

Sitka Community Gardens

Project Narrative



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Abstract

In order to help improve our community's resilience to supply chain disruptions, and encourage the development of critical skills and practices necessary for Sitka community members to become more self-reliant and food-secure, this project proposes the development of two (2) community gardens on currently undeveloped municipal lands.

Each proposed garden site is approximately ½ acre in size and would include 50 or more standard 10' by 20' garden plots, plus various covered areas and small enclosed structures for storing tools and other materials. The sites would be fully fenced and gated, but largely open to the general public during the summer growing season. Community members and social benefit groups/charities would be offered the opportunity to rent garden plots for a nominal annual fee.

Even though this Project Narrative details plans for two garden developments, we anticipate that CBS may want to see how one operates before committing to another. Nonetheless, there are good reasons for proposing two gardens. The main reason is that if one site is deemed unsuitable then the other may still be considered without sending the proponents back to the drawing board. Another reason is that if the two sites are approved for development, then work may proceed on both, and over the next few years the two gardens in combination could be producing twice the food security and skill-building benefits of a single garden.

Community gardens are considered essential civic infrastructure in many towns and cities across the US, like parks and playgrounds. They are often developed and operated by departments within local government. This project, however, proposes to assign these responsibilities to NGOs, with the nonprofits Sitka Local Foods Network and Transition Sitka undertaking project development and funding, and a cooperative association of active community garden members (yet-to-be-established) undertaking the responsibilities of normal garden operations. Over the long-term, it is expected that the association of gardeners will assume full responsibility for managing and maintaining the developments, with continuing oversight but only occasional direct assistance from the founding nonprofits.

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I - Introduction

This project proposes to establish two community gardens on undeveloped municipal lands in two separate Sitka neighborhoods. The proposed Osprey Street Community Garden is located near Blatchley Middle School and would serve residents living close to downtown plus liveaboards on boats in Sitka's harbors. The proposed Jarvis Street Community Garden is located uphill from the U.S. Post Office on Sawmill Creek Road and would serve residents living in the Indian River and Jamestown Bay neighborhoods. See Section III for garden location details and proposed layout designs.

Gardening has been practiced for a very long time in the Sitka area, with potato cultivation being a part of Tlingit culture for centuries, stretching back to before first contact with Spanish and Russian sailing ships in the late 18th century. But the concept of community gardening as it is commonly understood and practiced today, has only come to Sitka fairly recently, and (so far) only with mixed success.

For more than ten years the City and Borough of Sitka (CBS) Parks and Recreation Department, in conjunction with a now defunct after-school activities program for kids called Sitka Community Schools, played host to a small ¼-acre community garden on municipal property on the Sitka Channel side of Blatchley Middle School. But due to challenges that could not be easily remedied at the time, a decision was made in late 2016 to close down the garden.

The main reasons for the closure were: 1) the site was not fenced and gated so complaints over such issues as produce pilfering and vagrancy arose, and 2) some gardeners chose to lodge their grievances with middle school staff even though these school personnel had nothing to do with the garden's operations. This confusion arose because the Sitka Community Schools program was operating at the time out of an office inside the middle school building. As a result, when issues needed addressing, some gardeners erroneously (but understandably) assumed that they could address them through speaking with school personnel.

Several other more minor issues arose as well, such as concerns over the improper handling and storage of garden compost which attracted rats. There was also confusion over whether gardeners were, or were not, technically on school grounds, and therefore whether they were allowed or prohibited from smoking. These issues led school officials to determine that the garden *as it was organized and operated at that time* was not a good fit for that location.

In hindsight, most of these problems could have been remedied by installing perimeter fencing and adopting clear and enforceable "guidelines for gardeners" that included provisions for regular self-evaluations, conflict avoidance, and dispute resolution. But the Blatchley garden experience is valuable. It provides instruction on how the current project may make changes to garden design and operating procedures so that history doesn't repeat itself. In the future, there is every reason to expect that Sitka's community gardens will become valued long-term civic amenities in which residents can take great pride.

