



Small Urban Farmers Nourish The City of Houston

Proposal to the City of Houston Resiliency Committee



What does the Houston Food Bank do? We...

1. drive public policy change to create a world that doesn't need food banks and help our neighbors to become more civically engaged with their government.
2. work to lessen the need for neighbors to get in our lines through programs that promote health management and long-term economic stability.
3. provide supplemental access to nutritious food for individuals who are food insecure. We do this through more than 1,600 partners (schools, communities of faith, non-profits, healthcare providers) with over 300 in Houston.

Food Insecurity

(2023)¹

- **U.S.** rate 14%
- **Texas** 17% overall and 23% among children

- **Houston/Harris County**
 - 17% overall
 - 24% among children

- **Access to nutritious food:**
 - nearly 50% of individuals experiencing food insecurity may not qualify for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits due to program eligibility restrictions (and currently benefits are ~\$6 per person per day)

 - more than 500k Houston residents live in USDA designated food deserts²

1. USDA Household Food Insecurity in the United States 2023

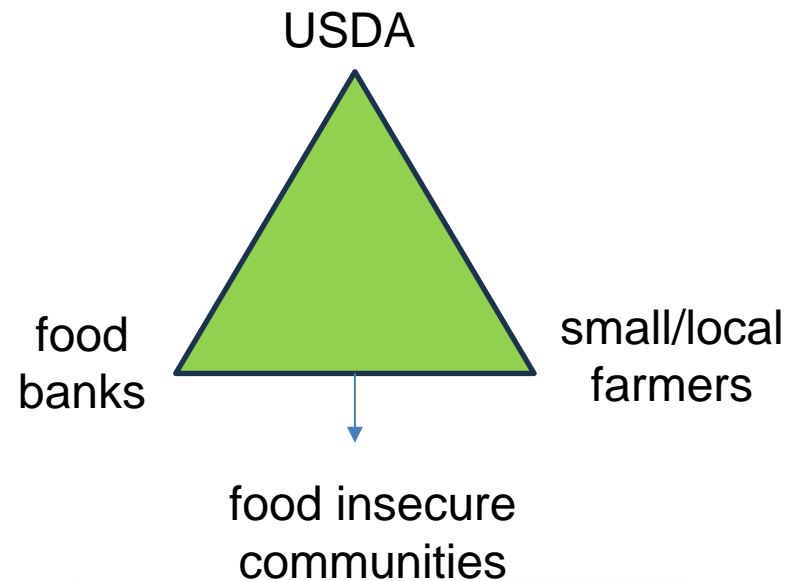
2. USDA Food Access Research Atlas

Houston Food Bank & Small Urban Farms

Long standing relationship developed through collaborative opportunities such as:

- *Local Food Purchase Agreement Program (LFPA)*

USDA funds are provided to food banks who subgrant to local farms to grow capacity that leads to more food for the community (but also additional jobs and economic growth).



Benefits of Small Urban Farms

Increase economic opportunities in their surrounding neighborhoods by *lowering food transportation and storage costs, making healthy produce available and affordable, and by creating local employment opportunities.*

Mitigate flooding by serving as water reservoirs that absorb excess water during stormwater surges.



Benefits of Small Urban Farms

Fit into the **City of Houston's Resilience Plan** that...

recognizes local greening initiatives as a strategy for mitigating climate change impacts and asserts that the city will *“invest in Houston’s food ecosystem through ... economic and workforce development, and local agriculture.”*



Challenges for Small Urban Farms

- Don't qualify for agricultural tax exemptions (greater than 5 acres)
- Significant investment needed to establish viable land and sustain a farm (infrastructure, labor, **water**)
 - Very small margins:
 - Total revenue on a .5-acre farm is ~\$50k/year.
 - From this, the farmer pays ~\$20,000-\$25,000 in expenses (supplies and labor are the biggest categories), taking home ~\$25k-\$30k.
 - Water costs can be up to 10-15% of gross earnings in water.

