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Turning Concrete Green:

Going Vertical in the Soil Capital of the World

In an age of genetically modified foods, preservatives, and abundant pesticides that are meant to increase our food options, why is it that people's diets are narrowing? The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have revealed that 15 million Americans suffer from food allergies. Industrial agriculture depletes food's nutrition through travel time and need for preservatives, and it fosters eating foods grown non-organically out of their appropriate season. Large-scale agriculture is also responsible for 20% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, potentially leading to global-warming. These are serious repercussions. And it is precisely these repercussions that the Lancaster Urban Farming Initiative has set out to revert, right in the heart of the soil capital of the world – Lancaster City.

The Lancaster Urban Farming Initiative is a non-profit headed by local business-owner, Corey Fogarty, owner of Federal Taphouse in downtown Lancaster. Fogarty, who once worked in real estate, has always been passionate about green initiatives, and worked on projects to enhance green design within the real estate market. "It's always been a very close, personal mission of mine to see more sustainable everything, really. I think my kids need a planet to live on, and I think we're really screwing it up right now and we all need to step up and do something about it."

The idea for the Initiative was brought to Fogarty by Sarah Taggart, a chef at the Federal Taphouse, when she suggested planting a rooftop garden on a location in Lancaster City. Fogarty encouraged Sarah to enlarge the vision, broadcasting a formal call for green initiatives within the city. The Lancaster Urban Farming Initiative was granted 501(c)(3) status this year with a board of 9 members and Fogarty acting as president. The non-profit really gained attention in the press recently when Fogarty and his crew received permission from parking authorities to institute rooftop gardens on parking garages around the city, their original target being the 30,000 sq. foot parking garage connected to Fogarty's restaurant. This goal has now spread to 4-5 locations around the city that will hopefully house green spaces.

These spaces will implement hydroponic and/or aeroponic systems in both horizontal and vertical greenhouses, a system Fogarty was encouraged to explore by Mayor Rick Gray. Hydroponics is a system of agriculture that submerges plant roots in water mixed with mineral-nutrient solutions rather than soil. This encourages oxidation of the roots allowing more mineral absorption and a greater yield in produce. An aeroponics system runs water off-and-on over the roots as opposed to submersion. The Initiative is collaborating with AERO, a local company that specializes in aeroponic design and vertical growers.

The Initiative also has a strict no-waste policy and plans to institute sustainable processes such as solar powering and reclaimed rainwater to ensure zero waste and no carbon footprint. Creating a

sustainable system is crucial to the Initiative, and while the challenges are large, Fogarty is confident that they can do it. “It’s pretty grandiose, but I think we can pull it off cost-effectively.”

The Initiative is fueled by a sense of community. There are two community outreach projects the Initiative is actively exploring, one being to work with tree tenders to plant fruit trees around the city. Another project, aided by Paula Wilson, former Hamilton Elementary School principal, is to create community gardens throughout the Lancaster school district. Wilson worked to put up 31 garden beds at Hamilton Elementary and will be volunteering with the Initiative on creating more school gardens.

These green space projects will also help the community through job creation. A feasibility study funded by the Lancaster County Community Foundation showed that the greenhouses will annually pump several million dollars of gross revenue into the city and create 30-50 jobs a year. The Initiative’s employment opportunities will be focused on people who suffer from disabilities, mental challenges, and addictions. The vertical greenhouses’ rotating tray beds will be accessible to employees in wheelchairs, and numerous studies show that working with plants can calm aggression, stress, and mental deterioration both in recovering addicts and those with mental health issues.

The Initiative also plans to teach city locals how to start backyard gardens. Fogarty is intent on helping people know their food’s source. “When I eat a cucumber or a tomato, even in my restaurant, I struggle with, ‘Where is it coming from?’” Fogarty has visions of the greenhouses providing produce for the city’s restaurants, ensuring quality produce year-round. “The reality is the land can provide you with what you need, we just don’t use it.”

This green crusade can give back to the community only as much as we give to it. The Initiative’s website is <http://lancasterufi.org> where you can submit donations. If you are interested in volunteering and would like to get involved, email them at info@lancasterufi.org. As Fogarty puts it, “Let’s take concrete and turn it green.”

BREAKOUT BOX: Want to know more? Be looking for a full-length documentary detailing the creation of the Lancaster Urban Farming Initiative that will be coming out from Outlaw Studios Entertainment hopefully sometime next year.