Secure Land for Urban Agriculture:
Seeking funders’ perspectives

Equity Trust, Inc.
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Overview

Equity Trust is a small, national nonprofit promoting socially equitable forms of property ownership, with a major focus on helping farmers and their communities build partnerships to protect affordable farms and promote secure access to farmland for farmers.

Over the past two years, we have been exploring land tenure issues for urban agriculture through interviews with practitioners around the Northeast; a December 2014 symposium that brought together many of these practitioners and partners to share experiences and approaches to land access; and study of the applicability of tools and strategies of farmland protection to the urban setting.

Participants in this work emphasized the need for strong partnerships between committed land trusts, government, and philanthropic funding sources in order to protect urban land for food production, as happens with rural farmland preservation. A handful of land trusts work in the urban space, but they have less capacity than their rural counterparts, partly because they do not have access to the same funding streams. Thus, the need to engage more land trusts and the need to develop funding sources are closely entwined.

To learn more about this need, and opportunities for addressing it, we interviewed individuals from foundations and funder groups that support work related to food systems broadly; convened conversations about land and urban agriculture between foundation representatives, public agencies, and urban agriculture practitioners; and conducted a survey aimed at funders already engaged with food systems, land conservation, or related environmental, health, and community development issues.

Key takeaways from these exchanges include the following:

• There is a great range in the level of awareness that funders of urban agriculture programs have of the land tenure challenges faced by the organizations engaged in urban agriculture, which naturally affects their readiness to invest time and resources in finding solutions.

• Direct funding for land acquisition is not something that many funders of urban agriculture programs are in a position to provide, in part because many of the foundations supporting these programs are relatively small.

• There are a variety of non-monetary strategies that foundations can and do use to contribute to securing land access for urban agriculture.

• Land trusts play a critical role in land protection, and their reach in the urban arena could be expanded in conjunction with expanded funding.

• The diversity of interests and missions that bring funders to support urban agriculture makes it hard to draw general conclusions about them as a group. It also suggests that continued outreach to and education of funders requires multipronged approaches.
Outreach methods and findings

We began our outreach to funders through a series of one-on-one phone conversations with foundation officers interested in food systems in the northeast. We heard a variety of perspectives, and found significant alignment around certain themes that helped shape a broader survey and an in-person gathering.

Several interviewees discussed the perception that few funders are interested in urban farming, and some noted that foundations might not see urban agriculture as part of their funding strategy even when they support it. For funders interested in strengthening the economy, promoting public health, or environmental protection, urban agriculture itself may not be a lead issue, so its role can get buried. This also means that the roots of funder interest are diverse and complex. Local funders may value urban agriculture for the health benefits of fresh food, local economic development, stormwater management, or education and youth programs. These observations shaped our approach to the survey.

The survey was conducted in late fall 2015 using SurveyMonkey. Community Food Funders and Sustainable Agriculture and Food System Funders helped circulate the survey through their network lists. Almost 60 people responded and 38 completed the entire survey. Respondents represented a national audience and included foundations interested in rural, as well as urban, areas.

Among the wide variety of interests that may lead a foundation to support urban agriculture, the greatest numbers of survey respondents indicated interest in:

- Environment/climate (including stormwater management) (61%),
- Food access/basic needs (56%),
- Local (place-based) needs (56%), and
- Community building (51%).

Given the diversity of interests, the survey was designed with two branches to allow for questions tailored to different groups: those interested in only environment or land conservation saw one part of the survey and those with any of the seven other funding interests listed in the survey saw the other part.

- Of the 33 respondents more focused on community programs, the area of greatest support for urban agriculture related projects was food- and farm-based education, which three-quarters of respondents had previously funded and which almost all would consider funding.
- Of the 5 respondents who answered the section for those most interested in land conservation, interests were mixed, but most have at least some interest in farmland protection and 4 out of 5 currently fund projects that protect land for food production.
To delve deeper into the issues raised in the interviews and survey, we also hosted a half-day meeting in Boston in November 2015 with a small group of private foundation representatives, government officials, and practitioners.

**Results and Discussion**

This study aimed to gauge foundations’ awareness of, interest in, and capacity to affect land tenure challenges for urban agriculture programs. Not surprisingly, foundations report limited capacity to support land acquisition or land protection for urban agriculture, as those that have been most interested in this field tend to be small foundations. The discussions and survey revealed that, in general, more needs to be done to inform funders about the issue of land tenure and its connection to successful urban agriculture programs. We found a willingness to consider supporting secure tenure through approaches other than directly funding acquisition, and we see a need to promote dialogue between funders and grantees to identify creative solutions.