Several official CBS attempts to promote community gardens have been made since Blatchley Community Garden's closure. For instance, Sitka's 2030 Comprehensive Plan, approved in May 2018, included a Parks, Trails and Recreation chapter that identified as a priority action (PTR 2.1g) to, "Allow community gardens in undeveloped municipal park space." Additionally, the plan's Land Use chapter identified as a priority action (LU 7.8) to, "Review zoning code to explore changes to allow urban horticultural and agricultural uses more broadly in existing zoning districts." To date (five years after that plan's approval), no action has been taken by CBS and no serious effort has been made by private parties to materially advance these priorities.

At various times over more recent years, the Local Emergency Planning Committee, the Health Needs and Human Services Commission and the Planning Commission have all discussed ways to improve community food security. But the challenge of identifying lands on which to locate community gardens has remained elusive.

Most recently, the 2022-2027 Sitka Strategic Plan that was adopted in September of last year declared via Goal 1.5 the intent to "Convene community partners to develop an action plan that will address the challenges of food security."

With this most recent CBS declaration of commitment to addressing Sitka's food (in)security, and in the absence of any other formal direction on how to proceed with the development of an action plan, a small group of community members interested in sustainability and food security came together and decided that it may be appropriate at this time to advance a detailed independent proposal for the development of community gardens on municipal lands.

After studying examples of successful community gardens elsewhere and determining that the Juneau Community Garden Association model might actually be the best fit for Sitka's particular circumstances and community character, the group developed suitability criteria for site selection, and came up with the following:

1. Sites must be at least a half-acre in size.
2. Sites must have good southerly exposure.
3. Sites must not be overly steep or irregular.
4. Sites must be reasonably accessible to neighborhoods.
5. Preferably, sites should have access to city water, sewer, and electricity, though other options could include rain catchment systems, porta-potties and solar panels.
6. And, finally, the community-at-large must be generally supportive, and willing to consider community garden sites as permanent civic improvements.

Over the last several months, project proponents have been broadly distributing Sitka Community Gardens project planning materials throughout the community, and have received several letters of support from key organizations and official advisory bodies. These letters are included as attachments to this narrative.

Public outreach thus far suggests that there is strong support for establishing community gardens in both proposed locations, though there has been some pushback from some

residents in the Osprey Street neighborhood. An opinion survey of residents in this area should take into consideration that there are many rental units here, and strong differences of opinion may exist between property owners and renters who often face very different challenges to economic prosperity and food security, even though they may live in the same neighbors.

II - Proponent Profiles

Sitka Local Foods Network (SLFN) is a well-established 501(c)(3) nonprofit that was founded in 2008 by Sitka Health Summit participants who saw the need for a new organization that could focus on two initiatives: 1) organizing and managing a Farmers Market, and 2) designing and developing a community greenhouse. The Sitka Farmers Market has been a success now for 15 years, with SLFN preparing to hold yet another season of market events in 2023. A Sitka Community Greenhouse & Education Center business plan was developed by SLFN and presented to the City in 2014 seeking to locate and operate a facility on municipal lands, but the proposal failed to gain approval and the effort languished.

Throughout its history, SLFN has organized numerous projects and offered many programs aimed at enhancing the production and distribution of local foods, including the development of St. Peter's Fellowship Farm, which is a communal cooperative garden (not a community garden, because plot rentals are not provided) located behind St. Peter's by the Sea Episcopal Church on Lincoln Street. This garden is now producing at capacity, and residents are able to purchase vegetables grown there through the Sitka Farmers Market.

The goal of creating one or more community gardens has been a priority of SLFN since the closure of the Blatchley Community Garden site in the fall of 2016. But progress has been slow, with the greatest challenges being location, location, and location.

Transition Sitka (TS) founders began meeting in late 2021 when members of the Sitka Chapter of Citizens Climate Lobby, a local branch of a national organization primarily focused on a national legislative agenda, decided to apply some of their energies toward addressing climate and sustainability issues at the local level in Sitka. TS is loosely aligned with the Transition Town movement which started in a Sitka-sized community in the U.K. in 2005, and has since spread rapidly to communities in countries around the world. The movement is dedicated to working for a low-carbon, socially just future with greater local food security and economic self-reliance.

TS has adopted two initial goals: 1) to help Sitka adjust to the coming inevitable shift away from fossil fuel dependency as an energy source, and 2) to increase Sitka's food security. TS was recently granted IRS tax exempt status under Section 501(c)(3).

