EQUITY TRUST—2010 Program Glimpses

Keeping farms affordable and producing local food.

Northampton Community Farm

When residents began organizing in Northampton, Massachusetts late last year, to protect a local farm from becoming athletic fields, Equity Trust was able to support them in several ways. Early on, we gave presentations to City officials and the general public, offering information, stories, and tools to help the project balance the needs of the community with those of the farmers who will work the land. Other nonprofits and individuals brought other key ingredients and out of the organizing emerged “Grow Food Northampton” a new nonprofit with a mission to promote food security by advancing sustainable agriculture in the region.

Grow Food Northampton is now partnering with their city and the Trust for Public Land to protect the original farm and a second adjacent farm, preserving 117 acres of farmland and a river conservation corridor (with some sports fields on the periphery). Equity Trust helped Grow Food to become Trust for Public Land’s preferred buyer for the farmland, and Grow Food now has a massive fundraising campaign underway. Equity Trust has provided fiscal agency for major gifts and foundation grants to the campaign. We also coordinated a committee of farmers to oversee selection of the lessee farmers who will grow food on the land to sell locally. Equity Trust is currently drafting the 99-year lease between Grow Food and the future farmers, ensuring community access while allowing the farmers to develop the infrastructure and build equity in the farm.

Southside Community Land Trust and the Urban Agriculture Task Force

In Providence, Rhode Island, the Southside Community Land Trust (SCLT) asked Equity Trust to work with them and a citywide Urban Agriculture Task Force to identify financing opportunities for community gardens, small urban farms, and other initiatives for bringing healthy local food to their local communities. Southside Community Land Trust is a nationally recognized leader in urban agriculture that Equity Trust has a long history of supporting. Equity Trust loans and donor advised grants have helped SCLT acquire and renovate the building that houses their offices and programs, and to purchase equipment for their Urban Edge Farm.

For the current project, Equity Trust has identified a wide range of financing sources, both governmental and non-governmental, that can support some of the goals of the community groups, non-profits, and small businesses that are building urban agriculture in Providence. Our next step will be to collaborate with the Urban Agriculture Task Force to plan how to develop local resources, including perhaps a local revolving loan fund, to meet the financing needs not met by existing programs.

Gaining Ground in Maine

This year, we completed a second winter of outreach and training for farmers and land trusts in Maine. Workshops shared Equity Trust’s models for whole farm preservation and presented ideas on how farmers and land trusts can collaborate to keep farms affordable and ensure that they continue to provide food and other community benefits. We continue to partner with two land trusts, and the farmers who work their lands, to create shared ownership agreements that will serve as examples in Maine of permanent whole farm protection.
Equity Trust Fund

The Equity Trust Fund offers socially conscious lenders and donors the opportunity to support agricultural and community development projects that protect the long term interests of communities, provide equitable ways of owning and stewarding property, and promote social justice and environmentally sustainable land use.

Support for sustainable agriculture

Two loans this year, to farmers on opposite coasts of the country, reflect the range of our agricultural loans. The Equity Trust Fund provided a land acquisition loan, one of our largest in recent years, to Pie Ranch, in San Mateo County, California, for the purchase and permanent protection of the land they have been farming. Pie Ranch is a non-profit run farm that combines farming and education to advance its mission to “inspire and connect rural and urban people to know the source of their food, and to work together to bring greater health to the food system from seed to table.” The farm has a diverse production of fruits, vegetables, wheat, eggs, milk, butter, and more that it sells at local farmers markets, through community shares, and to local bakeries. Pie Ranch offers an equally diverse mix of educational programs on the farm for urban youth from several San Francisco area high schools, and they provide full-year apprenticeships for young farmers as well as shorter internships for learning about sustainable agriculture, food justice, and farm-based education.

On Martha’s Vineyard, in Massachusetts, the Equity Trust Fund provided a much smaller cash flow loan to Whippoorwill Farm, the only Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm on the island. Whippoorwill Farm grows organic produce and flowers for its members, for local restaurants, and for sale at farmers markets. Our cash flow loan will help the farm manage under shifting circumstances as it adjusts marketing strategies to changes in the island economy and responds to other unexpected challenges that are common for farm businesses. While large land acquisition projects may be more visible and exciting, our ability to give this kind of on-going support to small farmers is equally important for building sustainable local food systems.

Expanding the reach of our loan fund.

In addition to providing loans to farmers, the Equity Trust Fund has been developing partnerships that will extend our reach and capacity to support social change. Working with local donors and other committed residents of Southeastern Connecticut, we have established the Francis Fund for Southeastern Connecticut, a sub-fund within the Equity Trust Fund dedicated to building resources and opportunities in New London County through targeted lending in support of an equitable, food secure, and ecologically sustainable regional economy. A local advisory committee is identifying potential borrowers with projects that will build key community resources. The committee is also actively recruiting lenders who want to invest where they live and effect real change in the health of their community. The fund has over $500,000 in donations and loans, and we are currently processing two loan requests, one for transitional housing for homeless veterans, another for housing for women recovering from substance abuse. Equity Trust hopes to extend this model to other communities that are embracing an understanding of wealth as a shared resource that is built collectively.