



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
JOSEPH A. CURTATONE, MAYOR

April 12, 2012

Dear Honorable Board,

With the support and co-sponsorship of the Board of Aldermen, I respectfully submit the following ordinance for consideration of the Board, with regard to proposed amendments to the Somerville Zoning Ordinance (SZO). This ordinance is one component of a larger policy framework that will provide a comprehensive set of regulations and incentives regarding urban farming across several areas, including: residential lots, commercial properties, “community farm” plots, and municipal lots. Regulations will be set pertaining to the growth and sale of fresh produce, as well as the keeping of domestic fowl and bees as defined within each section. While some of these activities have been customary in the past, the existing ordinances in Somerville have never clearly established the circumstances under which they are allowed. With an update to the zoning ordinance, urban agriculture will be encouraged and supported in Somerville.

Also included herewith is an informal set of Frequently Asked Questions designed to provide supporting information for your review. In forthcoming weeks, we will also provide administrative standards to be established by City departments to complement the ordinance.

BACKGROUND

As part of our mission to ensure Somerville is a great place to live, work, play, and raise a family, we are also committed to increasing access to fresh, wholesome foods for all residents, at affordable prices and via multiple means. To date, the City of Somerville, working under the tenets of Shape Up Somerville – Eat Smart, Play Hard, Move More, Live Well – has established a wide variety of programs and initiatives that have grown and expanded. Creating access to these fresh foods is particularly important in currently underserved neighborhoods, or “food deserts,” such as neighborhoods in sections of Wards 1 and 4 where access to local markets is cut off by multi-lane highways and inadequate pedestrian safety infrastructure.

The work of Shape Up Somerville, in addition to other local community groups has highlighted the need for and the interest in access to healthy and affordable food within City boundaries. In response, this administration seeks to expand on this work and continue as a national leader in innovative government practices by incorporating policies emerging nationwide, encouraging home gardeners to produce their own food and allow for the development of additional community gardens, market farms and commercial farms within Somerville. These policies will set the precedent for our City’s larger vision for a sustainable economic and environmentally-



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friendly Somerville in the future, consistent with the groundwork laid in our SomerVision Plan, and consistent with our goal of creating a community where every resident will be within walking distance from an opportunity to either grow or purchase healthy food at an affordable price.

In terms of addressing food deserts and access issues, the City has already established a successful Farmers Market program, including two outdoor markets, one indoor winter market, and a mobile market at the Mystic Housing Authority on Mystic Avenue, which was recently extended through the winter months. Their combined successes, and growing resident interest in expanding the program, reinforce our community's high demand for agricultural activity within our borders. These markets serve not only as places for people to purchase produce, but also special destinations where neighbors can gather and interact, putting Somerville in a prime position to be a leader in developing sustainable food systems.

The urban agriculture movement is gaining ground nationwide, particularly as part of First Lady Michelle Obama's *Let's Move!* and a focus on eliminating childhood obesity, an important facet of which includes increasing access to wholesome foods. We have already explored several best practices and case studies both locally and nationally and developed partnerships which may help lead our initiative. Locally, the Food Project of Boston and Nuestras Raices of Holyoke are two exemplary organizations doing urban agriculture work. The Food Project's focus on youth engagement through agriculture has won national recognition. The community kitchen, entrepreneurial and job training approach of Nuestras Raices model is something we could learn from specifically as we work with immigrant populations within the city. Nationally, staff and interns have met with Growing Power, another nationally recognized organization based in Milwaukee, in addition to Sweet Water Organics, an aquaponics facility also in Milwaukee.

BENEFITS OF URBAN AGRICULTURE

In addition to preserving open space and providing physical activity opportunities, there are numerous environmental benefits to growing local food. Growing locally eliminates both the need for use of fossil fuels in transporting food and the use of destructive chemicals to grow at a large scale. The development and expansion of community farming initiatives revitalize both indoor and outdoor underutilized spaces contributing to both beautification and public safety in addition to adding social spaces where neighbors can meet and connect throughout the city.

At the scale of the residential garden, urban agriculture provides a valuable supplement to a family's food budget. On the community farm scale, growing food can provide an invaluable classroom for students to learn about nutrition and where their food comes from. On the



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commercial scale, urban farms provide jobs and opportunities for entrepreneurs to develop local businesses. Overall, this initiative would fill the community's desire for our City to be a food secure and resilient community where residents have the opportunity to grow, or easily find fresh, local foods appropriate to their culture.