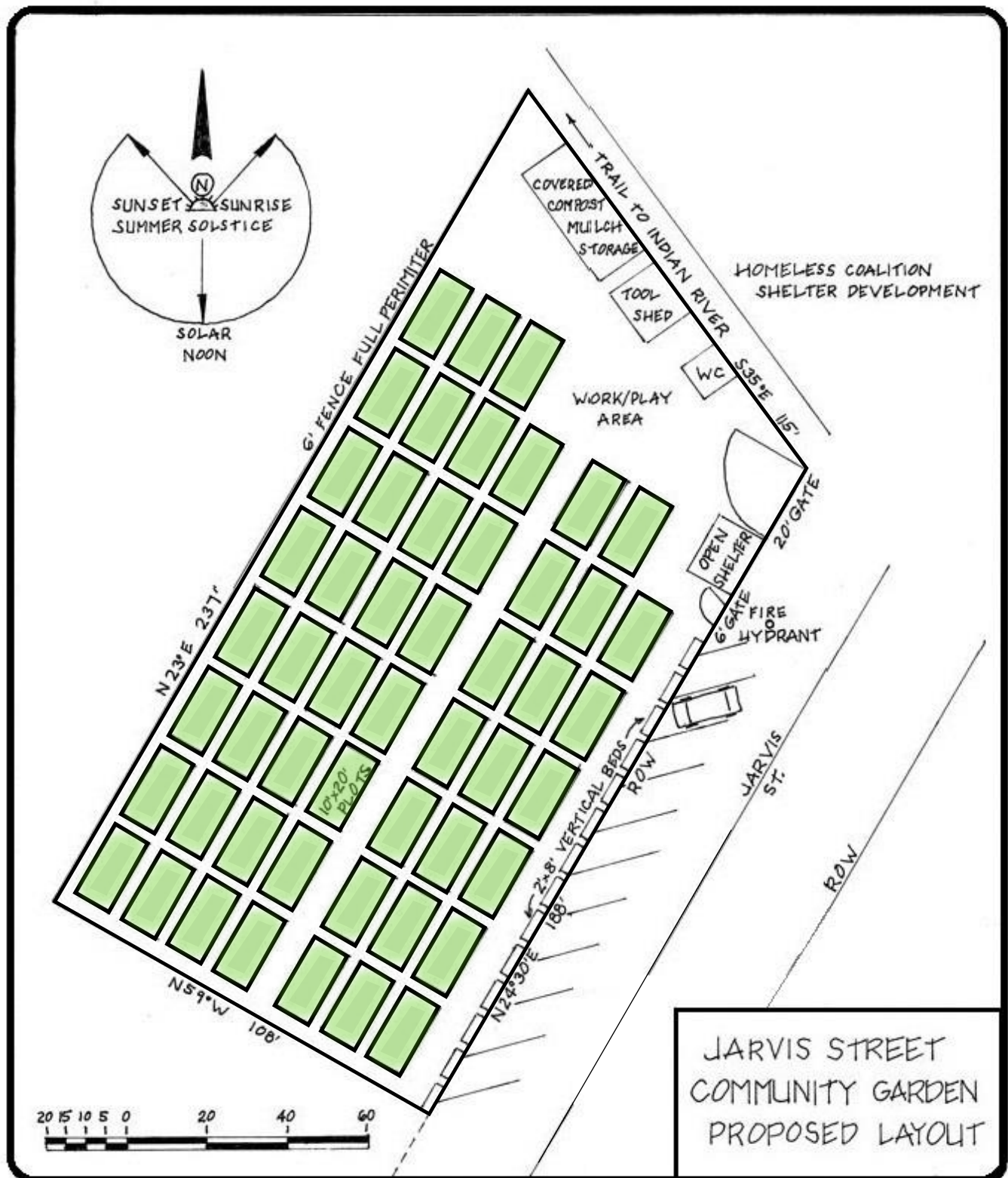
TS and SLFN are collaborators in the development of this project, and expect to continue working together to promote additional such projects in future.

III - Site Descriptions

Jarvis Street Community Garden

Located at the top end of Jarvis Street uphill from the U.S. Post Office on Sawmill Creek Road, this half-acre site is adjacent to the Homeless Coalition Shelter Cabin development and close to neighborhoods along Indian River, around Jamestown Bay, and in the Crescent Harbor vicinity. It will include 50 standard 10' by 20' plots, 15 standard 2' by 8' vertical garden beds for climbing or tall plantings, one teaching plot, onsite water, and toilet facilities. The garden perimeter will be fenced and gated.





