

**Proposal for Involvement of Newton Community Farm in Nahanton Park
April 26, 2010**

Parks and Recreation Commission, City of Newton

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Proposal Summary

Newton Community Farm (NCF) proposes to partner with Newton Parks and Recreation to expand programming and usage of Nahanton Park. Key features of the partnership would include designation of limited areas for farming and related education/volunteer/recreation uses, long term agreement, investment by NCF to prepare land for farming, creation and maintenance of birding habitat, and payment for use of city water.

NCF requests that the Newton Parks and Recreation Commission find that such a partnership, as generally outlined in this proposal, is in the best interests of the City and Nahanton Park. NCF asks that the Commission guide City staff in the broad details of how it wishes the partnership be established, and direct City staff to work with NCF to reach a mutually acceptable agreement.

Introduction

Newton Community Farm, Inc. (NCF), which operates Newton Angino Community Farm, a City owned property, for the benefit of the Newton community, is now seeking off-site locations to facilitate planning for future farm needs.

We believe that a potential partnership with Parks and Recreation using portions of Nahanton Park will assist Parks and Recreation's accomplishment of its goals to expand public/private partnerships, continue development of new and innovative programs, and build a rich cultural life in Newton.

We believe that such a partnership can be formulated in a way that is practical and financially viable for NCF. If the city is interested, NCF would like to open discussions about such a partnership at Nahanton Park while NCF works out the practical considerations.

We are specifically interested in exploring the potential to use spaces totaling between 0.5 and 1 acre for expanding our farm operation, educational, and volunteer programming. Nahanton Park is ideally suited to this purpose as it is currently underutilized and is less than a mile from the farm's site. This close proximity would allow staff, volunteers, and students to walk between the two locations. If approval by the City could be obtained in 2010, we could begin preliminary cultivation activities this growing season.

Purpose

Parks and Recreation's mission is to provide traditional and innovative recreation, leisure and cultural activities in a quality environment for all residents of Newton. NCF's mandate is to educate the Newton community about the importance of local, sustainably grown food. The proposed use of part of Nahanton Park provides an opportunity for both organizations to expand their activities and effectiveness.

Paralleling Parks and Recreation's activities, NCF pursues its mission through classes, hands-on work experiences, and by making the produce we grow available to the community through a

variety of markets. An example of what we do is the Farmer-in-Training (FiT) program. This program works with middle school students primarily, but not exclusively, from Newton. During one-week sessions students learn firsthand how to grow organic vegetables. In addition, they learn about the role of fresh produce in a healthy diet, harvesting and preparing vegetables as part of their daily lunch. Finally, through discussions, activities and contributions of the produce they grow to the Newton Food Pantry, the students examine issues of social justice and food security. Much of the produce these students grow is grown in four garden plots in Nahanton Park's "upper garden."

Permitting NCF to use additional land in Nahanton Park would enable Parks and Recreation to offer residents of Newton more opportunities to enjoy the space in a variety of ways. Allocating the land to farming would accommodate growing interest in NCF educational programs (like the FiT program), as well as our community volunteer days. Three days a week we are open to anyone who would like to come and work with us, learning firsthand about growing food. We have high school students coming to do their community service hours; college students who are interested in sustainability; parents who bring their young children because they want them to learn that carrots come from the ground not a plastic bag. Expanded farming use at Nahanton Park would make meaningful the incredible amount of interest in these community work days; NCF has been limited in this regard by our small acreage at Angino Farm. NCF programming might open other opportunities for youth engagement at Nahanton Park, such as forestry or trail maintenance.

Encouraging home gardening is another activity that aligns Parks and Recreation's mission in providing cultural, recreational and leisure activities, and NCF's goal to demonstrate food sustainability. Use of this second growing site would allow NCF better crop rotation, increasing the sustainability of our agricultural effort and its usefulness as a model for Newton home gardeners.

Benefits to the Park and to the City

The presence of NCF volunteers and farm workers will have a positive impact on the social environment of Nahanton Park. NCF already has strong relationships with many of the gardeners in the community garden plots, who buy seedlings from the farm and come to ask for advice. The community garden plots unfortunately have had some problems in the past with, among other things, theft. The increased people presence (volunteers and farm staff) that would accompany NCF's activities in the park would, in the opinion of Judy Dore (Parks and Rec) and Duane Hillis (President, Friends of Nahanton Park) help make it a more secure area for all. In addition, NCF has a strong record of maintaining its field not only as a productive agricultural site, but also as a very beautiful one. Our methods of growing show an attention to detail and reflect an aesthetic sensibility. Our presence in Nahanton Park would add to the beauty of this open space.

