and aquaponic facilities, and other innovations. Urban farmers and gardeners work among diverse populations to expand access to nutritious foods, foster community engagement, provide jobs, educate communities about farming, and expand green spaces.”

Climate and environmental benefits

Protecting farmland prevents urban sprawl and builds the resilience of the local food system. It is consistent with the Sustainable Thurston Plan and the Thurston Climate Mitigation and Adaptation Plans. It reduces indirect carbon emissions by reducing the need to transport food. It supports the advancement of climate-smart practices by preserving opportunities to adopt farm practices that sequester carbon, among other co-benefits that include improving soil health and water quality, recovering endangered species, and protecting aquifer recharge areas.

Equity advancement

This work includes a GIS tool that shows the distribution of agricultural resources in Olympia. It includes demographic data such as race and income, as well as areas with sidewalk access. This tool can be used to target resources to create more access to urban farmland, community gardens, and connections to the local food system. Access to new and preserved farmland should prioritize young and beginning farmers, people of color, and veterans.

Policy Recommendations

Support Regional Farmland Protection

Be an enthusiastic partner to Thurston County in their work to inventory and designate more agricultural land. Evaluate the Transfer of Development Rights program by consulting with housing developers to understand market conditions, including options to achieve density goals and other potential incentives. Explore opportunities to coordinate through the Thurston Regional Planning Council or with a consultant that works with Olympia, Lacey, and Tumwater.

Timeframe: Some work is already taking place through the Neighborhood Centers review process and Capital Mall Triangle subarea plan. An overall look at the TDR program could happen late in 2023 or in 2024, folding it into the Comprehensive Plan periodic update.

Conduct AgriPark Feasibility Study

Study the opportunities to acquire farmland in the Parks system to be stewarded by community partners as a facility dedicated to agriculture education. This study will be designed to explore partnerships with the Thurston Conservation District, Community Farmland Trust, Olympia School District, and other potential partners. Funding for this study is already included in the Capital Facilities Plan.

Timeframe: The AgriPark feasibility study expected to start in late summer.

Develop a Public Farmland Program

Partner with the Thurston Conservation District (TCD) and their South Sound FarmLink program to establish a public farmland program that will lease city-owned land to producers. Seek funding to develop the program and pilot a project with an initial property to lease to a farmer. An example of a pilot project could be a partnership with the Community Farm Land Trust on the South Bay property owned by the Parks Department. Evaluate options to create a source of dedicated revenue for acquisition, farm development, and maintenance, such as a proposition to voters, a mitigation fee for the loss of agricultural areas, or a level of service standard.

Timeframe: Within 6 months, the Parks Department could prepare a lease agreement with the Community Farm Land Trust for the South Bay property. Other elements of this strategy are longer term and will be evaluated once a pilot moves forward.

Expand Community Gardens

Explore a partnership with TCD to determine needs and interest for new community gardens in underserved areas, identify potential sites on public and private land, and solicit community partners. Connect with the Coalition of Neighborhood Associations to seek opportunities for neighborhood-driven community gardens.

Timeframe: After the Land Use and Environment Committee reviews this recommendation, TCD will consult with their Board of Supervisors and develop a cost proposal to be considered for the 2023 budget.

Incentivize Urban Agriculture and Remove Barriers in City Code

Include community gardens and urban agriculture as an option for meeting low-impact development requirements. Evaluate options for an ordinance, such as allowing community gardens as a Soil and Vegetation Protection Area or in the upper areas of stormwater ponds. Work with TCD to review barriers to urban agriculture in existing city code.

Timeframe: Identifying incentives and barriers could be included in the work plan for the Community Planning and Development work plan in late 2023. Development of ordinances depend on the outcome of this work and would take additional time in 2024 to move forward.

Connect Private Vacant Land with Potential Farmers

Connect the upcoming vacant property registration with TCD South Sound FarmLink program to make connections between landowners and potential farmers. Understand what information would be needed to easily link these two programs, such as the availability of water.

Timeframe: The registration program is on its way to City Council for approval in mid-August, and will be in effect 30 days later if approved by Council.

Include Urban Agriculture and Local Food in the Economic Resiliency Plan

Identify key stakeholders who should speak to the consultant and economic development planners who are developing Olympia's Economic Resiliency Plan.

Timeframe: Planning is in progress. Some members of the workgroup have already interviewed or are scheduled to do so.

Update Comprehensive Plan in Periodic Update

Strengthen urban agriculture and local food policies in Comprehensive Plan update by folding these strategies and upcoming work into the periodic update.

Timeframe: The periodic update is due to be completed by June 2025, though the work will begin sooner than that.

Existing funding opportunities

- USDA: Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production - planning and implementation of projects
- USDA: Environmental Quality Incentives Program – financial and technical assistance for farmers
- State Conservation Commission: Sustainable Farms and Fields - advances climate-smart agriculture
- State Conservation Commission: Farmland Protection and Land Access – easement funding
- Recreation and Conservation Office: Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program – easement funding
- Sentinel Landscapes program at Joint Base Lewis McChord