

NEWS RELEASE AND ADVISORY

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Philadelphia Residents Oppose Bill That Would Hurt Community Gardens

PHILADELPHIA – January 14, 2013 – A growing number of Philadelphians have come together to oppose City Council Bill 120917, which amends Philadelphia’s new zoning code to restrict and prohibit several uses—most notably community gardens and market farms—in “commercial mixed use districts” (zoned CMX-2 and 2.5). Introduced by Councilman Brian O’Neill in November 2012, the bill requires all market farms and community gardens on CMX-2 to obtain a “special exception,” an onerous process requiring fees, hearings, substantial paperwork, and legal representation for incorporated entities. The amendment creates new and unnecessary barriers to gardening and farming in Philadelphia.

Philadelphia needs healthier food and greener spaces. Community gardens and market farms provide both, with proven benefits to the long-term health, safety, welfare, and sustainability of our neighborhoods. They contribute to safer, healthier, and greener environments in our most blighted areas, and at the same time improve access to healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate food.

This bill covers one third of all commercial land in the City, putting at risk of sanctions and fines twenty percent of Philadelphia’s more than 350 existing gardens and farms, and the gardeners working them. Since this bill is considered a “pending ordinance,” it is already in effect, even before the final vote.

Landmarks’ Grumblethorpe Historic House and Garden is one of the gardens located in CMX-2. According to Brandi Levine, Executive Director of Landmarks, Grumblethorpe’s participating “youth receive life- and job-skills training, and mentoring throughout the year,” while the farmstand and garden provide “the lower Germantown community with fresh, locally grown produce and an extraordinary oasis in this urban community.”

The irony is that this bill makes Philadelphia less sustainable just as the city is striving to be the “Greenest City” in the country. Our nationally acclaimed Greenworks goals call for increasing access to healthy food and green space. Bill 120917 does the opposite, creating obstacles just when the City and countless residents and community-based organizations are working to increase access to fresh, local food and create innovative solutions to our vacant land problem. As cities across the nation look for ways to support urban agriculture, this bill moves against the tide of progress and threatens Philadelphia’s position as a leader in this area.

For the first time in fifty years, garden and farming are once again recognized uses in this city, with safeguards built in to ensure positive relationships between garden and neighbors. The proposed amendments create barriers without adding value. “Acquiring a special exception is an onerous process; community gardeners don’t have the resources needed for the myriad of fees required,” states Nancy Goldenberg, Senior Vice President of Programs and Planning at Pennsylvania Horticultural Society. “We should not be setting up roadblocks that prevent vacant, trash strewn lots from becoming gardens and community assets.” The special exception process will cost gardens upward of \$250 per parcel. Yet Councilman O’Neill, who introduced the bill, has not offered a compelling reason why it should be approved.

The Campaign for Healthier Foods and Greener Spaces is a growing affiliation of institutions working to support community gardening and market farming in Philadelphia. We urge residents to contact district and at-large council members and ask them to vote down City Council Bill 120917, and to attend the City Council vote on this bill on January 24, 2013 in Council Chambers. Philadelphia’s gardens and farms are anchor institutions, created by and rooted in their communities. They enhance, not compete with, other allowable uses in our neighborhoods. In fact, the alternative is more vacant lots and more blight.

For more information and updates, visit: <http://pilcop.org/take-action-to-protect-urban-agriculture-in-philadelphia/> and <https://www.facebook.com/phillygreenandhealthy>

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