Farming in Nahanton Park would allow NCF to increase the educational programming and volunteer opportunities we provide to the Newton community. The increased production would also make more fresh, sustainably-grown produce available to residents.

Areas of Interest

There are three locations in the Park that are of interest. These include the "lower brush area" next to the "lower" community gardens, and the "mowed area" located between the two community garden sites. We have also been encouraged by Friends of Nahanton Park and Newton Conservators to consider the "overgrown community garden area" nearby. The

accompanying map shows the locations of the sites. There is also some interest in a fourth area nearby that has more mature trees and brush and would be more costly to prepare for farming.

Land Preparation

The effort to convert non-cultivated land to cultivated land will require from one to three years after clearing. Land preparation is expected to cost NCF in the range of \$15,000 to \$20,000.

In the case of the *Mowed Area*, soil would be plowed and seeded with a cover crop such as clover or other nitrogen-fixing crop. The area would be left in a cover crop for several seasons in order to increase the soil organic matter, loosen the subsoil, and add nitrogen. The “meadow” would be cultivated for vegetable production once the soil is of acceptable quality: probably between two and three years. NCF has conducted initial soil tests on the area and has found it generally suitable for growing crops, but in need of improvement.

The *Lower Brush Area* will require a greater effort to prepare since it is currently partially covered with early succession brush, shrubs and small trees; this once clear space has been allowed to start reverting back to forest. The land would have to be cleared, stumps removed, and a cover crop planted. Much of the clearing might be done by community volunteers and through NewtonServes. Preparing the soil for agricultural production would take a minimum of two years after the land has been cleared. NCF has not yet tested the soil here.

The “*Overgrown Community Garden Area*” will need brush and small trees removed but may be ready for farming after a year of preparation. NCF has not yet tested the soil, but we expect it to be in better shape than the other areas being considered.

To encourage continued wildlife activity we would like to place habitat plantings in part of the designated areas, with the support and advice of the Newton birding community. Such plantings, if carefully designed, might reduce the need for fencing to keep out humans and animals that are detrimental to crops.

Impacts on the Environment

The proposed use will add a pastoral quality to the Park and would increase its beauty as currently some of the proposed area is overgrown and littered with debris.

Clearing the land adjacent to the “lower” gardens would change its current aspect of early succession forest. The land would be restored to what it was like perhaps as little as 15 years ago. Much of this land was actively farmed in the first half 20th century when this was the site of the City's “poor” farm.

Changing the use of a portion of Nahanton Park may have other environmental impacts. In one case, farming the “mowed area” will increase the attractiveness to birds. We propose to work closely with organizations like Newton Conservators and Friends of Nahanton Park, to ensure that the change is congruent with other uses of the park. NCF has strong relationships with both organizations, and a history of working with them. Although neither organization has had a formal vote, the leadership of both organizations have indicated general support of a proposal to have NCF farm in Nahanton Park.

Friends of Nahanton Park held a valuable information/discussion session on April 18 to learn how other stakeholders and the neighborhood view this proposal.

Partnership Details

If Parks and Recreation sees the mutual benefit of partnering with Newton Community Farm, we will need to come to agreement on activities programming, defining the space and planned changes, how to bear the costs of making the changes, fencing to protect crops, how many years the land will be committed initially to agricultural use, possible renewal arrangements, modification of snow-dumping use of the “*Mowed Area*” and other issues that will arise. NCF would use city water for irrigation and will pay for its cost. NCF expects to direct net income from additional produce sales from Nahanton Park land towards funding Educational and Community Outreach programming, in a manner consistent with Parks and Recreation goals. Our preliminary budget analysis indicates there will be very little net income from the Nahanton Park sites, so that NCF cannot afford significant rent commitments.

Conclusion

NCF's proposed use of land in Nahanton Park would have significant positive impacts on both the park itself and the broader Newton community. NCF's engagement at Nahanton Park is supported by members of the Parks and Recreation staff, the Friends of Nahanton Park, and many of the gardeners who utilize the community garden plots. Over the past five years NCF has demonstrated its ability to manage City property effectively, making Newton Angino Community Farm a treasure for all of Newton. We would very much like to work with The Parks and Recreation Commission and other stake holders to make this proposal a success.



Key plan of possible farming areas. See separate detail.

NORTH



SOUTH

NAHANTON PARK POSSIBLE FARMING AREAS
(very preliminary outlined areas, including possible buffer zones)
Scale: red line = approx 100'

1. "LOWER BRUSH AREA"
2. "OVERGROWN COMMUNITY GARDEN AREA"
3. "MOWED AREA"