

# Free Times - Ohio's Premier News, Arts, & Entertainment Weekly

## News

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News Lead

## Agri-culture

A City Takes Up Arms In The Local Food Revolution

By Michael Gill

A SUNDAY AFTERNOON MEETING in the basement of the Lakewood Public Library does not have the feeling of revolution. It's more like the county fair has met the Kiwanis of yesteryear - back when the civic-minded volunteer group was fat with young men jazzed about their neighbors and doing a good thing for their hometown.

LEAF, a grassroots group whose acronym stands for Lakewood Earth And Food, is planning its second summer. In one corner, florescent lights shine down on a table with a little mountain of blue plastic bags bulging with groceries for the second time: potatoes, cabbage, onions - "winter shares" of locally grown produce. The women staffing the table will also sell you farm-fresh eggs. In the front of the room, LEAF board members take turns talking about different aspects of their local food program: community gardens, community-supported agriculture (CSA), bulk buying and soil building. Then come the Ohio farmers who actually grow the food. About 75 people in the audience listen attentively, with questions about everything from pesticide to bee-keeping.



LEAF - People and produce in front of Lakewood Public Library.

The ideas that drive the local food movement are not new: People want fresher, therefore tastier and more nutritious fruits and vegetables. They want to support local farmers and cut down the number of miles their food travels before reaching their plate - which averages about 1,500 miles in the US. City Fresh, a nonprofit broker of locally grown produce, plays to that market in Northeast Ohio, with an added dose of social consciousness: They aimed first at areas of the city that are not well served by grocery stores or other markets, and a portion of the cost of each "share" subsidizes low-income shareholders. They sell prepaid shares of the farms' output each week at neighborhood sites known as "fresh stops."

But last year, across the region, those ideas gained traction in the market. According to City Fresh manager Maurice Smalls, the organization had just four Fresh Stops in 2006. Last summer, the

number swelled to 16. The LEAF-sponsored Fresh Stop was just one of those, but its customers and volunteers turned out in disproportionate droves. Between City Fresh and Covered Bridge Farms, another CSA, Lakewood went from zero to about 250 households buying community-supported produce, with organizational help from dozens of volunteers. And this year, a new mayor has told the group he will support their community gardening initiative not only with public land, but also by asking private land holders - like developers stuck with the city's few vacant lots while the housing market is on idle - if they will let LEAF use their space for community gardens.

"It's like the Kiwanis of the 21st century," says LEAF volunteer Dan Slife. He's referring to the groundswell of volunteer support that made last summer's weekly Fresh Stop in front of Lakewood Public Library into a mini carnival, with music, art, games for kids, and people lingering to socialize. "As these older service organizations lose relevance, how do young people reconnect with their community? Food security and sustainability are in the zeitgeist. These are the topics that are on our mind."

The group is likely to incorporate this year so it can have an official mechanism to handle money, and eventually will pursue nonprofit status. Its growth has some talking about becoming its own broker, working directly with farms.

A nutritionist by day and LEAF volunteer by night, Annie Stahlheber kept track of shares of City Fresh in Lakewood. "Without promotion and before the program existed here, we had 40 people signed up," prepaying \$20 per share for the produce without knowing exactly what they'd get. She says one-third of the shares sold at the 16 City Fresh sites last summer were sold in Lakewood: More than 200 households bought produce that way. The surge of interest pushed against the suppliers' capacity to keep up. The next busiest City Fresh community was Cleveland Heights, which had about 70 participating households.

Lisa Jean Sylvia, who works for City Fresh, said, "In Lakewood there were so many shareholders, it got to the point where I had to cut them off."

Lakewood was also the biggest market for family-run Covered Bridge Farms, an unbrokered CSA program. Covered Bridge operates CSAs in Erie, Pennsylvania, Ashtabula and Jefferson, Ohio, but fully half their shares were sold in Lakewood.

For the moment, the surge of interest in local foods is best measured by last year's produce sales. In the future it might be measurable in acres. Smalls hopes that increasing demand will lead to more local farms, even in the shrinking city. And this year, Lakewood is poised to make strides that way, thanks to the support of new mayor Ed FitzGerald.

WITH ITS SUPERFLUITY of abandoned property, from parking lots to industrial sites, to former home sites and land-banked lots, Cleveland is littered with small and large community gardens, some in operation for decades. But Lakewood has almost no available undeveloped land. Empty lots are all but nonexistent. City parks are actively programmed. In addition, it's a city where the yards are itsy

bitsy, teeny weeny, and in some cases too small even to grow zucchini. So when LEAF organized around kitchen tables last winter, volunteers had community gardening at the forefront of their minds.

LEAF volunteer and landscaper Chris Trapp led an effort to find potential plots, mapping and researching scraps of green space all over town, from lots where houses once stood to parks to oddly shaped parcels along the margins of I-90. But without a champion in City Hall, despite substantial grassroots interest, the group was only able to build a garden on one plot of land where an older community gardening effort had fallen idle, back in a quiet corner of the city's Birdtown neighborhood.

This year it's looking quite a bit different. Trapp was one of three volunteers that met with Mayor FitzGerald early in March to talk about it. They went in thinking they'd need to sell the idea and had a list of talking points rooted in progressive community planning: that more people in the parks make the park safer, that it's an opportunity to add to quality of life without putting a cost burden on the cash-strapped municipal budget, that it might even help attract new residents. It turned out that the mayor was already on the same page.

"I thought it was a great idea," FitzGerald said. "What we know we can do is use parks. But there is other land we control - little segments by the highway, for example - that are not big enough for a park or development, but big enough for their gardening requirements. We're also talking with private landowners, including developers who have unutilized space that might not be developed for two years, where they might be able to do blacktop gardening."

FitzGerald also says foreclosed properties may present an opportunity. Values are high enough in Lakewood that buyers are frequently ready to snap up those properties at bargain prices, but some circumstances, especially tax delinquency, open the door to city ownership. The city is in the process of acquiring some foreclosures, a deal which should be completed before the beginning of the summer. Some of those properties are likely to be demolished to make way for new houses - which FitzGerald acknowledges he would rather have. But if the land lies fallow, he says the city would also be open to community gardening.

"I think the idea is progressive, and it has no downside," FitzGerald says. "It could be kind of a signature thing we could do in the city. It doesn't require the city to do much - just open the door and get out of the way."

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