

Comments on [HB920 – Urban Agricultural Incentive Zones](#)

Urban Agriculture Is Essential to Healthy Communities

STATE & LOCAL GOVERNMENTS MUST SUPPORT URBAN GROWERS

Thank you for making the space to share our support of urban agriculture.

My name is Russell Thorsen, and I'm a Farmer Outreach Specialist with Pasa Sustainable Agriculture.

For those not already familiar with our work, Pasa is a Pennsylvania-based 501(c)3 nonprofit that cultivates sustainable and equitable farms and food systems across the Mid-Atlantic and beyond. For more than three decades, we have worked with our network of over 20,000 farmers, changemakers, and food systems professionals to advance sustainable agriculture with our advocacy and programs grounded in farmer-driven training, education, research, and community.

I've been a grower at farms and gardens around the city and county for over 10 years. I've worked at the research greenhouses at University of Pittsburgh, in the horticulture department at Phipps, and the Phipps Homegrown program installing raised bed gardens in people's backyards. I worked at Grow Pittsburgh as a community garden program manager, directly starting and mentoring 12 gardens and supporting dozens more across Allegheny County. I managed the Garfield Community Farm, started and teach the Community Compost School (our 4th cohort graduates this week), and co-chair the Community Compost working group with the PFPC. Now, at Pasa, I provide technical assistance to growers and manage the urban cohort for our Soil Health Benchmark Study. I'm also a community gardener at the Gardens of Millvale.

Access to fresh, local, culturally relevant food is a human right. This means that growing food is also a right.

And as those of us who grow food know, it's also an act of deep care—care for ourselves, care for our neighbors, care for our communities, and care for our planet. Growing food and tending to the land physically, chemically, and biologically changes the soil itself. It sequesters carbon, improves rainwater infiltration, provides cooling shade, and builds habitat for pollinators.

And in addition to providing access to nourishing food, urban farms and gardens are gathering spaces where we share culture, history, art, and knowledge. Amid dense concentrations of pavement and buildings that retain heat and cause stormwater runoff, an urban farm or garden is a vital oasis of life-enriching green space. They're what makes a city worth living in.



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But growing food is not easy, and unfortunately, city policies often don't make it any easier.

Urban growers fight many uphill battles to obtain access to land, water, and infrastructure. Yet even when they are able to obtain rights to these, they often shoulder unfair fees and restrictions that do not reflect their land use and ignore the additional service they provide to the city.

I'm going to provide a few concrete examples of these challenges, and share how Pasa hopes that Representative Rabb's Urban Agricultural Incentive Zones could help open up a world where zoning codes correctly recognize the benefit that farms and gardens bring to the city, support them in overcoming their challenges, and make it easier for growers to save money, receive payment, and feed their communities. I'll also make a few suggestions for how State and local governments could further support urban growers.

On the subject of land. The classification of land as "vacant" often pits urban agriculture and housing against one another. I'm aware of a dispute where a grower has a letter of support from the sitting councilperson, and the chair of the Community Development Corporation from 2017 supporting her starting a garden on a vacant lot. Now both councilperson and CDC want to kick her off and sell it to a developer.

Urban Agricultural Incentive Zones could give municipalities tools to identify and preserve lots deemed appropriate for agriculture, so it's no longer a source of contention.

Even when growers have obtained legal access to grow on the land, it doesn't guarantee they'll be able to sell the food they grow to their community. I know one grower who has a farm through Pittsburgh's Adopt-a-Lot program. She is growing food and wants to set up a market stand on site. However, the street is zoned residential, which means a grower of color cannot sell her produce on site in a food apartheid neighborhood.

The Urban Agricultural Incentive Zones should allow growers the ability to sell on-site.

On the subject of water. Irrigation, which growers know can double our yields, is especially crucial in cities where space is at a premium. But digging a water line is very expensive. And farms are required to pay sewage fees, even though the water they pull from the City goes to the soil, not back through the municipal system.

We're really pleased with how the Urban Agricultural Incentive Zones bill would give municipalities the opportunity to offer growers modified rates for utilities like water.

We hope that local governments will also consider things like exemption from sewage fees and will look for other ways to support growers in establishing frost-free hydrants on sites.

On the subject of groundhogs. That might sound funny, but I guarantee every grower in this room winced in pain thinking about their struggles with this critter. Pests like large rodents and deer can cause thousands of dollars in damage and even loss of an entire crop overnight. While rural growers are often able to deal with these pests in any manner they see fit, urban growers are beholden to municipal animal control departments. Here in Pittsburgh,



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animal control will often re-release any groundhogs trapped back onto growing sites, while threatening growers with animal abuse fines and even jail time. I've personally experienced this multiple times.

Deer fencing is consistently one of the most expensive pieces of infrastructure on urban agriculture sites. Once installed, they require constant maintenance. Currently, if federal programs pay for fencing, it is usually livestock fencing. Vegetable growers need support with fencing to meet their needs.

Urban Agricultural Incentive Zones should acknowledge the risks these animals pose to growing operations, work with animal control to find fair solutions, and find ways to support growers fencing needs.

TO SUMMARIZE OUR KEY POINTS

- Municipalities should identify and preserve lots deemed appropriate for agriculture to prioritize food production and land stewardship and prevent disputes with developers.
- Modified rates for municipal water lines and sewage fees would reflect urban growers' role in keeping water out of our storm drains.
- Urban growers need the support of animal control, as well as support for fence installation and maintenance.
- In addition to providing nourishing food to our communities, urban growers perform valuable ecosystem services and conservation practices that protect our cities' public health in the face of a changing climate.
They deserve not only recognition but priority. Not only celebration but compensation.

In closing, Pasa wishes to express our deep appreciation for Representative Rabb and his leadership on this issue and his commitment to sustainable agriculture across Pennsylvania. We celebrate this important step in acknowledging and supporting the crucial services provided by urban growers, and we urge you not to stop here.



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