South Baton Rouge Community Gardens Initiative

United States
Marcelle Boudreaux
Organization type: nonprofit/ngo/citizen sector
Budget: $1 million - $5 million
Website: http://www.cpex.org

- Food
- Intercultural relations
- Food security
- Mentorship
- Youth development
- Sustainable agriculture
- Social enterprise

Project Summary

Elevator Pitch

Concise Summary: Help us pitch this solution! Provide an explanation within 3-4 short sentences.

South Baton Rouge Community Gardens Initiative seeks to focus resources on reusing blighted vacant land, with the goal of making Old South Baton Rouge a healthier and economically sound community. This means transitioning environmental liabilities into community based economic development opportunities through a sustainable and innovative community garden renewal strategy focused on three core development areas: Land Reclamation; Social Rebuilding; and the Green Economy.

About Project

Problem: What problem is this project trying to address?

The culprit for exacerbating the OSBR neighborhood disinvestment, is the more than 2,300 neglected vacant land parcels and 900 deteriorating vacant housing structures in the Old South Baton Rouge neighborhood. These properties represent 34% of a three square mile area, and have fallen prey to trespass and arson, illegal dumping of noxious chemicals, and criminal activity. This neighborhood is also classified as a "food desert". Local corner stores, selling primarily processed food products, are the only source of foodstuffs within this neighborhood, with the nearest local grocer almost 20 minutes by vehicle, and even longer by public transit. The community lacks outlets for fresh produce, a detrimental effect to the health of its residents.

Despite the challenging statistics of distress and given the opportunity of vacant land, the community has the potential to reverse the declining trends through sustainable and innovative community garden renewal strategy.

Solution: What is the proposed solution? Please be specific!

The Community Gardens Initiative is a community revitalization program through the lens of urban agriculture. This innovative renewal program has a multi-faceted approach that looks beyond just the plants and farther than the immediate season. The first component is the reclamation of vacant land, an act that reduces the detrimental environmental effects and returns land back to commerce. The neighborhood of OSBR is in dire need of creative land management strategies to combat land vacancy and to develop engaging community spaces. Second, is the rebuilding of social capital, by creating places in the community that foster collaboration across racial and generational lines. Community gardens build social capital by fostering relationships among beyond standard social networks. The objective is to develop a Community Gardens Initiative that would re-engage the community networks. Lastly, the use of a community garden program as a land management tool will create opportunities for environmental education, outreach and stewardship within the community.

Impact: How does it Work

Example: Walk us through a specific example(s) of how this solution makes a difference; include its primary activities.

The community gardens initiative has impacted the community through the remediation of blighted vacant land, garden implementation, and educational classes. Two gardens are currently growing on what was once blighted vacant lands, in addition to several other vacant properties currently in the planning stages. Urban agriculture SUCCESSES One of these gardens is a youth garden with neighborhood children ranging from ages 5-16, who show up weekly to help tend to vegetable patches and sunflower stalks. In partnership with one of the neighborhood churches, another community garden was built by over 30 community members: a raised planter bed, a benefit to the elderly gardeners, an herb spiral, a sunflower patch, and a handful of fruit trees around the perimeter. Classes have been taught on Organic Gardening 101. One community leader is enrolled in the Master Gardener program, thanks to a small scholarship by CPEX; this leader has already purchased a plot of land to build another community garden for the neighborhood. PLANNING STAGE (0-6 months) Several other gardens are in the planning stages for fall and spring gardens. One of these gardens will pair 25 Louisiana State University students with children from OSBR. The student-children groups will meet
Another community garden is being planned at a local community center, and this garden would offer a youth development program involving gardening and allow for cross-generational elderly-youth programming. Lastly, a schoolyard garden is being investigated at one of the local community schools. To follow-up on the Organic Gardening 101 class, a series of Fall gardening courses are planned by the end of November.

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Center for Planning Excellence

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The information you provide here will be used to fill in any parts of your profile that have been left blank, such as interests, organization information, and website. No contact information will be made public. Please uncheck here if you do not want this to happen.

**Country your work focuses on**
LA, East Baton Rouge Parish

**Website URL**

**Innovation**

Do you have a patent for this idea?

**Impact**

**Actions**

Collaboration. This initiative depends on collaborative partnerships to develop and maintain a sustainable Community Gardens Initiative in OSBR. Working with the partners helps identify available land, provide training about gardening to the community, recruit volunteers to build the gardens, identify leaders who will help maintain the gardens and organize activities and programming to sustain the garden.

Capacity. Once community leaders are identified, then their capacity must be developed to maintain gardens and to teach other potential leaders. Enrolling in the intensive horticulture and gardening Master Gardener program can provide a solid knowledge base for community leaders.

Model. All the steps necessary to successfully implement a community garden are being modeled to determine the most efficient and successful methods of sustaining the initiative. Gardens fail without a plan; this best practices model will be distributed to the community to prevent wide-scale failure.

Lack of community buy-in could prevent the success of this initiative.

**Results**

The proposed activities will maximize the use of vacant, blighted, and adjudicated property by converting the land into social and economic opportunities. Returning vacant land to productive use reduces the amount of vacant land and environmental liabilities while stabilizing and increasing property values. This can help stimulate public and private reinvestment by encouraging redevelopment.

