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EDITOR'S PICK ALERT TOP STORY

EPA grant first step for city toward urban agriculture project

Margaret Reist
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A brownfield site at Seventh and N streets was previously Nature's Variety Cold Storage Facility.

JUSTIN WAN, Journal Star

Margaret Reist

Put on your floppy gardening hat and dream.

City officials have done more than dream, and it earned them an \$800,000 grant from the Environmental Protection Agency, which will be used to assess and clean up brownfield sites in the West and South Haymarket — including up to 10 acres of land city officials hope to use for urban agriculture projects.

That's exciting news to Tim Rinne, chairman of the Lincoln-Lancaster County Food Policy Council, who said moving Lincoln's local food production into the commercial realm is an important step.

Now, 90% of the food consumed here is imported from other places.

“The sad thing is that renowned agricultural powerhouse that Nebraska is, hardly any of what we chomp away on comes from here,” he said.

The idea, if the West Haymarket land adjacent to the People's City Mission can be cleaned up, would be to lease it to local farmers who would produce food that could be used by local businesses.

By leasing public land for commercial market gardening, Lincoln will reduce its reliance on other states, Rinne said.

“Rather than continuing to rely exclusively on drought-stricken and wildfire-plagued California to produce the bulk of our produce, or waiting for the next breakdown of our national food distribution network like we saw with the COVID-19 crisis, Lincoln's city government leadership is taking the visionary and cautionary step of building a resilient local food system,” he said.

Taryn Serwatowski, brownfields coordinator at the Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy, said the community's champion on revitalization projects is Frank Uhlarik, who's been working toward an urban agricultural project for several years.

In 2017, the state cleaned up a vacant lot near Cooper Park near Eighth and D streets, but the project had to be shelved when neither the city nor Community Crops could acquire the land.

So Serwatowski was excited when Uhlarik called about the West Haymarket land, which had little soil contamination but building materials buried up to 5 feet deep. She worried that the cost of excavation would be prohibitive — until they found out about the EPA grant.

The West Haymarket land is in the floodplain, which makes other development problematic. Using it for ag purposes is a unique way to create offset flood storage and help protect surrounding developments, said Dan Marvin, the city's urban development director.

Serwatowski said the role of the brownfield program is to act as a catalyst to revitalize blighted areas and cleanup grants like this help remove the environmental stigma attached to brownfield properties.

The five-year grant will be used to assess four other sites in the South and West Haymarket. The money also can be used to develop cleanup plans and clean up two sites.

Lincoln was the only community in the state to get the EPA's grant through its multipurpose, assessment and cleanup grant program, said Edward Chu, acting EPA Region 7 director. Brownfield sites are developed land, often previously used for industrial or commercial purposes, that could be contaminated.

The other sites that will be assessed include a vacant lot at 215 S. Seventh St., a portion of which is a parking lot and a portion that's open green space. The parking lot would, city officials hope, be developed. They want to turn the open green space into parkland.

Other sites that will be assessed and cleaned up for commercial, residential or mixed-use development include an abandoned grain elevator at 610 G St., Confidential Lumber Supply, 525 L St., the former police garage and the International Harvester Building, 645 J St.

The land being considered for the urban agricultural project includes about 5 acres owned by the West Haymarket Joint Public Agency adjacent to the People’s City Mission, as well as another 5 acres nearby owned by the Mission and Community Action of Lancaster and Saunders Counties.

The city mission and community action could use some of the produce from the project, the grant proposal says.

The city has used EPA grants and other environmental funding sources to clean up much of the West Haymarket area, and used EPA grants as far back as 2005 to clean up the area around 50th and O streets where the Hy-Vee and other businesses replaced what had once been a car dealership.

Chu said this grant will help Lincoln continue to pursue its clear vision of future development.

“These actions lay the foundation for building resilient and thriving neighborhoods.”



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