

Sitka Community Gardens Proposal

Q&A

Q: Who is organizing this effort?

A: Two groups: Sitka Local Foods Network (SLFN), a well-established tax exempt 501(c)(3) nonprofit, and Transition Sitka (TS), a registered domestic Alaska nonprofit corporation established in 2022 with help and support from the Sitka Chapter of the non-partisan national advocacy group Citizens Climate Lobby (CCL).

Q: What is the main reason for this proposal?

A: Sitka's food security situation is not what it should be. The January 2023 (most recent) US Consumer Price Index indicated that the rate of food price inflation for Americans who purchase groceries to eat at home is 11.3% year-over-year. The risk of food supply chain interruptions in Sitka currently has a low likelihood of occurrence, but a high likelihood of severe impact. Community garden developments will help raise the level of food supply resilience.

Q: Why is this proposal being put forward now?

A: The City and Borough of Sitka (CBS) recently adopted its 5-year Strategic Plan which identified several priority initiatives. Goal 1.5 directs municipal leadership to, "Convene community partners to develop an action plan that will address the challenges of food security." This proposal establishes SLFN and TS as key 'partners' committed to addressing food security. It also puts forward the argument that a key component of any 'action plan' must include planning for the development of a network of community gardens.

Q: Sitka had a community garden behind Blatchley Middle School a few years ago that was closed. What happened?

A: Blatchley Community Garden operated for more than ten years but was closed in the fall of 2016 for several reasons. Probably the biggest single reason was that the garden was not fenced and gated, so issues arose regarding produce pilfering and vagrancy. Contributing to this, the garden was officially a project of the now defunct Sitka Community Schools, an after-school activities program which operated out of an office inside the middle school building. When gardeners had concerns or complaints, they sometimes erroneously assumed that they could raise their issues with the middle school office staff and principal who actually had no connection whatsoever to the garden's operations. Gradually, minor grievances and misunderstandings led to the conclusion that the garden *as it was organized and operated at that time* was not a good fit for that location.

Q: How will a new community garden located near Blatchley avoid making the same mistakes?

A: First, the new garden will not be associated in any way with Blatchley Middle School and it will even be given a completely disconnected name: Osprey Street Community Garden. Second, the garden's normal operations will not be under the direct supervision of Sitka Parks and Recreation which has taken over the after-school activities program from Sitka Community Schools with an office, once again, in the middle school building. Third, the garden's operations will be controlled under terms established in a MOA between principals SLFN and CBS, which will include outlines for a clear process to both avoid and resolve issues of concern. Fourth, the garden will be fully fenced and gated. Fifth, and finally, a new set of guidelines for gardeners will be established and enforced so that past mistakes are not repeated.

Q: Is there sufficient interest in community gardening to warrant establishing a network of garden sites?

A: Until such time as CBS demonstrates some level of commitment to allowing the creation of one or more long-term community gardens in one or more locations around town, it is extremely difficult to accurately determine how many members of the community might be willing to participate as plot renters. Nonetheless, two assumptions can be made: 1) when the old Blatchley garden was closed it had developed a long waitlist for plot rentals, so we can assume a not insignificant level of interest; and, 2) well-established and efficiently operated community gardens all around the state and all around the country typically have long waitlists. Community gardens, in general, are very popular public amenities wherever they are located.

Q: How much will plot rentals cost?

A: First and foremost, plots are meant to be affordable. The Juneau Community Garden Association, which this proposal is modeled after, has set its standard 10' by 20' plot rental rate for the 2023 gardening season at \$35.

Q: How does the plot rental application process work?

A: New applications must be submitted by all interested gardeners every year by early February, with no exceptions. All applications are reviewed and plot assignments awarded according to an established process that provides an initial screening designed to favor those applicants demonstrating the greatest need for garden space, while also allowing prior-year gardeners the ability to keep their prior-year plots. Unsuccessful applicants are put on a waitlist and may be awarded space during the season if space should become available.

Q: Do gardeners have other obligations besides just paying a plot rental fee?

A: Yes! Every successful applicant automatically becomes a member of the Sitka Community Gardens Association for the term of one year, which carries with it a requirement for the performance of a modest minimum number of service hours. Association members must fulfill their service hour obligations in order to maintain their membership in good standing. New gardeners may choose to serve by helping with the maintenance of the garden's buildings and other infrastructure, while more experienced gardeners may choose to serve by helping to lead work parties or provide guidance to garden visitors to ensure that acceptable rules of conduct are observed.

Q: What other provisions will there be for making sure that established gardening rules are followed?

A: Initially, oversight will be carried out by either a designated representative of the SLFN Board of Directors or an employee hired by the Board for this purpose. Over time, it is expected that a cadre of more experienced gardeners with consistent Association membership will gradually evolve to help make sure that gardening rules are followed. And, in addition to these provisions, the terms established in the MOA will provide for onsite inspections of garden operations by city officials on an 'as necessary or appropriate' basis.

Q: For half the year, active gardening won't be taking place. What then?

A: Gardeners will be required to put their plots to bed in the fall and leave them in an orderly condition. Non-compliance with this requirement may affect a gardener's future application approval. Onsite water supplies will be turned off by October 31st and only turned on again after the threat of a hard freeze has passed sometime in April.