

Sitka Community Gardens

Jarvis Street Project Narrative



Transition Sitka
417 Arrowhead Street
Sitka, AK 99835
(907) 747-9834
www.transitionsitka.org



Sitka Local Foods Network
408 Marine Street, Suite D
Sitka, AK 99835
(907) 623-7660
www.sitkalocalfoodsnetwork.org

February 2024

Abstract

In order to help improve our community's collective resilience to supply chain disruptions, and encourage the development of critical skills and practices necessary for individuals to become more self-reliant and food-secure, this project proposes the establishment of a community garden on currently unimproved municipal lands at the top of Jarvis Street.

The proposed garden site is ½ acre in size and will include approximately 43 standard 10' by 20' garden plots, plus various ADA accessible plots, covered areas and small enclosed structures for storing tools and bulk garden materials. The site will be fully fenced and gated, but largely open to the general public during the summer growing season. Individual community members, families, and social benefit groups/charities will be offered the opportunity to rent garden plots for a nominal annual fee.

Even though this Narrative describes plans for a single garden project in a single Sitka neighborhood, it is not intended to be the only such development in the community. Residents in other neighborhoods need to begin considering where best to locate additional gardens, large and small, for the purpose of growing food.

Community gardens are considered essential civic infrastructure in many towns and cities across the US, like parks and playgrounds. They are often developed and operated by departments within local government. This project, however, proposes to assign these responsibilities to NGOs, with the nonprofits Sitka Local Foods Network and Transition Sitka undertaking project development and funding, and a cooperative association of active community garden members (yet-to-be-established) undertaking the responsibilities of normal garden operations. Over the long-term, it is expected that the association of gardeners will assume full responsibility for managing and maintaining the proposed Jarvis Street and other future developments, with continuing oversight and only occasional direct assistance from the founding nonprofits.

For more information, contact: Joel Hanson, project lead
sitkajoel@gmail.com
907-747-9834



I - Introduction

This project proposes to establish a community garden on undeveloped municipal property on Jarvis Street uphill from the U.S. Post Office on Sawmill Creek Road. Its location here would be most convenient to residents living in the Jamestown Bay neighborhood, but the site is also reasonably close to homes and apartments in the Indian River and Crecent Harbor neighborhoods. See Section III for garden location details and proposed layout design.

Gardening has been practiced for a very long time in the Sitka area, with potato cultivation being a part of Tlingit culture for centuries, stretching back to before first contact with Spanish and Russian sailing ships in the late 18th century. But the concept of community gardening as it is commonly understood and practiced today, has only come to Sitka fairly recently, and (so far) only with mixed success.

For more than ten years the City and Borough of Sitka (CBS) Parks and Recreation Department, in conjunction with a now defunct after-school activities program for kids called Sitka Community Schools, played host to a small ¼-acre community garden on municipal property on the Sitka Channel side of Blatchley Middle School. But due to challenges that could not be easily remedied at the time, a decision was made in late 2016 to close it down.

In hindsight, most challenges could have been remedied by installing perimeter fencing and adopting clear and enforceable “guidelines for gardeners.” In future, there is every reason to expect that Sitka’s community gardens, wherever they may be located, will become valued long-term civic amenities in which residents can take great pride.

Several official CBS attempts to promote community gardens have been made since Blatchley Community Garden’s closure. For instance, Sitka’s 2030 Comprehensive Plan, approved in May 2018, included a Parks, Trails and Recreation chapter that identified as a priority action (PTR 2.1g) to, “Allow community gardens in undeveloped municipal park space.” Additionally, the plan’s Land Use chapter identified as a priority action (LU 7.8) to, “Review zoning code to explore changes to allow urban horticultural and agricultural uses more broadly in existing zoning districts.” To date (six years after that plan’s approval), no action has been taken by CBS and no serious effort has been made by private parties to materially advance these priorities.

At various times over more recent years, the Local Emergency Planning Committee, the Health Needs and Human Services Commission and the Planning Commission have all discussed ways to improve community food security. But the challenge of identifying lands on which to locate community gardens has remained elusive.

Most recently, the 2022-2027 Sitka Strategic Plan that was adopted in September of 2022 declared via Goal 1.5 the intent to “Convene community partners to develop an action plan that will address the challenges of food security.”

With this most recent CBS declaration of commitment to addressing Sitka’s food (in)security, and in the absence of any other formal direction on how to proceed with the development of

an action plan, a small group of community members interested in sustainability and food security came together and decided that it may be appropriate at this time to advance a detailed independent proposal for the development of community gardens on municipal lands.