Osprey Street Community Garden

Located adjacent to the Vilandre Ballfield next to Blatchley Middle School on Halibut Point Road, this half-acre site is close to downtown, Swan Lake and Edgum Drive neighborhoods. It will include 54 standard 10' by 20' plots, 22 standard 2' by 8' vertical garden beds for climbing or tall plantings, one teaching plot, onsite water, and access to nearby public toilet facilities at Vilandre Ballfield. The garden perimeter will be fenced and gated. A small 'fruit tree grove' and berry patch located outside the fenced area along Osprey Street will be maintained by garden members as a public 'food forest' for general use and enjoyment. Because of this garden site's proximity to Blatchley Middle School and to the Vilandre Ballfield where school activities are routinely offered, some parking and general access restrictions may need to be applied during weekday school hours and occasional baseball tournaments.





III – Goals and Objectives

The overarching goal of this project is to launch the establishment of neighborhood community gardens in Sitka to help combat food insecurity. Coincidentally but importantly, we expect many other public benefits to derive from the project, including:

- Teaching sustainable gardening practices to youth and novice growers.
- Facilitating connections between neighbors.
- Promoting healthy outdoor activities.
- Encouraging volunteerism and leadership.
- Developing intergenerational and cross-cultural collaborations.
- Building civic pride and community cohesiveness.
- Advancing equity and inclusion.

One major objective is to provide Sitka residents with access to garden spaces at very low cost. The ability to purchase or cultivate fruits and vegetables is not just a health issue; it is also an economic justice issue. The Sitka Health Summit's 2014 Sitka Community Food Assessment Indicator Report will soon be updated with new survey information, but the report's now 10-year-old data suggests that 20% of Sitka households were receiving food assistance of some kind during the last decade. We expect even more troubling numbers to come out of the new survey in this decade.

Despite Sitka residents' current ability to access sources of wild foods to supplement purchased groceries, our food security situation is not as robust as it needs to be, and future prospects are troubling:

- The April 2023 (most recent) Consumer Price Index indicates that the US rate of food price inflation for those who purchase groceries to eat at home is 7.1% year-over-year, with the subcategory for cereals and bakery products rising to 12.4% y/y.
- The US Department of Agriculture is forecasting an 8% increase in grocery costs for 2023, which means that consumers at the end of this year could be paying as much as 20% more for the same groceries compared with 2021.
- The prospects for more global supply chain disruptions caused by fuel price spikes and geopolitical conflict is increasing.
- Shortfalls in US domestic foodstuff production due to drought conditions in key growing regions are becoming more common.
- International trade of essential foods in all categories (cereals, vegetable oils, dairy products, sugar, and meat products) is being threatened by protectionist export controls, procurement restrictions and harsh sanctions.

It is clear that the development of a network of community gardens will not be able to meet all of our community's essential food needs. But the main objective of this project proposal is to do the best we can, as soon as we can, to grow as much as we can.

IV – Procedures and Work Plan

The garden sites identified in this proposal are intended to be permanent community facilities that depend primarily on a cooperative association of active gardeners to contribute both financially and physically to the operation and maintenance of the sites and immediate surroundings. Though this association has yet to be established, we will refer to it here for convenience as the Sitka Community Gardens Association, or simply the “Association.”

It is intended for the sites to be leased by CBS to SLFN for low or no cost, with competitive bidding requirements waived. Sites will be developed according to conditions and stipulations detailed in a lease agreement between the two parties, and will be managed (initially by SLFN and eventually by the Association) according to standards established in a detailed garden operating procedures manual titled Guidelines for Community Gardeners in Sitka. This document will control garden operations. A draft version is attached to this narrative.

Garden spaces (plots) within the proposed sites will be offered to the public for a small rental fee through a seasonal application process. Successful applicants become members of the Association for a one-year term and sign an agreement to abide by the rules and conditions outlined in the Handbook, which includes a requirement for members to perform a certain amount of work (in ‘service hours’) for the benefit of the Association. Membership is not intended to be limited exclusively to individuals. Organizations such as Southeast Alaska Independent Living (SAIL) and the Sitka Tribe’s Kayaaní Commission will be welcome to join.