*Raising awareness*

The foundation officers we spoke with thought that many funders may not be aware of land tenure issues. To overcome this barrier, it would be valuable for practitioners to share their experiences with foundations to inform funders about the issue, help them understand the range of ways they could partner, and help them make strategic decisions. The people we spoke with thought that there would be interest in a genuine dialogue about solving a problem nonprofit organizations are facing and foundations want to address.

When asked about the types of land tenure challenges grantees face and how those challenges impact programs, survey respondents’ answers were quite varied, highlighting the cost of land, soil contamination, and notably, suggesting that tenure is not a problem. This last response may indicate lack of awareness of the issue, or that that respondent happens to work with the fortunate few organizations that have obtained secure tenure. Similarly, when we asked about roles foundations might play in addressing those challenges, a common answer was “not a focus or funding area,” suggesting that foundation officers do not identify land tenure as related to their funding.

Funders of urban agriculture programs are a heterogeneous group with greatly varying levels of awareness of the land tenure challenges faced by their grant recipients. Some are actively engaged in support for land access while others are not well informed about how insecure tenure may put the benefits of urban agriculture programs at risk. If foundations are not aware of a problem or do not see a connection to their work, it makes sense that they would not be ready to invest time and resources in finding solutions. Continued outreach and education on the issue is important for building awareness, but it is a complex task to reach foundations with a wide range of specific geographic priorities, a diversity of stated interests, and limited resources relative to need. Additionally, urban agriculture-related grants may come from
several different program areas within a single foundation, making it difficult to reach this audience without a sophisticated outreach strategy.

Funding

Foundations interested in urban agriculture primarily provide program support. Direct funding for land acquisition, or for other capital expenses associated with land access, is not something that many funders of urban agriculture programs are in a position to provide, in part because many of the foundations supporting these programs are relatively small. About half of the survey respondents agreed that requests for funding for land acquisition or protection could compete with program support, due to their limited capacity. Of the other half, some respondents said they have separate funding streams to address the need, while others will not fund acquisition at all.

Of the five respondents who answered the section of the survey designed for those with primary funding interests in environment or land conservation, four have funded operations and programs of land trusts or other conservation nonprofits, including three that have funded an urban land trust or a community garden coalition. This is a significant sign of support for critical land protection partners. Three respondents have funded permanent protection of urban land for farms or gardens as open space, and one would consider it. Opinions were mixed on what are the most viable sources of funding for the acquisition of urban land for food production, but foundations were identified as the most likely source.

Beyond land purchase, capitalization for water hookups, clean soil, and other essential infrastructure is very expensive and most interviewees felt there is not a lot of funding available for such expenses. Partly because of the limited funds available for capital improvements, it was suggested that this dialogue needs to go beyond foundations to include both private and public funding sources. In Massachusetts, Department of Agricultural Resources grants are available for capital expenses including land acquisition, but this seems an exceptional program not replicated elsewhere.

Despite stating that their foundation does not fund acquisition, more than one person interviewed gave examples of projects they have helped to fund. These projects were described as anomalous, when the timing and price were right, and before the particular foundation’s grantmaking strategies had evolved. One of those transactions was characterized as long and complicated so it is understandable why foundations might not want to be involved. In another case, an organization received general support for program and operating costs, that it was also permitted to use for land or capital. The foundation officer involved observed that most foundations are not that flexible, that general support is hard to come by, and that small nonprofits need general operating support or broad programmatic support.

Bringing stakeholders together

We also explored ways foundations could support grantees even when land acquisition or other approaches to secure tenure are not within their funding priorities. "Bringing stakeholders
“Making connections” emerged as a key low-cost service that foundations can provide, and one that was widely embraced. For this to be effective, it is important for urban agriculture program staff to be able to talk with funders with confidence that insecure land tenure will not affect their program funding, and for funders to understand the importance of secure tenure. There is more work to do to spread this message to both funders and grantees and encourage them to think creatively and collaboratively about what types of support might be offered.

Bringing stakeholders together can have multiple impacts including helping to identify other funders that might be able to support acquisition. As one respondent noted, since acquisition is so costly, it may be strategic to focus on policy change, peer-training, and technical assistance to make land, such as municipal parkland or other city property, available for urban agriculture. It is encouraging that foundations are thinking along these lines, but these approaches do not deliver funding to directly address immediate challenges and access to public lands does not necessarily provide secure tenure.

Making connections

One way for small foundations to help, when they themselves cannot provide sufficient funding for acquisition, is by connecting their grantees with larger foundations with greater capacity, as well as public funding sources. “We have found that it is easier to help them secure acquisition/protection funding from the environmental agencies and funders” was a particularly promising survey response from one foundation. Others suggested providing leads to public funding sources.