After studying examples of successful community gardens elsewhere and determining that the Juneau Community Garden Association model might be the best fit for Sitka's particular circumstances and community character, the group developed suitability criteria for site selection, and came up with the following:

1. Sites in general—and certainly an initial site—should be at least a half-acre in size.
2. Sites must have good southerly exposure.
3. Sites must not be overly steep or irregular.
4. Sites must be reasonably accessible to neighborhoods.
5. Preferably, sites should have access to city water, sewer, and electricity, though other options could include rain catchment systems, porta-potties and solar panels.
6. And, finally, the community-at-large must be generally supportive, and willing to consider community garden sites as permanent civic improvements.

Over the last several months, project proponents have been broadly distributing Sitka Community Gardens project concept materials throughout the community, and have received several letters of support from key organizations and official advisory bodies. These letters are included as attachments to this narrative.

Public outreach thus far suggests that there is broad support for establishing a community garden in the Jarvis Street neighborhood.

II - Proponent Profiles

Sitka Local Foods Network (SLFN) is a well-established 501(c)(3) nonprofit that was founded in 2008 by Sitka Health Summit participants who saw the need for a new organization that could focus on two initiatives: 1) organizing and managing a Farmers Market, and 2) designing and developing a community greenhouse. The Sitka Farmers Market has been a success now for 15 years, with SLFN preparing to hold yet another season of market events in 2023. A Sitka Community Greenhouse & Education Center business plan was developed by SLFN and presented to the City in 2014 seeking to locate and operate a facility on municipal lands, but the proposal failed to gain approval and the effort languished.

Throughout its history, SLFN has organized numerous projects and offered many programs aimed at enhancing the production and distribution of local foods, including the development of St. Peter's Fellowship Farm, which is a communal cooperative garden (not a community garden, because plot rentals are not provided) located behind St. Peter's by the Sea Episcopal Church on Lincoln Street. This garden is producing at capacity, and residents are able to purchase vegetables grown there through the Sitka Farmers Market.

The goal of creating one or more community gardens has been a priority of SLFN since the closure of the Blatchley Community Garden site in the fall of 2016. But progress has been slow, with the greatest challenges being location, location, and location.

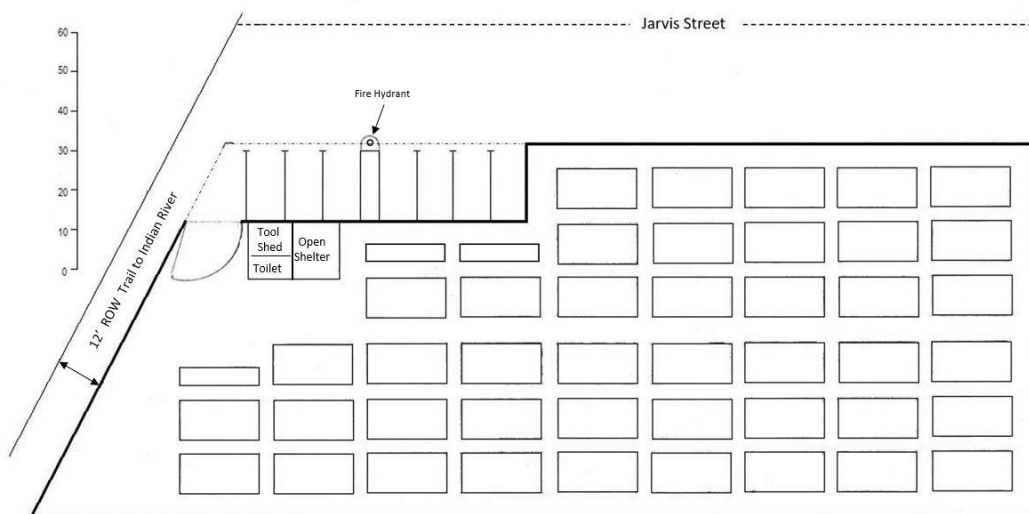
Transition Sitka (TS) founders began meeting in late 2021 when members of the Sitka Chapter of Citizens Climate Lobby, a local branch of a national organization primarily focused on a national legislative agenda, decided to apply some of their energies toward addressing climate and sustainability issues at the local level in Sitka. TS is loosely aligned with the Transition Town movement which started in a Sitka-sized community in the U.K. in 2005, and has since spread rapidly to communities in countries around the world. The movement is dedicated to working for a low-carbon, socially just future with greater local food security and economic self-reliance.

TS has adopted two initial goals: 1) to help Sitka adjust to the coming inevitable shift away from fossil fuel dependency as an energy source, and 2) to increase Sitka’s food security. TS was recently granted IRS tax exempt status under Section 501(c)(3).

TS and SLFN are collaborators in the development of this project, and expect to continue working together to promote additional such projects in future.