The developed sites are also intended to be demonstration gardens. Association members are expected to welcome non-members who wish to enter, explore, and enjoy the gardens. However, to avoid risk of misuse or unauthorized harvesting of produce, sites will be fenced and gated so that non-members cannot generally gain access to the gardens unless Association members or recognized member partners with gate access privileges are also present onsite. It is expected that Association members will be working on their garden plots or performing service hour obligations regularly during the growing season, so the gardens are therefore expected to be open to the public much of that time. Of course, another reason for fences and gates is to keep the deer, bears and other critters out!

SLFN, as parent organization of the Association, will periodically offer or otherwise make available community education workshops for both Association members and the general public, typically using designated ‘teaching plots’ for hands-on experience.

It is expected that, over time, there will be a cadre of gardeners who have become regular plot renters, and it is from among this group that the Association Steering Committee will emerge to take over most of the gardens’ management, relieving SLFN from much of its direct involvement. SLFN will continue to be responsible for ensuring that the terms of the lease agreement are upheld, including the maintenance of liability insurance coverage.

As with any garden development project in this region, site preparation is important. The two garden sites proposed here will require significant tree and brush removal, trenching and burying hundreds of feet of drain pipe, erecting hundreds of feet of fencing, and hardening some limited areas with rock fill to accommodate vehicular traffic and small structures. Additionally, utilities available nearby will need to be accessed. Overall, however, improvements necessary for project completion may be considered fairly minor compared to other public amenity development projects like ballfields. Certainly, it is *not* anticipated that there will be any need for deep excavation of overburden or extensive placement of rock and gravel resurfacing.

A careful inspection of the Osprey Street Community Garden Proposed Layout diagram (page 8) shows that, for those who live on Osprey Street who would be most affected by the proposed development, an effort will be made to try to compensate for the expected visual impact of tree removals. A small grove of mixed species of fruit trees and berries will be planted and tended by Association members along a portion of Osprey Street which, within a few years, should provide a public park-like setting and “food forest” for the neighborhood. This “food forest” will be located outside the garden perimeter fence and will be accessible to residents at any time.

To further minimize possible impacts on Osprey Street residents, vehicular access to the Osprey Street Community Garden will be from the Blatchley Middle School side of the garden, reducing the risk of possible parking and traffic congestion on Osprey Street. “No Garden Access Parking” signage may be posted, just to make sure gardeners get the message. Access to the garden site from Osprey Street will thus be restricted to pedestrians and bicyclists only. The garden perimeter fence along Osprey Street may also be constructed in such a way as to mitigate both visual and auditory impacts.

Some Osprey Street residents have expressed concerns regarding road surface subsidence. It may be reasonable to require project proponents to engage the services of a geotechnical/hydrological analyst to study the potential impacts of a garden development, and to provide suggestions for mitigating further surface destabilization.

A major challenge to project completion at both proposed sites will be obtaining suitable soil to fill garden beds. Typically, this challenge is addressed over time when gardeners gradually build the health of their soil with compost, mulch, and various amendments. In recent years, CBS has generously made compost and mulch available to the gardening community for free from materials collected in various ways through public works and other projects. It is hoped that the city will see fit to direct a portion of these materials to this project in order to help overcome the dearth of dirt dilemma. Otherwise, garden soil will be sourced from commercial suppliers.

Sometime in the future, it is hoped that Sitka will launch a community composting project. This will help reduce municipal solid waste disposal costs and benefit local gardeners by providing them with a good local source of bed building materials—an unbeatable two-fer.

Milestones and timelines for completion of this project are difficult to assess at this time for many reasons, not the least of which is the extreme uncertainty as to whether an application for lease of municipal lands for the development of community gardens will garner Planning Commission and Assembly approval. It's hard to plot a firm course, when you don't know if there are reefs over the horizon or open water.

In a perfect world, CBS would have acknowledged the need for establishing a new a community garden after the closure of Blatchley, and would have issued an RFP for the development of one or two half-acre sites of its own choosing. Under such circumstances, it would be reasonable to expect potential developers to provide CBS with detailed timelines and budgets. But such was not the case. The possible trajectory of this project proposal is currently unknown and unknowable, so development details are to some degree unplannable.