Water Costs

Farm	Address	Acres	Average Annual Water Usage (Gallons)	Average Annual Water Costs	Vegetable Production (Pounds/ Year)
Finca Tres Robles	257 N Greenwood Street Houston	0.75	~275,000	\$1,376	24,000
PIF Westbury (site of Louamba Family Farm, MARS Farm, and Natural Healthy Foods)	12581 Dunlap Street, Houston 77035	2.00	~1,000,000.00	\$7,864	30,000
PIF Fondren (site of Chef Constant Sustainable Farms, Hope Farm, and Kengue Family Farm)	10595 Fondren Road, Houston 77096	2.50	~1,500,000.00	\$9,790	36,000
PIF Blossom Heights (site of Nyuma Family Farm)	8720 Lipan Road, Houston 77063	0.25	~150,000.00	\$1,124	4,000
PIF Montrose (site of Jasmine Family Farm)	1318 Sul Ross Street, Houston 77006	0.50	~300,000.00	\$2,087	7,000
Verdegreens	1208 Bland St, Houston, 77091	~2	~365,000	\$5,500	360,000
Shamba Ya Amani	8401 Dairy View Ln Houston, TX 77027	1	~590,000	\$4,000	10,000
TOTALS		9 acres	4.2 million gallons	\$31,741	471,000

Given the benefits of small urban farms to the city, we are asking Houston's City Council to address a significant threat to their vitality and enact an Urban Farm Agricultural Water Exemption.

Proposal



- ❖ The Urban Farm Agricultural Water Exemption is intended for use by small agricultural operations (may be a non-profit or for-profit) that produce vegetables and/or fruit for direct human consumption.
- ❖ Farms must use responsible conservation practices, such as drip irrigation systems and limited watering hours.
- ❖ Excluded from the exemption are those growing primarily for personal use, such as backyard gardening or neighborhood gardens.

Proposal



- ❖ To qualify, farming operations must meet the following criteria:
 - Distribute a majority (>50%) of farm-grown products through sale or community distribution
 - Use a majority of the grow space (>50%) to produce fruit and/or vegetables for human consumption
 - Maintain in production at least 5,000 square feet of growing space for a majority (>6 months) of the year

- ❖ Farms may be asked to provide one or more of the following to verify their qualifications:
 - Sales and/or donation records
 - A business plan
 - A farm map, including an overall view of the growing space and list of crops in production

Urban Farms Known to be Eligible

- **Finca Tres Robles (Council District H)**, a project of the non-profit **Small Places** grows organic produce. They strive to build their local community's food system by making their produce affordable to its residents and by offering classes on the farm covering a wide variety of food and health related topics.
- **Plant It Forward (PIF) (Council Districts C, K, and J)** is a non-profit farm support organization that partners with new American small business farmers to bring fresh, healthy food to Houston families. They work with **~70 farmers** in the greater Houston region, including 8 urban farming businesses operating in the City of Houston.
- **Verdegreens Farms (Council District B)**. On their two-acre small business farm, they use a mix of hydroponics and no-till soil cultivation to grow a wide variety of seasonal vegetables, lettuce, herbs, and microgreens.
- **Shamba Ya Amani (Council District F)**. The non-profit collective of 32 farmers tend their own dedicated raised beds and make collective decisions about their 1-acre community field to plan, weed, water, harvest, and prepare crops for market (current payment of water by the International Management District will be phased out).

Return on Investment

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Return on Investment

(example of .5-acre farm; \$2,000/yr. water costs)



- Farmer invests their savings by purchasing \$1,000 worth of frost cloth, which covers ~half their farm during a freeze. This saves their crops, allowing them to continue to harvest and provide food to the community. Today, they would lose crops for ~6 weeks following a freeze.

This creates an additional \$6,000 in value and provides an additional ~\$1,400 pounds of produce to the community

- Farmers invests their savings by purchasing a small high tunnel for \$1,5000 to protect crops, extending the growing season and creating protection from insects.
- They are now able to grow their own plant starts in a nursery, instead of planting directly in their beds which reduces the time their crop needs in the bed

This increases the overall output by ~3,000-5,000 pounds of diversified vegetables annually.



Return on Investment

(example of .5-acre farm; \$2,000/yr. water costs)



Farmer invests in large tarps (\$1,500) needed to cover the farm during hot summer months which **protects the produce and prevents weeds on the farm.**

**We humbly ask your support of the Urban Farm
Agricultural Water Exemption.**

For more information

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