The activities will also build capacity through environmental outreach and education and promote stewardship throughout the community. This will aid in the restoration of social norms and trust that build community coordination and cooperation.

The production of urban agriculture provides an opportunity for “green-collar” job training directed at disadvantaged youth and adults. This training
can teach business and technical skills for industries such as food agriculture and land management. Also, importantly, growing produce at home and in community gardens provides a partial relief to the problem of substandard grocery stores by infusing a local fresh food resource into the community.

**What will it take for your project to be successful over the next three years? Please address each year separately, if possible.**

In order to make a substantial impact in OSBR, the Community Gardens Initiative must be scaled up. To be successful over the next three years, a realistic strategy for scaling up the Community Gardens Initiative is essential. An abridged version of that plan over three years is as follows:

**Year 1:** Build gardens. Identify and train community leaders.

**Year 2:** Build gardens. Identify and train community leaders. Develop “green-collar” job training.

**Year 3:** Build gardens. Implement “green-collar” job training program. Create food co-op in the neighborhood to allow residents to sell or barter their extra crop.

**What would prevent your project from being a success?**

Educating the engaged community leaders and the broader community are key steps to ensuring success. Properly training the community about gardening enhances the success rate of the garden. Gardens will fail if they are not maintained properly, reverting back to the vacant land and associated environmental liabilities. The benefits of community gardens must be adequately relayed to the community in order to build support for this initiative. Without community buy-in, this limits the long-term success of these gardens.

A broad and sustainable funding source could streamline the implementation of the gardens and capacity building. A lack of a clear funding source(s) could potentially hinder the project from succeeding.

**How many people will your project serve annually?**

More than 10,000

**What is the average monthly household income in your target community, in US Dollars?**

$100 - 1000

**Does your project seek to have an impact on public policy?**

Yes

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**Sustainability**

**What stage is your project in?**

Operating for less than a year

**Is your initiative connected to an established organization?**

If yes, provide organization name.

**How long has this organization been operating?**

Please select

**Does your organization have a Board of Directors or an Advisory Board?**

Yes

**Does your organization have a non-monetary partnerships with NGOs?**

Yes

**Does your organization have a non-monetary partnerships with businesses?**

Yes

**Does your organization have a non-monetary partnerships with government?**

Yes

**Please tell us more about how these partnerships are critical to the success of your innovation.**

CPEX maintains a vibrant partnership with the Louisiana State University Community University Partnership (LSU CUP), LSU Ag Extension Center, the East Baton Rouge Redevelopment Authority (EBRRA), community members and organizations, the local community schools and the South Garden Project (a grassroots horticultural organization) to implement this initiative. This active collaboration brings together the community residents who have a desire for positive change with diverse organizations that can help facilitate and instruct that change.

This Initiative would not function without these partners. LSU CUP engages university students in extracurricular service opportunities. The EBRRA provides direction on vacant land. The Ag Extension Center and the South Garden Project provide technical horticulture and gardening instruction. Lastly, the community provides the reason for the project. Our goal is for the community to gain the capacity to lead this Initiative once it is established.

**What are the three most important actions needed to grow your initiative or organization?**

*Seeking funding sources is essential to grow the Initiative.

*The ability to locate vacant land with clear title or clear understanding of legal ownership.

*The sustainability of this Community Gardens initiative depends on the capacity of community members to obtain the necessary skills to maintain
The Story

What was the defining moment that you led to this innovation?

The social innovator behind this idea is Susan Ludwig. With an educational background in horticulture, landscape design, urban planning, she also owned a successful small business. During her internship with Center for Planning Excellence and subsequent promotion to the Director of Redevelopment for projects in Old South Baton Rouge, she has tirelessly developed and implemented programs to benefit the existing residents and businesses in this area. With an uncanny ability to empathize with people of all walks of life, she has created successful partnerships and friendships within the community. Creating asset wealth in this low-income community is a primary goal of all her projects, yet the level of disinvestment stems from decades of neglect. Blighted vacant properties consume almost 34% of the land area in OSBR, making CPEX's impact on the built environment sometimes hard to visualize. The application of an urban agriculture program seemed like a no-brainer because it assists in providing immediate site beautification, as well as developing community spaces, youth development and job training in the emerging green economy.

Tell us about the social innovator behind this idea.

Susan Ludwig is the Director of Redevelopment for the Center for Planning Excellence (CPEX) in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. CPEX is a non-profit organization that provides best-practice planning models, innovative policy ideas, and technical revitalization assistance to individual communities across the state of Louisiana. Well-versed in a variety of community and neighborhood revitalization strategies, Susan currently works with distressed low-income communities in need of economic and social capacity revitalization. Before moving to Baton Rouge to start her new career in urban planning, Susan managed a lush and diversely populated 45 acre greenbelt and wetland system facility welcoming thousands of visitors to Acadiana annually for the Gateway Foundation of Acadiana. In 1999, Susan started her own business, Raintree Nursery and Gardens, a successful nursery, gardens and landscape design/build company promoting and implementing renewable and sustainable designs. Susan obtained her Master of Landscape Architecture degree from the Robert Reich School of Landscape Architecture, concentrating in sustainable urban design and urban agriculture for low income communities. She received her Bachelor of Science degree in Applied Life Sciences from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

How did you first hear about Changemakers?

Friend or family member

If through another, please provide the name of the organization or company

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