

Community Gardens Safeguarded

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URBAN AGRICULTURE: Community gardeners give thanks at city hall on Monday for increased protection of their gardens and urge further protection and support. (Phoebe Zheng/The Epoch Times)

NEW YORK—In a city where space is scarce, land use is often an contentious issue. Community gardeners have long felt the pressure of competing interests closing in on the lots occupied by their bean stalks and raspberry bushes.

Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe relieved some of that pressure Monday with the announcement of increased community garden protections. Gardeners across the city celebrated the hard-won fruits of their advocacy efforts, while continuing to push forward for even greater security to protect what they see as an invaluable resource to New Yorkers.

The city's 282 active gardens will be preserved as long as they remain in good standing and are not deemed a health or safety risk to surrounding residents. New gardens may be established and enjoy the same protection. If a garden is failing or inactive, known as default, the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) must identify a gardening group to take over and give them nine months to restore the lot to active production.

The term for licensing of community gardens also increased from two years to four. Gardeners previously felt any protection they enjoyed was precarious as a new administration could easily throw it out.

“These will be the first licenses that will be in effect into the next administration, so it underscores that these gardens are meant to endure, regardless of who is in office,” declared Council Speaker Christine Quinn at the announcement in a Harlem veggie garden.

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The protections announced Monday are additions to a 2002 Community Gardens License Agreement established between the city and the state attorney general. This agreement expired in September, sparking dialogue between the community and city officials on the amendments to be made in a renewed contract. Monday’s edicts expand upon and clarify many additions already made in September, a process advocates say must continue.

New York City Community Garden Coalition (NYCCGC) calls for further clarification and improvement on the agreement. They say the process for identifying a garden as “default,” is not clear enough. They call for increased support to failing gardens before closure and for extended support to gardens not currently under DPR jurisdiction. Of the city’s approximately 600 gardens, only 282 are registered with DPR.

Last week Speaker Quinn pledged to make community gardens a priority in her FoodWorks report which outlines city council’s long-term goals for New York’s food production and consumption.

A History of Struggle

While the benefits of locally grown produce and the use of space for green initiatives are lauded by many, the lucrative space occupied by urban farms has often been contested.

In 1999, 114 community gardens were put up for auction to developers. The New York Restoration Project (NYRP) rallied with other green advocates and community members to save these gardens only hours before the scheduled auction.

“Today, I’m prouder than ever to be a New Yorker,” said NYRP founder Bette Midler in response to the 1999 victory.

The Community Gardens License Agreement in 2002 was a major step toward providing protection for these green spaces. It created a framework for preservation and relocation of gardens “when development of a lot is necessary,” states a DPR press release.

An NYU study shows that community gardens may also increase property value and are linked to the revitalization of a neighborhood. A 2006 study by NYU law and economics students looked at property values in areas with community farms as compared to values in areas with similar real estate without community farms.

“We find that the opening of a community garden has a statistically significant positive impact on residential properties within 1,000 feet of the garden. ... We find that the opening of the garden is associated with other changes in the neighborhood, such as increasing rates of home ownership, and thus may be serving as catalysts for economic redevelopment of the community,” wrote students Vicki Been and Ioan Voicu.