Foundations may play a key role in obtaining municipal support as well. One interviewee said that if they have a sense that the city is responsive and doing its part, as a funder, they would not be inclined to get involved. But if a grantee says they need help because they are not getting traction, the funder would be open to approaching the city. Another person mentioned the Funders’ Network Partners for Places program as a compelling model that supports building partnerships between local government and place-based foundations for a variety of projects including urban agriculture. Engaging municipal governments is critical as cities often own vacant land and land disposition is managed at the city level. Some cities (Providence, RI, for example) have been willing to transfer title for a nominal fee, but even nominal fees have gone up as cities struggle with scarce resources.

In terms of building philanthropic support, there is a need to get beyond food funders, but interviewees agreed that it is hard to reach out across silos. One person expressed that it would be too much of a stretch to look to funders of rural land conservation, though there may be foundations that would support acquisition in both urban and rural areas. A couple of the foundation officers said that they do not work in urban areas, but one director indicated that on some of the issues around land access and secure tenure there is great crossover from peri-urban municipal governments and state organizations to urban areas. Foundations can play a role in bringing together funders from different interest areas and other allies from different levels of government.
Indirect support

There are a variety of non-monetary strategies funders can use to contribute to securing land access for urban agriculture. Between a third and one half of survey respondents said they would consider supporting secure land tenure through each of the following approaches:

- Advocacy for public policy promoting access and tenure,
- Funding a land trust or community garden coalition,
- Funding environmental remediation or other actions to make urban land available for agriculture, or
- Funding negotiations or legal work related to urban land.

This openness to consider new approaches suggests that it is worth continuing the dialogue and exploring further.

When direct funding is available only for program support, one strategy for helping with acquisition is to provide support for a capital campaign for a specific project, either through technical assistance or financial backing. This type of campaign is a major undertaking for a small, program-oriented urban agriculture organization and, as one respondent stated, “Running a capital campaign definitely requires particular TA and capacity, so this [would] be one area where funders could help” to raise money directly from the community. Foundations and large donors are familiar with the capital campaign model and understand that it can happen alongside regular fundraising. This type of collaboration requires an open dialogue to identify needs and potential support.

Funders shared other ways that they have contributed indirectly to solving land tenure issues, including provision of funds for permitting or surveying as part of an acquisition or protection project; giving general support to local nonprofits whose mission is to protect land through acquisition, planning, and zoning; and operating a revolving loan fund for land acquisition.

Without putting money towards land acquisition, funders can play a role in advocacy and policy change, including sharing documents and information from work in other areas and providing input to benefit new projects. In addition, while philanthropic support may not be available for direct solutions (such as acquisition), there may be opportunities to provide funding for others to come up with replicable solutions.

The approach most widely in use involves directly funding a land trust or a community garden coalition. The fact that 36% of survey respondents already do this suggests that this is an area of relative comfort for foundations that could be built on. Because foundations are already in contact with land trusts, land trusts are well placed to educate funders about the need for secure tenure, and the opportunities for collaboration between stewardship organizations and urban agriculture practitioners. Moreover, as having partners in place to help protect the land is often essential, foundations could encourage land trusts to embrace urban agriculture projects. “Pushing local land trusts to include land access as a key motive of easements” was a
compelling strategy suggestion. Even though easements are less commonly used as a land protection tool in urban areas, the concept of encouraging land trusts protecting urban land to be aware of the needs of community members to access land is an important one. Further education is needed, both for funders and for land trusts, about the most appropriate and effective tools for protecting urban land for farms and gardens.

In addition to further education for funders, one person commented that it would be helpful to educate land trusts on being good landlords. Expanding access to land was a top recommendation that came out of the urban agriculture working group as part of the MA Food Plan process so there may be emerging opportunities, at least at the state level in Massachusetts, to engage different stakeholders.

**Competing uses and the value of urban land**

In reflecting on how land tenure issues impact programs, one survey respondent commented, “In the coming months and years, there are likely to be conflicts between two laudable public policy goals: preserving and expanding urban agriculture and providing more affordable housing. We are monitoring this dynamic.” This tension was also raised at our meeting in Boston. The idea that there is a conflict between urban agriculture and housing reveals a perception that agriculture is not the “highest and best use” for land where there is unmet demand for housing, and that when viewed in the context of a tight housing market, land is too expensive to be used for urban agriculture. We discussed this issue with funders and others and learned that it is not clear to what extent this is perception or reality so further exploration and dialogue is needed. Small, unbuildable lots or lots that have a history of subsidence or other issues may be appropriate for long-term agricultural use regardless of housing demand and the benefits of urban agriculture may justify the land use.

