



Memphis Association Uses Game Changer Grant to Reduce Blight and Put Urban Farming to Work on Vacant Lots—April 2013

The Memphis Area Association of REALTORS® (MAAR) is determined to fight the blight that is overwhelming a number of its urban neighborhoods. Thanks to a Game Changer Grant from the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS®, MAAR is now partnering with the mayor’s office on what seems like a “win-win-win-win” solution: a pilot program that seeks not only to reduce neighborhood blight – but to increase neighborhood pride, spur economic development, and, remarkably, to boost the local school lunch program.

Melanie Blakeney, CEO and Executive Vice President of the 3,100-member local association, explains: “As residents of Memphis and as REALTORS®, we share the mayor’s concern about the high levels of blight here, and vacant lots are just as unhealthy as blighted houses. This new program will test the viability of urban farming on vacant lots in a core neighborhood of South Memphis.”

The hope is that immediate neighbors can be engaged to be responsible for the farm-lots, and that the harvest of healthy produce will be sold to local public schools for use in lunches. Excess produce could be sold by the neighborhood farmers for profit. “If this succeeds,” says Blakeney, “the city will be able to replicate the pilot program on a broad scale.” She notes that MAAR’s Community Partners Committee is always looking to form creative partnerships with like-minded groups, but that this project, touching on so many needs in the community, is especially poignant.

Tommy Pacello, a member of Memphis’ Mayors’ Innovation Delivery Team (one of five such teams funded by Bloomberg Philanthropies deployed to model cities throughout the country,) has been helping to put the program together. While urban farms are not a new idea, he says, “this is the first I know of that brings a city and its schools together in partnership with a private funder like MAAR, and community groups that are providing technical support. It’s an ambitious program, and still very much in the planning stages, but everyone here is very excited about it.”

“This gathering of resources is tremendous,” he continues. The lots in the pilot program funded by MAAR will amount to about one-and-a-half to two acres of land that is not necessarily contiguous, but within close proximity. The land will be graded, fitted with water, electricity, and hoop houses to extend the Memphis growing season to up-to 11 months of the year.

Technical expertise in farming and economic development will be provided by other members of the partnership, including Tony Geraci, a national advocate for school food reform, who is now Executive Director of Nutrition Services in the Memphis City Schools. “As a business model, the demand side is already in place,” says Pacello. “Tony is a great advocate for what we’re doing – in fact, he’s already tested a model hoop house, and is raring to go.” Various community development councils and other neighborhood groups in South Memphis will focus on community engagement, which will be the real key to the project’s success.



“People want to improve their neighborhoods,” says Blakeney, “and anything that brings pride will have a positive ripple effect.” She and her team were recently invited to a small private reception with the mayor, who cited MAAR’s involvement as a prime example of public/private partnership. “Fighting neighborhood blight is the mayor’s No. 1 priority, and although we’re still in an early, experimental stage, the REALTORS® are proud to be part of the solution!”

To learn more about how the Memphis Area REALTORS® are helping to transform blighted property into productive urban farms, contact Melanie Blakeney, CEO/Executive Vice President of the Memphis Area Association of REALTORS®, at melanie.blakeney@maar.org or 901.818.2428.



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