III – Jarvis Street Site Description

Located at the top end of Jarvis Street uphill from the U.S. Post Office on Sawmill Creek Road, this half-acre site is adjacent to the Homeless Coalition Shelter Cabin development and close to neighborhoods along Indian River, around Jamestown Bay, and in the Crescent Harbor vicinity. It will include 43 standard 10’ by 20’ plots, several 2’ by 8’ vertical garden beds for climbing or tall plantings along the perimeter fence, one teaching plot, onsite water, and toilet facilities.



Jarvis Street Community Garden - Layout



III – Goals and Objectives

The overarching goal of this project is to launch the establishment of a neighborhood community garden in Sitka to help combat food insecurity. Coincidentally but importantly, we expect many other public benefits to derive from the project, including:

- Teaching sustainable gardening practices to youth and novice growers.
- Facilitating connections between neighbors.
- Promoting healthy outdoor activities.
- Encouraging volunteerism and leadership.
- Developing intergenerational and cross-cultural collaborations.

- Building civic pride and community cohesiveness.
- Advancing equity and inclusion.

One major objective is to provide Sitka residents with access to garden spaces at very low cost. The ability to purchase or cultivate fruits and vegetables is not just a health issue; it is also an economic justice issue. The Sitka Health Summit’s 2014 Sitka Community Food Assessment Indicator Report will soon be updated with new survey information, but the report’s now 10-year-old data suggests that 20% of Sitka households were receiving food assistance of some kind during the last decade. We expect even more troubling numbers to come out of the new survey in this decade.

Despite Sitka residents’ current ability to access sources of wild foods to supplement purchased groceries, our food security situation is not as robust as it needs to be, and future prospects are troubling:

- The prospects for more global supply chain disruptions caused by fuel price spikes and geopolitical conflict are increasing.
- Shortfalls in US domestic foodstuff production due to drought conditions in key growing regions are becoming more common.
- International trade of essential foods in all categories (cereals, vegetable oils, dairy products, sugar, and meat products) is being threatened by protectionist export controls, procurement restrictions and harsh sanctions.

It is clear that the development of a network of community gardens will not be able to meet all of our community’s essential fruit and vegetable needs. But the main objective of this project proposal is to do the best we can, as soon as we can, to grow as much as we can.

IV – Procedures and Work Plan

The garden site identified in this proposal is intended to be a permanent community facility that depends primarily on a cooperative association of active gardeners to contribute both financially and physically to the operation and maintenance of the site and immediate surroundings. Though this association has yet to be established, we will refer to it here for convenience as the Sitka Community Gardens Association, or simply the “Association.”

It is intended for the site to be leased by CBS to SLFN for low or no cost. The city requires that a competitive bid process be followed for land leases, but the city has given assurance that the Request for Proposals (RFP) will specify its interest in establishing a community garden. This will ensure the site will not be used for other purposes and that the proponents, SLFN and TS, will be awarded the project. The site will be developed according to conditions and stipulations detailed in a lease agreement between the parties, and will be managed (initially by SLFN and eventually by the Association) according to standards established in a detailed garden operating procedures manual titled Guidelines for Community Gardeners in Sitka. This document will control garden operations. A sample version is attached to this Narrative.

Garden spaces (plots) within the proposed site will be offered to the public for a small rental fee through a seasonal application process. Successful applicants become members of the Association for a one-year term and sign an agreement to abide by the rules and conditions outlined in the Guidelines manual, which includes a requirement for members to perform a certain amount of work in ‘service hours’ for the benefit of the Association. Membership is not intended to be limited exclusively to individuals. Organizations such as Southeast Alaska Independent Living (SAIL) and the Sitka Tribe’s Kayaaní Commission will be welcome to join.

The developed site is also intended to be a demonstration garden. Association members are expected to welcome non-members who wish to enter, explore, and enjoy the garden. However, to avoid risk of misuse or unauthorized harvesting of produce, the site will be fenced and gated so that non-members cannot generally gain access unless Association members or recognized member partners with gate access privileges are also present onsite. It is expected that Association members will be working on their garden plots or performing service hour obligations regularly during the growing season, so the garden is therefore expected to be open to the public much of that time. Of course, another reason for fences and gates is to keep the deer, bears and other critters out!

SLFN, as parent organization of the Association, will periodically offer or otherwise make available community education workshops for both Association members and the general public, typically using a designated ‘teaching plot’ for hands-on experience.

It is expected that, over time, there will be a cadre of gardeners who have become regular plot renters, and it is from among this group that the Association Steering Committee will emerge to take over most of the gardens’ management responsibilities, relieving SLFN from much of its direct involvement. SLFN will continue to be responsible for ensuring that the terms of the lease agreement are upheld, including the maintenance of liability insurance coverage.