When dealing with rural farmland, affordability is often measured by what a farm business can support. One survey respondent observed that in urban agriculture there is “not enough economic scale to support ownership and maintenance costs,” but this applies more to farm businesses than nonprofits, which make up the majority of urban farms in the northeast and might be of greater concern to foundations. This does, however, suggest a possible area of further investigation into how small plots can support viable businesses. Other land tenure challenges identified in the survey related to generational transfer, succession planning, and heirs property may be more relevant to private ownership in rural areas, but may also merit further investigation into how these issues impact urban farms. In conversation, there was some concern expressed that focusing on urban, because it needs special consideration, divides the interests of urban and rural farmers instead of considering all farmers’ needs together.

**System impact**

Several interviewees expressed skepticism that conservation of small, urban parcels could have a systemic impact. They are interested in farmland protection that supports larger scale food production. They acknowledged, however, that although urban agriculture is unlikely to
produce enough to feed a significant portion of the population or to be an economic driver, it can contribute to changing conditions, generating interest in local food that can help support farm businesses around the region.

Interviewees also talked about the challenge of addressing land tenure for urban farms and gardens systemically because the context (vacancy rate, real estate values, local policy, etc.) varies widely by location, even while the issues are similar. For example, in New York City, the land value is such a barrier that no one is putting up funds for acquisition at market value. There, it is critical to look for other solutions besides purchase, including long-term leasing options and other approaches that might be adapted from affordable housing. By comparison, in Boston, land values are not as high as in New York, but they are also much too high to be affordable to farmers. In Massachusetts, the conversation may be linked to city zoning, or to state policy creating potential sources of acquisition funding through bond bills, while those opportunities may not be present in other states.

**Conclusions**

One survey comment encapsulated our motivation for undertaking this work: “Securing land should be a prime concern. Without it all else is moot.” The willingness of funders to respond so openly to our requests for information and to share so much—including the ten survey respondents who provided their contact information to allow for continued dialogue—is a positive indication that there is a community of funders who are sympathetic to this vision.

Based on this inquiry, our recommendations include:

- Maintain open dialogue between funders, practitioners, and partners;
- Encourage creative thinking and further exploration of strategies that funders would consider, even if they have not been tried;
- Given the range in the level of awareness of tenure issues and the diversity of interests that bring funders to support urban agriculture, continue engagement and education of funders using multipronged approaches; and
- With direct funding for land acquisition often out of reach, promote non-monetary strategies that foundations can use to contribute to securing land access for urban agriculture, particularly making connections and bringing stakeholders together.

Our aim has been to raise awareness of the critical issue of land tenure to the viability of a wide range of urban farm and garden programs related to health and nutrition, youth development and education, and community and self-determination, and to foster discussion of creative strategies to both secure land (i.e. permanently protect the resource) and secure tenure (i.e. assure access to the land). We hope funders will see the issue as relevant for an array of interests from resource conservation to food security – if farmers and gardeners have secure tenure, they can keep producing food for the communities depending on them.
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About the Secure Land for Urban Agriculture Initiative

Equity Trust launched this initiative in December 2013, as part of our Farms for Farmers Program, to explore the issue of land tenure for urban agriculture. The urban context presents particular challenges for farms and gardens, including the high price of urban land and the many competing uses. Yet urban agriculture is increasingly credited as an important vehicle for healthy food access, youth-led advocacy, hands-on nutrition education, farm-to-school collaborations, and other programs advancing just local food systems. By promoting innovative solutions, including adapting and applying methods that have been used successfully to preserve affordable working farms as well as affordable housing, Equity Trust hopes to support the sustainability of all this work, helping to make access to land for these efforts affordable and secure.

For further information, please contact:
Equity Trust, Inc.
PO Box 746
Amherst, MA 01004-0746

www.equitytrust.org
eti@equitytrust.org
413.256.6161

Participating organizations:
596 Acres
Brooklyn Queens Land Trust
Cabot Family Charitable Trust
Cedar Tree Foundation
Claneil Foundation
Community Food Funders
The Conservation Fund
Conservation Law Foundation
Fairfield County's Community Foundation
The Food Project
Gardening The Community
Green Guerillas
Henry P. Kendall Foundation
John Merck Fund
Levitt Foundation
Local Economies Project
Kinship Foundation
Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources
Massachusetts Department of Energy & Environmental Affairs
Merck Family Fund
New Entry Sustainable Farming Project
New York City Community Garden Coalition
New York Community Trust
North Star Fund
Oxfam America
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Strategies for Cities
Springfield Food Policy Council
Sustainable Agriculture and Food System Funders
Swift Foundation
The Trust for Public Land
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Other funders contributed to the survey anonymously.

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