Linking Land, Campus and Community Through Sustainable Farming at UNH

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When we think of New Hampshire and northern New England, we often imagine scenes of rural life, such as quaint towns, rolling farmland, and fall foliage. Tourists flock to New Hampshire, Vermont and Maine each year to enjoy the countryside and take advantage of the vast opportunities it presents, such as skiing and snowshoeing in the winter or swimming and hiking in the summer. Yet, with the rapid development of many rural areas in the region threatening the character and quality of life of towns and residents, we must consider how we meet the demands of people and industries while sustaining many of the qualities we appreciate about rural life. While this can be a challenge to balance, it can also present opportunities to envision new ways of doing things that integrate human well being, economic viability and ecological health.

Planners and public health professionals have made efforts to find ways to reduce sprawl and increase opportunities for healthy activities such as walking and biking in many communities, thus connecting land use and transportation. Another effective way to balance the benefits of open space while serving the needs of people is to organize a community farm or garden. This can take many forms ranging from providing garden space for community members to Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), in which members purchase a seasonal share that gives them an investment in the farm as well as fresh products. At the University of New Hampshire, a new effort has been launched to create a Campus-Community Farm that will serve as a teaching, research and outreach resource for universities and communities throughout the state and beyond.

The Campus-Community Farm

The Campus-Community Farm (C-CF), a project of the Office of Sustainability Programs’ Food and Society Initiative, is the first and largest certified organic land on the UNH campus. It was first certified organic in 2002 and is now integrated into the campus master plan. The C-CF is located on Main Street, along one of the gateways to the University. The high visibility of the site, combined with its location near the dairy operation, equine facility, Woodman Research Farm, and the Child Development Center, present ample opportunities for programmatic collaboration and outreach.

Goals for the C-CF are innovative and ambitious. They include not only the demonstration of an integrated, sustainable farming system, but also the development of related curriculum and research. In addition, the outreach potential for the C-CF is enormous, and could include efforts such as educational programs aimed at K-12 schools and training for agricultural practitioners, researchers, community members and others.

Breaking Ground

In October of 2003, the C-CF was formally established through a groundbreaking celebration that included New Hampshire’s Commissioner of Agriculture, Steve Taylor. The groundbreaking created an approximately two-acre plot of land for use by the student Organic Garden Club (OGC), one of the largest student organizations on campus. The OGC spent the winter developing a plan and budget for the garden site. In collaboration with Students Without Borders (SWB), an engineering student organization on campus, a grant was obtained from the Parent’s Association to develop and implement a drip irrigation system and other built components at the site. In the spring, UNH Hospitality Services donated funds to the OGC, which allowed the Club to begin purchasing seeds and other supplies. In return, a portion of the food produced at the site will go into the dining halls to feed students, thereby providing a demonstration of the food system from seed to plate.

The Office of Sustainability Programs
hired a manager for the garden site in May to assist with the development of the garden and oversee the student plot for the summer months when fewer students are on campus. Jenica Springer, a 2003 UNH graduate with a B.S. in Community Development, was hired as the manager. During her studies at UNH, she worked at the UNH Woodman Horticultural Research Farm, as well as at Stonewall Farm, a certified organic farm in Nottingham, NH. In addition, she was a founding member of the OGC. Springer will work on the site until mid-September, allowing transition time for returning Club members. She will also help create a master plan for the site including garden layout, crop rotations, soil recommendations and other items.

Finding the Future
As demands for space increase with population growth and industry, communities must find new ways to incorporate their needs and values in ways that are sustainable and healthful for themselves and future generations. Land grant universities such as the University of New Hampshire can offer tools for communities by demonstrating innovative solutions to real-world problems. The C-CF represents one of these solutions; many others can be imagined. Community planners, zoning boards, land developers and others have important roles to play in developing these ideas further, finding new solutions and implementing them successfully. Ultimately, the question is: do we want to find the future, or do we want the future to find us? Looking ahead and anticipating solutions in the present allows us to direct the future we want to see instead of becoming victim of our short-sighted development.

Focus On
Better farms, better food and better life in Vermont

The Intervale is an innovative non-profit center for “sustainable ventures and ecological innovation” located in Burlington, Vermont. The unique center, which was created in 1988, offers an important model for developers and planners to investigate as they consider the future of communities.

The Intervale consists of 325 acres located on an historic 700-acre agricultural floodplain. The center was originally envisioned to clean up the area and plant cover crops to restore the land, which was in a state of neglect. However, the mission was expanded and The Intervale is currently engaged in numerous activities, including restoring the area as a “social, agricultural, economic and natural resource,” “building the economic vitality of small sustainable farms throughout Vermont,” and cultivating an ecological economy that will support the environment as well as the surrounding community. They accomplish these activities through programs such as Intervale Compost Products, Vermont’s leading compost operation; Farms Program, which leases land and provides support to farms that grow organically on Intervale land; and Healthy City, a program providing at-risk youth with opportunities to grow produce for communities lacking access to fresh produce. In addition, the twelve farms in operation in 2003 at The Intervale provided the city of Burlington with 6% of its fresh produce. Along with offering nutritious food grown locally, it generated over $500,000 in revenue, thus contributing to the local economy.

The city of Burlington is recognized as an important partner of The Intervale, and there are many ways in which the two interact. For example, “the Community and Economic Development Office in Burlington is partnering with The Intervale to develop the Eco-Park,” a project to include year-round greenhouse production and education space. The Intervale offers the City a variety of long-term benefits, such as “a successful sustainable model for job creation within City limits” and “the contributions of an organization that addresses the issues of poverty and hunger in Burlington.” Source: http://www.intervale.org. For more information, please e-mail info@intervale.org or call 802-660-0440.

Resources

• The Intervale, http://www.intervale.org
• Sustainable Communities Network, http://www.sustainable.org
• Vital Communities, http://www.vitalcommunities.org
• American Community Gardening Association, http://communitygarden.org/
• UNH Campus-Community Farm, http://www.sustainableunh.unh.edu/fas/campus_comm_farm.html

Save the Date! The fourth annual Soul of Agriculture conference will take place November 7-9, 2004 at UNH. This year’s conference will focus on the connections among nutrition, health and agriculture. For more information, please visit: http://www.sustainableunh.unh.edu/fas.