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Garden Power

The Fate Of The Community Gardens Is Unknown, Again.

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Stable Soils Wanted

PHOTOS BY AKOKO SEMON

Its Fate Uncertain For Several Years, Ithaca's Community Gardens Warily Eyes The Future... Again.

BY MATT BUTLER

A peek around Ithaca's Community Gardens these days is unimpressive. A mix of faint green, brown and gray populate both fenced-in areas, split by an access road in between. This isn't a symptom of neglect or incompetence, simply a seasonal reality as morning dew turns to frost.

In warmer weather, the Gardens are a wellspring of life and activity, with sunflowers growing so high they can be seen from Route 13 among more flowers, fruits and vegetables than you can count. The 150 plots of garden space are tended to by a diverse mix of people, and yield everything from the most common dinner table fruits and vegetables to foreign seeds planted by the Northside's immigrant population, the likes of which can't be found in a Tops or Wegmans. Students from places like Southside Community Center come to learn gardening on one of the community plots.

The gardens, founded in 1976, were originally located in the Northside neighborhood, behind an old P&C Grocery store (And, later, the Community Pride Grocery Store) that is now home to the 210 Hancock affordable housing project. A few years after that the gardens, now backed by a non-profit called Project Growing Hope formed from gardeners around the city, were forced to move to the stretch of land it occupies now, a two acre spot in what has become Carpenter Business Park just off Route 13. With New York State Electric and Gas (NYSEG) power lines severely limiting any upward building that can be done on that particular parcel (but not elsewhere in the Business Park), it is a fairly natural fit for a garden.

But whether or not the Community Gardens will continue to reside there for the foreseeable future has been uncertain in recent years as potential developers, eyeing the scarce open land left in the city, has targeted the site. Their two-acre oasis is now surrounded by eight acres of land, now in the possession of Cayuga Medical Center who, even months after purchasing the site, have yet to say anything publicly. CMC Spokesman John Turner said the hospital's intentions have not changed since they announced the property's purchase in June for $10 million. At that point, a press release issued by CMC said they wanted to work with Project Growing Hope to "come up with a permanent plan that will sustain the community gardens."

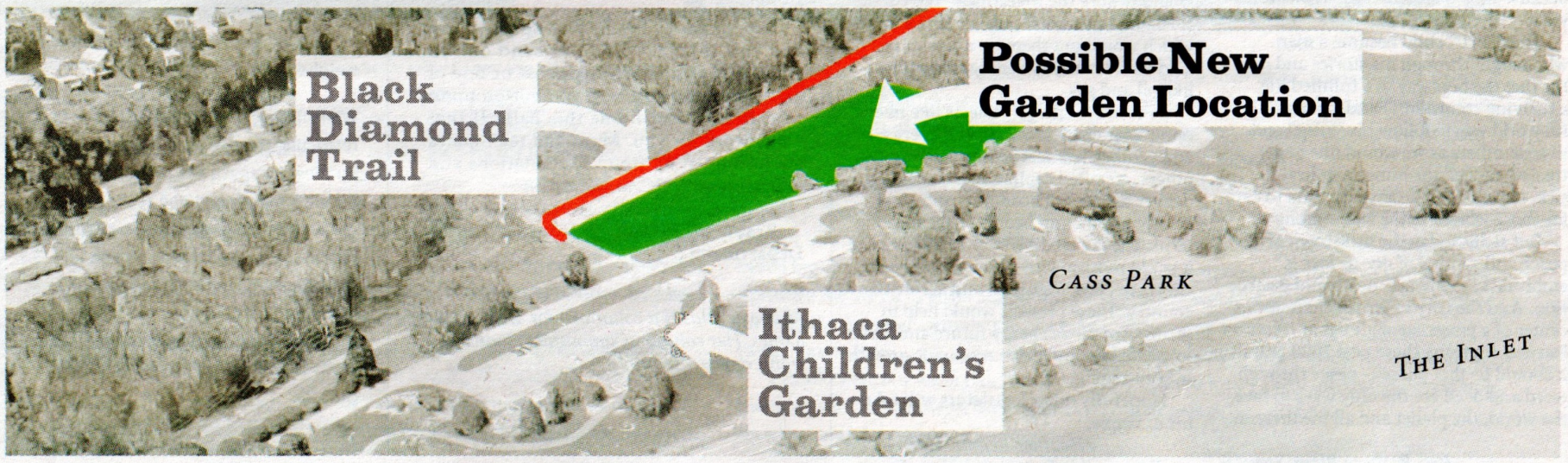
One of those possibilities appears to be working the garden into the construction of some unnamed development to come, so that the site could still be developed but the garden wouldn't be uprooted.

"Our goal is to come up with a workable solution, and we're in the process of doing that," Turner reiterated this month. He said whatever is developed on the site will be mixed use, and a combination of "healthcare, housing, retail and commercial."

Park Grove Realty, LLC has been chosen as the site's developer, a relatively young Rochester firm founded by former Conifer Realty partners that is most known under that name for a controversial townhouse project in Lansing. Conifer is a more familiar name to Ithacans, responsible for projects such as the Cayuga Meadows affordable senior housing on Cayuga Lake.

One potential landing spot that has been floated, if the gardens do end up relocating, is a small slice of Cass Park near the Children's Garden. While the specifics of that proposal are cloudy, the community garden's members argue the move would be significantly negative for the garden's membership and for the health of the plants themselves. The area of Cass Park that could host the garden is in the shadow of West Hill and can act like a natural draining area during wet seasons, many members claim, both of which would be problematic for a healthy garden.