Notwithstanding the many uncertainties, it is safe to assume that if the project is approved for two sites as proposed, completion is likely to take at least two or three years following initial groundbreaking. But if a land lease agreement is only approved for one site, then all of the available labor and all of the available financing will go into developing the single site and probably result in an earlier completion date. However (just to make things more complicated,) the development of two sites may be of greater interest to a larger pool of contractors, which could result in more competitive bidding for a contract. This, in turn, could result in better contract performance and an earlier completion date. It's hard to say.

Once the Planning Commission's review of this project proposal is complete, and a recommendation has been prepared for Assembly consideration, proponents may finally have a good-enough understanding of the scope of the project to allow for the development of detailed work plans, timelines, and budgets. Until then, attempting to develop estimates may be more misleading than helpful.

V - Evaluation

It is important to provide CBS and the general public with opportunities to evaluate garden performance in comparison to expectations. Evaluations should take place periodically during project development, as well as later during normal operations.

We expect that coordination with the CBS Public Works Department Building/Grounds/Parks staff will be critical to the success of this project in the development stages. It would be useful, therefore, to institute a regular schedule of meetings between staff and developers, as well as a reporting process so that staff findings may be transmitted to city authorities for evaluation.

Gardening is widely viewed as a recreational pursuit, so it seems logical for evaluations to also be conducted periodically by the Department of Parks and Recreation once the gardens are in normal operation. We hope and expect that the gardens will provide many opportunities for organizing youth gardening groups and other educational offerings, and these kinds of activities

align closely with both the Department's mission and its technical capacity to facilitate the scheduling of recreational and educational outdoor programs.

Periodic inspections of the garden sites and evaluations of operational procedures will help maintain public appreciation for the services provided, and can help in the discovery of ways to improve.

VI - Sources and Uses of Funds

Funding for site preparation and development will come from government grants, as well as from corporations and philanthropic institutions. Support for food security programs is currently a high priority for many government and private funders, and we believe Sitka's current high degree of food insecurity will make this project quite compelling to funding agencies and charitable organizations. Also, the degree of generosity shown by local individuals and businesses within the Sitka community for projects like this which promise to provide multiple benefits never ceases to amaze.

An initial dialogue has already begun between project proponents and Rasmuson Foundation, and we expect that funding may be made available from this organization to cover costs associated with project pre-development such as geotechnical analysis (if required) and site surveys.

As the project moves into development, sources of funds include:

- USDA Micro-Grants for Food Security Program, which distributes funds to State Government agencies like the Alaska Department of Agriculture for redistribution, specifically to projects that promise to increase the quantity and quality of locally grown food through such projects as small-scale gardening.
- USDA Urban Agriculture and Innovation Production Competitive Grants Program, which can award grants from \$50,000 to \$250,000.
- USDA Community Food Projects Competitive Grant Program, which can award grants for projects not to exceed \$125,000 in any single year or \$400,000 over four years.

If grants require some level of non-federal matching, then we anticipate use of the estimated value of the land under lease from CBS to meet at least a portion of the matching requirement.

Once site preparations have been substantially completed, community members will begin to rent garden plots, so income generated from this source will begin to provide revenue for ongoing maintenance and improvements. Because gardeners are required to perform a certain number of service hours per season, labor will also be available for these purposes. Coincidentally, such labor may be characterized as "contributions-in-kind" to the project, which allows a dollar value to be attached to them and that value to be applied toward matching requirements for further grants.

The Juneau Community Garden Association (JSGA) has generously shared with us the outlines of their sources and uses of operating funds. They currently receive plot rental income from about 165 standard 10' by 20' plots annually at approximately \$35/plot, plus about 30 small beds for climbing plants at \$5/bed. This income plus the income generated from holding a spring plant sale event, one Mid-Summer Festival, and one Fall Harvest Celebration where garden produce is sold to benefit JCGA has been meeting much of their maintenance and operations budget needs for a number of years.

Although a future "Sitka Community Gardens Association" cannot initially expect to generate the same level of plot rental income as JCGA, we will enjoy similarly low maintenance and operations costs due to the benefits of adopting a similarly efficient cooperative association model, using "service hour" membership labor to accomplish most maintenance and management needs, eliminating the need to hire paid staff.

Attachments

- ✓ Detailed elevation maps of proposed garden sites (digital files only)
- ✓ Sample Guidelines for Community Gardeners Handbook
- ✓ Letters of support