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## **Foodscape My City Please!**

A few years ago New York University's School of Law and the Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy co-authored the findings of a study in a paper titled "The Effect of Community Gardens on Neighboring Property Values". The study examined the quest by cities across the United States to find the best use for vacant lots, noting that the community garden movement is one of the major contenders for the space, among others including public parks and other green spaces.

As stated in the paper, in order for land to be allocated efficiently and fairly, local governments need sound research about the value of such gardens and parks to their host communities. At the same time, cities are looking for new ways of financing the development and maintenance of public garden and park space. Some have turned to tax increment financing to generate resources, other are introducing impact fees or special assessments to cover the costs of urban parks.

In order to employ such financing mechanisms, both policy concerns and legal constraints require local governments to base their charges on sound data about the impacts green spaces have on the value of the neighboring properties that would be forced to bear the incidence of the tax or fee.

Interesting, this is what the study found.

1. The opening of a community garden has a statistically significant positive impact on residential properties within 1000 feet of the garden, and that the impact increases over time.
2. Food gardens have the greatest impact in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods, with higher quality gardens having the greatest positive impact.
3. The opening of a garden is associated with other changes in the neighborhood, such as increasing rates of homeownership, and thus may be serving as catalysts for economic redevelopment of the community.

There is no doubt that the concept of urban farming is trending upwards in Florida, and in Lee County, this is becoming the rave these days. While most of the growth over the last four years was observable on small farms which struggled to receive recognition from planners – hence the occasional citation from residential code enforcement personnel – there has been a radical shift in attitudes heralded by the passage of a Community Gardens Ordinance in 2010. Suddenly, urban dwellers are beginning to come out of the woodwork (there are no woods in the cities, just woodwork!) to enquire

about how to grow their own little urban parcels of food. Wow, sometimes all we need is a bit of gentle prodding from appropriately timed policy. Bravo to the Lee County Community Development Department and to the five county Commissioners who approved the ordinance.

The above points provide ample reason for the cities of Lee county to adopt a similar policy as the county and enact a measure to accommodate community gardens or as I would call them 'Foodscapes' within city boundaries. 'City Foodscapers' could be encouraged to rent or lease vacant lots – this would negate the need for traditional impact fees - and provide green-space and a living green grocery store all in the same spot.

How many vacant lots are there in Cape Coral and Lehigh Acres to name two of the Counties larger urban centers badly impacted by the construction crash.

I say, Foodscape my city please!



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