Beyond that, though, they say access to, and thus participation with, the gardens would be profoundly reduced. According to a survey collected by Project Growing Hope in 2015 of around 110 community garden members, 82 percent of its gardeners at that time traveled less than two miles to get to the garden, 61 percent of which answered they travel less than a mile.



Moving the gardens farther beyond Route 13 and over the Inlet would hamper many members' willingness or ability to participate said board member Devon Jenkins, either because they would no longer have the time to make the trek or don't have a car to shorten it. Many of the gardeners don't have much expendable income, with that same survey revealing 43 percent have a household income less than $32,000 per year. In theory, it would alienate the population who find themselves economically forced to use community gardens in the first place.

"The people who need it most would be the ones most affected," Jenkins said.

There are potential legal complications to such a move as well. Gardening is not an approved usage of parkland, so if the gardens were to move to Cass Park it would require a passing vote in the New York State Legislature, and due to the Public Trust Doctrine, the city would have to find an equal amount of parkland elsewhere in Ithaca and substitute it for the land leased to the community gardens. That process, particularly at the state level, could be very lengthy.

Community Gardens members still harbor some resentment, and some wariness, after negotiations between Project Growing Hope and the city over the garden's last lease extension soured in 2012 and 2013 and almost didn't happen, saved by a last-minute public push. Eventually a new lease was agreed upon, but with a new wrinkle: a revocable clause that could be invoked via Common Council vote at any time, which would terminate the lease one year after the vote.

According to Sheryl Swink, a long-time gardens board member, those negotiations, and the new inclusion of the revocable clause, are still a source of tension. The gardens feel as if the place they love is in a constant state of limbo, especially now with the added pressure of development around them seeming imminent.

The only way out of that limbo, in the minds of the garden's members, is permanence. The preferred method by which that permanence could come about changes depending on who is talking, but it boils down to more commitment from the city.

"Unless the city changes their approach to community gardens and to actual quality of life issues not just development and housing, unless they directly address those issues, this is not going away," Jenkins said. "The city needs a much more aggressive stance when it comes to these quality of life issues."

When asked, Mayor Svante Myrick reiterated his preference that whatever the future course for the site, the community gardens are consulted and included during the process.

"We really need more medical services downtown, in the heart of the city, I think it would make it easier for the people who live here," Myrick said. "But I think there has to be a way to achieve that, and also keeping the community gardens in a form that works for them. Maybe that's staying exactly where they are, maybe that's moving to another site, whatever that is we are ready to work with them."

As for the benefits the garden yields to the community at large, Myrick was measured while balancing the benefit Carpenter Business Park development could have on the city. New zoning on the waterfront has greatly increased the options for future construction.

"I think it's a real benefit, and I don't want to lose it," Myrick said. "We should be careful not to imply that thousands of people benefit from the gardens. But those who are able to benefit from it, their lives are made better by it and that makes our city a better place."

Jenkins said he feels the gardens exist at the intersection between liveability and development. As development continues, the community amenities that might seem unnecessary but which carry subtle benefits become more essential but also more threatened, he said. Housing is obviously necessary, Jenkins said, but it should come hand-in-hand with space for things like parks and gardens, things that reach beyond the concrete jungle to connect people.

Whatever the garden means to the city, it's clearly made an impact on those who have plots there. A community has formed among those within the wooden fences, perhaps best exemplified by the volunteer plot that bears a sign "In Memory of Chao," a gardener who passed away several years ago. Food from his plot is passed out among other members when it is ripe to harvest. The garden has become popular among Ithaca's Burmese immigrant population, who use it to plant vegetables normally unique to the soils of Myanmar.

Common Council member Seph Murtagh, who represents the Second Ward where a high number of the gardeners come from, said he understands the need for livable aspects of the city, and thinks it makes up an important ingredient in the attractiveness of Ithaca. A cautious approach is needed to preserve the middle ground Ithaca comfortably inhabits between big city and small town, and it's still a priority for the city's government shown through the ongoing formulation of a new Parks Master Plan.

"I think there is a sense that the city is changing very rapidly, with the cranes everywhere and the construction that's going on and the building's going up," Murtagh said. "There's a sense that you don't want to lose what makes Ithaca special, and the small-town stuff that makes it an enjoyable place. We're not Manhattan or San Francisco, there's a reason people come here and it's often to get away from those places."

Expressing support for the gardens, Murtagh said if they are "unwilling to move, that's going to be a big complicating factor in this whole thing." He said his ideal situation is that CMC works out a deal with the community gardens that's mutually agreeable.

The gardens' predicament is a microcosm of the city's evolution as a whole. New Ithaca is picking the elements of Old Ithaca it wants to bring with it, guessing, sometimes haphazardly, along the way at which parts are serviceable enough to help the city achieve what it wants to be. Garden members make a compelling argument that the value it brings for the lower-income population, and Ithaca's health as a overall community, merit not only continued existence but government funding and support. The community garden is not, as members asserted again and again, just a place for people who don't have enough room on their lawn. Trade-offs are inevitable, but ultimately the decision rests with the city, and what its priorities and values are going forward.

"It seems like it kind of fits with our vision of the place," Murtagh said. "The question though is how does that happen in conjunction with the city's desire to develop this big eight-acre parcel? [...] If there was a way we could snap our fingers and allow them to stay, I think we would do it, but there's also a real interest in developing that parcel."