

## Let's Talk: Oakland Community Gardens

September 20, 2023

**Attendees:** Andrea Boykowycz, Caroline Greaser, Mackenzie Pleskovic, Sean Harrington, Elena Zaitsoff, DaVonn Brown, Candice Gormley, Justin Patrick, Lizbeth Gray, Howard K Stevens Jr, Trisha Margiotti, Holly Dick, Leerice, Wooden Canoe, Claire Matway, Scarlett, Abhi, Scarlett Chandler, Hudson, Anna Mackinnon, David Manthei, Cate Lecrone, Jasir Chavis, Brandon Boone.

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Andrea welcomes everyone and introduces the topic of community gardens. The conversation will focus on what Oakland already has in terms of community gardens and what kind of available opportunities Oakland has for expansion. Representatives from both the city's Adopt-A-Lot program and Pitt University's Plant2Plate program are present to provide insight. Andrea turns it over to Abhi and Scarlett who are Pitt students on the board of the Plant2Plate program.

### Abhi and Scarlett – Plant2Plate board members

Scarlett and Abhi are seniors who have been in Plant2Plate for two years. Plant2Plate is an urban garden located at 246 Oakland Avenue, is completely student run, and Pitt-funded. It aims to provide fresh grown produce to local communities through partnership with food pantries and other outreach opportunities.

**Andrea Boykowycz: How do you go about recruiting your volunteers? Plant2Plate won't always have the Oakland Ave location so what other kinds of opportunities do students have to garden in the different areas in Oakland? Would there be interest in more varied kinds of sites in other areas of Oakland?**

**Scarlett:** For context, the spot on Oakland Ave is part of Pitt's master plan to build more overflow housing and over the past few years Pitt, as a community, has reached those population levels where administration has started placing deadlines on Plant2Plate's time on Oakland Ave.

**Abhi:** Plant2Plate is guaranteed to have it through the end of 2024. Unofficially based on conversations with administration and student government, developing that land is off the radar compared to other development projects that the University is currently working on. Plant2Plate may have it for a couple more years.

**Scarlett:** In exchange for Plant2Plate's location on Oakland Ave the administration has offered them a location on Vera Street in West Oakland. Through soil testing and planning with different engineering groups they have found that the land there is non-viable for the scale of operations that they already conduct on Oakland Ave.

**Abhi:** Plant2Plate has roughly 400 volunteers, but there is a very high turnover due to the variability of student's schedules. The potential location on Vera Street poses another issue because it is not close to students living in Central and South Oakland.

**Scarlett:** We have talked to the OPDC and done our own research through Adopt-A-Lot on various vacant lots and drafted outreach to those, but nothing has come to fruition yet. They do

have some plans for some Pocket Gardens on Pitts campus, and they would love to implement that model wherever they can. Implementing their pocket model would be more sustainable for the long-term growth and upkeep of the club. Having pocket gardens in underutilized green spaces throughout Oakland can help foster a deeper sense of community and maybe get more full-time residents involved.

Andrea pivots and asks Mackenzie Pleskovic: **Can you talk a little about the Adopt-A-Lot program? What should the process be for exploring and identifying city owned lots that might be potential candidates for gardens?**

Mackenzie Pleskovic – City of Pittsburgh, Department of City Planning

The Adopt-A-Lot program was created to allow the community members/students who are interested in utilizing vacant properties that are owned by the city of Pittsburgh to develop it in to either a rain, flower, or food garden. Right now, we have 80 throughout the city, one is in West Oakland. There are vacant properties in West and South Oakland, but none in Central Oakland. lotstolove.org is a great resource for identifying vacant lots so Plant2Plate can use that to find vacant lots in Central Oakland that could be potential garden space. The URA (Urban Redevelopment Authority) may own more property in Central Oakland and are trying to start a farm-a-lot program that would have a similar model to Adopt-A-Lot. Mackenzie offers to share a list of all the city owned vacant property in Oakland with Abhi and Scarlett. Most of what she has looked at would be greenways due to the steep topography, but there are two potential garden locations that she offers to share, as well. Once a viable lot is found then submit an intake form to the city. The city is not trying to activate any more city-owned gardens but, through programs like Adopt-A-Lot, the city can aid the community in stewarding vacant lots and adding more gardens.

*From Candace Gormley in the chat: I'm a resident from West Oakland... I would be interested in learning about potential sites.*

Andrea Boykowycz: Grow Pittsburgh is a non-profit organization that is dedicated to education and support for community gardening and among the things that they offer is a Garden Resource Center (workshops, tool lending library, technical assistance with volunteer events and how to maintain a healthy garden).

*Opens it up for questions.*

Liz Gray: **Scarlett and Abhi can you explain in greater detail the idea of pocket gardens?**

Abhi: Pocket gardens can be a way to get a greater proportion of the Pitt community involved with gardening, especially when their central garden on Oakland Ave gets removed. Currently we have our first two pocket gardens in the development phase.

Scarlett: Bringing in a pocket garden would look like identifying an underutilized space and bringing in some kind of insulated raised bed or other small planting apparatus with some tools. These should be easy and inexpensive to implement in these small locations and can be whatever the caretakers want it to be (it's very customizable).

Andrea Boykowycz invites Elena Zaitsoff (with Oakcliff Community Organization) to comment on the fate of the Lawn Street community garden.

Elena Zaitsoff: Greg Fisher is the person who is tending. The OCO doesn't want to lose it as a garden and is happy to look into it further.

Andrea Boykowycz: **Does Plant2Plate offer composting as a part of the educational programming that you're offering on Oakland Ave? Do you have any recommendations for other community gardens?**

Abhi: They have one compost pile, but it has gotten large enough that it has been a trouble to maintain, which has limited its use. Their plan going forward is to split it up into multiple, smaller piles so that maintenance is easier. If other community farms want to start composting, start small and scale up slowly.

Scarlett: We have also had issues with people misusing the compost pile (putting garbage/cardboard/etc. in there).

Anna Mackinnon: Pitt's Ambassador program is happy to help and provide volunteers.

Brandon Boone (resident of West Oakland): **Are you guys (Plant2Plate) tied into pollinators or efforts for pollinators throughout the community? I would desire to have a honeybee hive.**

Scarlett: Plant2Plate does have a pollination garden at the Oakland Ave Garden. They have partnered with the sustainability class at Pitt led by Dr. Corey Flynn to repopulate a native wildflower garden that serves as a pollinator garden. Corey may have some contacts in terms of beekeeping.

Abhi: Pitt probably couldn't have beekeeping on their site (liability issues), but would be happy to help connect contacts for beekeeping to potentially be available in one of the community gardens.

*Andrea closes the meeting and thanks everyone for coming out and asking questions.*