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# CRAIN'S CLEVELAND BUSINESS

## REAL ESTATE

### Real estate: 'Agripuncture' going through a growth spurt

*'Agripuncture' backers push for community involvement in rehabilitation of inner-city land*



**Damien Forshe (left) and Keymah Durden are co-founders of the Rid-All Green Partnership in Cleveland's Kinsman neighborhood. Not pictured is fellow co-founder Randell McShepard.**

*Photo credit: MCKINLEY WILEY*

There are dozens of projects throughout Cleveland that are turning vacant swaths of land into food reservoirs while linking city dwellers -- many of them poor -- to fresh, local produce.

By [KATHY AMES CARR](#)

For decades, the Forgotten Triangle in Cleveland's Kinsman neighborhood was an illegal landfill, an open-air Dumpster littered with tires and trash.

Now the triangle is taking on a new shape after a massive cleanup and shaving of the land cleared the way for a farming project that looks as if it could be part of a reservation in the Metroparks.

There are greenhouses where vegetables and even tilapia are growing. Orange trees dot the manicured grounds. Nearby, crates of waste from restaurants and food banks meet mounds of wood chips and other earthly derivatives to be composted into rich soil that feeds this urban food system.

The operation at East 81st Street and Otter Avenue is one of dozens of projects throughout Cleveland that are turning vacant swaths of land into food reservoirs while linking city dwellers — many of them poor — to fresh, local produce. But the real key to planting sustainable urban agriculture projects lies in developers' ability to empower people in the surrounding communities to become a part of the rehabilitation.

The architecture website ArchDaily refers to the phenomenon as "urban agripuncture," or the use of pinpointed, productive landscapes to revitalize abandoned communities and connect them to healthy foods.

Kimberley Hodgson, who last year co-authored a report, "Urban Agriculture: Growing Healthy, Sustainable Places," examined how local governments are weaving social, environmental and economic aspects of agriculture into the urban fabric. The report categorized cities' initiatives by noncommercial (social purposes such as education), commercial (sales) and a hybrid model, which incorporates both.

"Cleveland has a strong hybrid model," said Ms. Hodgson, who noted other cities such as Philadelphia, Seattle and Milwaukee share the hybrid model designation. "These local governments are really attentive by reaching out to local food systems, farmers, low-income groups, coalitions" and reusing vacant land with commercial, social and environmental considerations in mind. **Seeds of change**

At the 1½-acre agriculture incubator in Kinsman — known as the Rid-All Green Partnership — volunteers compost soil and harvest the produce, which is supplied to Cleveland produce distributor Sirna & Sons, St. Vincent Charity Medical Center, farmers markets and restaurants, including Pure & Supreme Cuisine in Cleveland and Sandwich King in Bedford.

"We're also talking to a restaurant in Chinatown," said Randell McShepard, who founded Rid-All Green Partnership with childhood friends Damien Forshe and Keymah Durden.

The Rid-All Green Partnership is an arm of Milwaukee-based nonprofit Growing Power; the latter group's CEO is former NBA player Will Allen, who was named in 2010 as one of *Time* magazine's most influential people in the world.

To facilitate its mission of education, outreach and local food production, Rid-All plans to break ground this fall on a \$650,000, 6,000-square-foot greenhouse that will shelter a farmers market and commercial kitchen for local residents and other food enthusiasts.

The Rid-All campus anchors the larger, 26-acre Urban Agriculture Innovation Zone between East 79th and East 84th streets off Kinsman Road. Ohio State University Extension is using six acres there for demonstration purposes and farms. **Landing land a key**

Down the road at Kinsman, Ensign and Grand avenues in the city's Central neighborhood, Green City Growers Cooperative is developing a \$17 million hydroponic greenhouse on 10 acres that is scheduled to come online in November. The project will use shallow pools of nutrient-rich water, rather than soil, to annually produce 5 million heads of lettuce and leafy greens and 300,000 pounds of herbs; the produce will be distributed to grocers and

heads of lettuce and leafy greens and 500,000 pounds of herbs, the produce will be distributed to grocers and food service companies within a 150-mile radius.

The city of Cleveland assembled the land and cobbled together \$10 million in federal loans and grants to support the initiative. Green City Growers plans to employ about 35 residents, who will be allowed to assume an ownership stake in the business and share any profits.

Neighborhood development organization Burten, Bell, Carr Development Inc. is helping to bring online both the Green City Growers Cooperative and the Urban Agriculture Innovation Zone, the latter of which required 18 months of private land acquisitions and working with city officials to assemble land bank parcels for development. The nonprofit that serves most of Cleveland's Ward 5 still is looking to acquire about 70 more parcels at the site.

"There are various degrees of interest (from 32 different land-owners) in selling their property," executive director Timothy Tramble said. "Some were adamantly opposed, but we were ultimately able to inspire them with our vision."

The city of Cleveland has roughly 20,000 vacant lots, with about 10,000 in its land bank. The city in 2007 began revamping policies and codes to make urban farming easier; the changes included the introduction of an urban garden zoning district and chicken and bee zoning, and allowing for agriculture in residential districts.

Pending adoption is an urban agriculture overlay district that would allow large-scale farming activities. **Making a statement**

Over on East 67th Street and Superior Avenue, in the city's St. Clair-Superior neighborhood, four hoop houses rise from the shadows of a vacant church, which nonprofit Community Greenhouse Partners bought "for a song" in December 2010 from the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland, said the nonprofit's founder and executive director, Timothy Smith.

The operation so far has garnered about \$40,000 in private grant money to advance its vision of hiring locally and enriching the community with inexpensive organic goods.

Carrots, kale and other greens share the earth with weeds and brush on the nearly 3-acre property, which Mr. Smith continues to clear as his urban agriculture project gains ground.

"This is our statement garden," he said.

Mr. Smith is providing microgreens — small, young shoots of a plant used as salad greens — to Cleveland eateries such as Noodlecat and Flying Fig, and Hawken School, and he is in talks with charter school operator Breakthrough

Schools about introducing microgreens or other produce to students at Citizens Leadership Academy in the city's Hough neighborhood.

Meanwhile, Mr. Smith plans to transform the former St. George church into a grocery store, coffee shop and market, which he said would sell on-site produce and other goods cheaper than what residents pay at the convenience store. The basement of this estimated \$5 million project would function as a commercial kitchen that would educate residents on food utilization.

"I believe we are a transformative forest in this neighborhood, and people are starting to figure it out," Mr. Smith said. "The residents are waiting and watching."

An area resident of the Kinsman farm has moved beyond observation and has been volunteering at the Rid-All Green Partnership.

Aaron El-Amin said he previously knew nothing of agriculture. He since has taken on-site farming workshops and enjoys helping with the composting.

"It's the hardest work I've ever loved," he said.

As to whether the exposure has changed his habits and approach to local food, Mr. El-Amin said: "I'm learning a lot about nutrition. They're winning me over slowly."

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