Somerville has been recognized as an innovative community, both for our award-winning programs and initiatives, as well as for our ability to do more with less, providing quality services for our residents on a balanced budget. The urban agriculture initiative proposed in this SZO amendment provides another opportunity for Somerville to serve as a national model of how a densely populated urban community can become an agricultural hub. The proposed zoning amendments would simultaneously provide opportunities for healthier eating options for all residents, as well as opportunities around local food entrepreneurial activity and job training for both youth and adults.

We are fortunate to have a supportive and engaged business and nonprofit community, many of whom are already well-equipped and eager to fill the urban farming niche. Already, Groundwork Somerville, the Somerville Growing Center and Green City Growers have established raised beds in the South Street area, which is vastly underutilized and industrial in nature, to increase access in a typical food desert while teaching students and younger residents the importance of growing local, supporting our economy, and creating an educated future resident base.

There is also interest in new technologies for growing indoors, including hydroponic growing that grows plants in nutrient solution without soil, and aquaponic growing that uses natural bacterial cycles to convert fish waste to plant nutrients, thereby growing both fish and vegetables. There is also an interest in exploring agriculture research and partnerships which would allow residents from other countries to grow culturally appropriate foods in Somerville. It is important as we focus on increasing awareness of healthy lifestyle choices that we also focus on our cultural diversity, creating opportunities across all ages and ethnic backgrounds. Incorporating guidelines and regulations for residential lots (backyard gardens or square footage plots), municipal lots (community gardens), commercial greenhouses, and community farms (such as those operated by nonprofit organizations) creates a new design for urban farming, and allows the City to research and explore various opportunities with regard to urban agriculture.

The benefits of this initiative are neither limited to the aforementioned examples, nor are they limited in how we might expand upon them as our community continues to learn and grow. This initiative is another example of our commitment to a roadmap for our City's future that will provide a sustainable, and healthy, approach to development and economic growth.



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SUSTAINABLE REGULATIONS

The proposed ordinance amendment, as outlined below, will create a framework for urban farming in the City of Somerville, as well as set parameters for proper farming techniques, preventive maintenance of all farm properties, and provisions for keeping of domestic fowl and honey bees. (Please see attached FAQ document.)

Briefly, the proposed ordinance would support and encourage urban agriculture and urban farming in each of the following areas: residential, commercial, municipal, and designated “community farm” lots, with provisions and regulations to include:

- **Home Agriculture:** Home agriculture includes the keeping of hens and bees, outlining the restrictions and responsibilities of each. Yard farms and roof farms will be differentiated and appropriate zoning rules cited.
- **Community Farming:** Regulations are established pertaining to farms or greenhouses operated by a nonprofit agency and that may include occasional on-site sales, subject to further regulations as set forth in the ordinance and footnotes.
- **Farming on municipal land:** Regulations are established to allow flexible use of municipal lands and buildings for agricultural purposes.
- **Commercial Agriculture:** Generally, the SZO currently allows for commercial agriculture under the “commercial greenhouse” category. Recommended amendments to this category would define aquaponics and hydroponics as they related to this ordinance/initiative, as well as establish regulations regarding keeping of hens and bees as a part of a commercial establishment
- **The keeping of domestic hens or bees** is permissible in residential farms on a small scale, as well as on community farms if the farm secures a special permit under the zoning ordinance
- **Additional regulations** will be developed with the assistance of ISD and Health Department to address noise, nuisance and environmental concerns. These will likely take the form of Health regulations that will supplement the submitted ordinance..

PROPOSED ORDINANCE(S)

The ordinance proposed today has a few key features to advance urban agriculture in Somerville. These proposals are based on national best practices but are adapted to the unique conditions in Somerville and the structure of the Somerville Zoning Ordinance. Specifically, the ordinance:

1. Provides definitions for key terms of urban agriculture



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2. Amends section 7.11.4 to allow home agriculture including yard farms, roof farms, keeping of bees, keeping of hens, and limited on-site sales of agricultural products, while establishing limitations in 7.12 for each of these activities.
3. Amends 7.11.5 to clarify that community gardens are allowed in Somerville.
4. Amends section 7.11.9.10 to expand the categories of agriculture beyond commercial agriculture to include non-profit farms and farming on municipal land, while establishing the circumstances under which hens and bees may be kept, and establishing limitations in 7.12 for each of these activities.

CONCLUSION

I hope that the Board of Aldermen will approve this proposal amend the Somerville Zoning Ordinance to encourage urban agriculture by adding definitions, amending the table of uses and amending the footnotes to the table of uses, and help to move forward the urban agriculture movement in Somerville.

Respectfully submitted,

Joseph Curtatone
Mayor