As with any garden development project in this region, site preparation is important. The Jarvis Street site will require significant tree and brush removal, erecting hundreds of feet of fencing, and hardening some limited areas with rock fill to accommodate vehicular traffic and small structures. Additionally, utilities available nearby will need to be accessed. Overall, however, improvements necessary for project completion may be considered fairly minor compared to other public amenity development projects like ballfields. Certainly, it is *not* anticipated that there will be any need for deep excavation of overburden or extensive placement of rock and gravel resurfacing. US Army Corps of Engineers development authorization has been issued.

Project proponents will take on the responsibility of obtaining professional engineering recommendations for surface drainage and storm water runoff management.

A major challenge to project completion will be obtaining suitable soil to fill garden beds. Typically, this challenge is addressed over time when gardeners gradually build the health of their soil with compost, mulch, and various amendments. In recent years, CBS has generously made compost and mulch available to the gardening community for free from materials

collected in various ways through public works and other projects. It is hoped that the city will see fit to direct a portion of these materials to this project in order to help overcome the dearth of dirt dilemma. Otherwise, garden soil will be sourced from commercial suppliers.

Sometime in the future, it is hoped that Sitka will launch a community composting project. This will help reduce municipal solid waste disposal costs and should benefit local gardeners by providing them with a good local source of garden bed building materials—an unbeatable two-fer.

Notwithstanding possible complications or delays, it is safe to assume that if the project is approved for the Jarvis Street site in early spring 2024, initial clearing can begin in April or May. Completion is likely to take two years following initial groundbreaking.

V - Evaluation

It is important to provide CBS and the general public with opportunities to evaluate garden performance in comparison to expectations. Evaluations should take place periodically during project development, as well as later during normal operations.

We expect that coordination with the staff of Public Works, Department of Building & Grounds, will be critical to the success of this project in the development stages. It would be useful, therefore, to institute a regular schedule of meetings between staff and developers, as well as a reporting process so that staff findings may be transmitted to city authorities for evaluation.

Gardening is widely viewed as a recreational pursuit, so it seems logical for evaluations to also be conducted periodically by the Department of Parks and Recreation once the garden is in normal operation. We hope and expect that the garden will provide many opportunities for organizing youth gardening groups and other educational offerings, and these kinds of activities align closely with both Parks and Rec's mission and its technical capacity to facilitate the scheduling of recreational and educational outdoor programs.

Periodic inspections of the garden sites and evaluations of operational procedures will help maintain public appreciation for the services provided, and can help in the discovery of ways to improve.

VI - Sources and Uses of Funds

Funding for site preparation and development will come from government grants, as well as from corporations and philanthropic institutions. Support for food security programs is currently a high priority for many government and private funders, and we believe Sitka's current high degree of food insecurity will make this project quite compelling to funding agencies and charitable organizations. Also, the degree of generosity shown by local individuals and businesses within the Sitka community for projects like this which promise to provide multiple benefits never ceases to amaze.

As the project moves into development, sources of funds include:

- USDA Micro-Grants for Food Security Program, which distributes funds to State Government agencies like the Alaska Department of Agriculture for redistribution, specifically to projects that promise to increase the quantity and quality of locally grown food through such projects as small-scale gardening.
- USDA Urban Agriculture and Innovation Production Competitive Grants Program, which can award more substantial grants on the order of \$50,000.
- USDA Community Food Projects Competitive Grant Program, which can award grants for projects not to exceed \$125,000 but require 100% matching funds.

For grants requiring some level of non-federal matching, we anticipate using the estimated fair market value of the land lease from CBS to meet at least a portion of the match.

Once site preparations have been substantially completed, community members will begin to rent garden plots, so income generated from this source will begin to provide revenue for ongoing maintenance and improvements. Because gardeners are required to perform a certain number of service hours per season, labor will also be available for these purposes. Coincidentally, such labor may be characterized as “contributions-in-kind” to the project, which allows a dollar value to be attached to them and that value to be applied toward matching requirements for further grants.

The Juneau Community Garden Association (JSGA) has generously shared with us the outlines of their sources and uses of operating funds. They currently receive plot rental income from about 165 standard 10’ by 20’ plots annually at approximately \$35/plot, plus about 30 small beds for climbing plants at \$5/bed. This income plus the income generated from holding a spring plant sale event, one Mid-Summer Festival, and one Fall Harvest Celebration where garden produce is sold to benefit JCGA has been meeting much of their maintenance and operations budget needs for a number of years.

Although the proposed future Sitka Community Gardens Association cannot be expected to generate the same level of plot rental income as JCGA, we will enjoy similarly low maintenance and operations costs due to the benefits of adopting a similarly efficient cooperative association model, using “service hour” membership labor to accomplish most maintenance and management needs, eliminating the need to hire paid staff.

Attachments

- ✓ Survey drawing of proposed garden site
- ✓ Sample Guidelines for Community Gardeners Handbook
- ✓ Letters of support