

The Evolution of an Urban Farm Business

Navigating the social promises and economic realities



My background: urban/rural, nonprofit/business



South Circle Farm



Start-up: one replicable model

- Land purchased with grant dollars by nonprofit CDC
- Contract with farmer to develop the site
- Lease site to farmer
- CDC covers site development costs:
 - infrastructure (things that stay on site)
 - Zoning changes, environmental assessments
- Farmer covers operation costs: seeds, plants, salaries, tools, etc
- CDC relationships help establish the farm



Start-up: site development technique





Start-up: fundraising for educational programming



Start-up: Issues to navigate

- Benefits to sponsoring organization
- Stability of the organization
- Long-term maintenance of the infrastructure
- Equity for the farmer



Tools and techniques for intensive urban production

Our Production
Goals:

- Maximize growing space
- Organic methods
- Diversity, with focus on high-value crops



Tools and techniques for intensive urban production

No-till

- Permanent beds
- Broad fork
- Tilter
- Tarps



Tools and techniques for intensive urban production

Labor -saving tools

- Greens harvester
- Paperpot transplanter
- Seeders



Tools and techniques for intensive urban production

Season extension



Where are we now?



- Farm merger!
- Mad Farmers Collective
- 3 farmers, 2 farm sites
- 2 acres in cultivation

Where are we now?



- Supply 2 summer markets, 1 winter market, 8 restaurants, 2 small groceries
- Wide range of veggies, specializing in salad greens and some root crops



Where are we now?

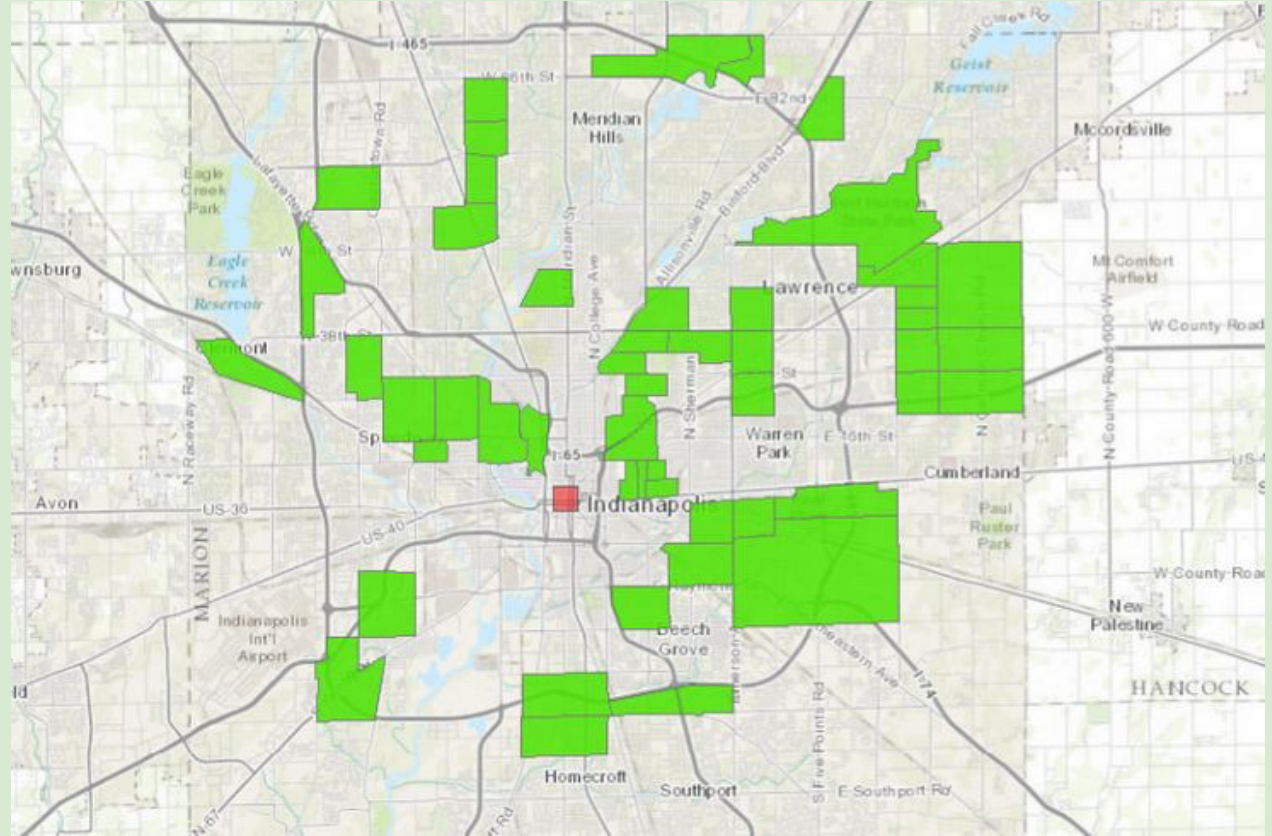
- Partner with Purdue Extension-- training new urban growers
- 2018 SARE grant-- designing a specialized wash station for salad greens
- Helped to start and sustain a new southside farmers market



Tensions and compromises



Tensions and compromises: Does urban agriculture solve social problems? How does our farm contribute to solutions?



Tensions and compromises: “for profit” v nonprofit

- Competition for resources: Sales, staff, land
- No access to grants
- Messaging/public awareness



Tensions and compromises: financial sustainability

- Risks and costs of any small farm, and then some
- Short term leases
- Infrastructure needs



What would sustainability look like for our business?

- Happy, healthy farmers
- Happy, healthy crops year-to-year
- Revenue sufficient to cover operating costs, infrastructure improvements, and decent salaries (including health care and retirement savings!! Like a “real” job!)
- Business is well-regarded and contributing to our community



Where do the Mad Farmers go from here?

Our Challenges

- 2 sites
- Short term leases
- Tenuous water access

Our Strengths

- Quality of crops
- Relationships with customers--chefs and market shoppers
- Proximity to markets and customers

Needs

- Long term lease with equity options or land ownership
- City -wide support system for urban ag
- Permanent, affordable water source
- Sufficient land base in one location
- Commercial-scale infrastructure
- Excellent relationships in the community

Where do the Mad Farmers go from here?

- Fundraising for infrastructure costs
- Continue refining our growing processes
- Narrowing our crop selection
- Exploring more revenue streams including fee-based on-farm education
- (Looking for land with longer term possibilities??)



Thank you!

