

Sustainable Reuse of Urban Brownfield Sites

Urban / Community Farm

7256 S. South Chicago Avenue, Chicago, IL



Before: A vacant industrial building at the corner of 73rd Street and South Chicago Avenue was acquired in 2005 and demolished in 2009.



After: As of Sept. 2010, area teens are being trained to maintain an organic urban farm and greenhouse providing fresh produce for this former “food desert.”

Project Summary

The Delta Redevelopment Institute and Comer Science & Education Foundation are starting to reap the benefits from the transformation of a brownfield lot in Chicago’s Greater Grand Crossing neighborhood into an organic community garden.

This project began in 2005, when Delta acquired a building that was formerly a petroleum distributor and began environmental assessment of the entire block, including a former gas station at the northwest corner of 73rd Street and South Chicago Avenue. The initial goal was to attract a small grocery store to the site, given the neighborhood’s status as one of the “food deserts” lacking adequate access to healthy food.

The project is part of a larger revitalization plan for the area where Gary Comer, founder of the Land’s End clothing empire, lived as a boy. His family’s foundation has invested more than \$30 million in neighbor-

hood improvements, new housing and the Gary Comer Youth Center located across the street from the garden.

In 2008, staff and students helped Delta and a fresh produce supplier — Stanley’s Fruits & Vegetables — to operate a weekend “farmers market” on the property, with support from the Chicago Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) and the Comer Foundation. The market, along with special programming such as cooking demonstrations, operated successfully every Saturday from July - October 2008.

Once the seasonal market ended, Delta hoped Stanley’s would build a permanent store at the site. The 1.7-acre lot was owned jointly by Delta, Comer, and the City of Chicago, and they offered the land to Stanley’s at no cost. Given the economy, Stanley’s decided it could not take on the risk of a second store.

Still, the success of the farmers market demonstrated that there was demand for fresh produce in the community. Delta and Comer forged ahead with plans for a permanent urban garden that could grow produce and provide youth job training and nutrition education.

After a year of work to demolish the old industrial building, remediate the land, import compost, and plant raised beds, the organic urban farm began harvesting produce in September 2010.

Planting began in July 2010, when the youth center received about 600 plants. Crops include fruit trees, nut trees, landscape plants, collard greens, mustard greens, pole beans and more. Teens from the area are helping maintain the garden, where they also have the opportunity to learn about healthy cooking and eating and the benefits and business of organic gardening.



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Steps to Success

1 — After acquisition in 2005, the 1.7-acre property was inspected by environmental experts.

2 — A seasonal farmers market on adjacent city-owned land tests consumer interest in fresh produce.

3 — The vacant former industrial building at 7256 S. South Chicago Avenue is demolished.

4 — A layer of protective material was installed below clean fill and raised beds, and compost arrives at the property in spring 2010.

5 & 6 — During summer 2010, the crops are planted and labeled both outside and inside the greenhouse. Crops include fruit trees, nut trees, landscape plants, collard greens, mustard greens, pole beans and more.

7 & 8 — Children and teens from the Gary Comer Youth Center, located across the street, help plant and maintain the garden.

Risks & Challenges

- **Finances** — Delta Institute, Comer Science & Education Foundation, and the City of Chicago's Local Initiatives Support Corporation provided financial support for this project.

- **Maintenance** — Comer Youth Center staff and students provide most of the maintenance needs for the urban farm.

- **Politics** — City and community support was important in getting permits and approvals for the project, as well as planned expansion on city-owned land.