

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

## Cover

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## City Chicken

Get Ready For The Rural Revolution

By Dan Harkins

On a frigid morning, the soil on the half-acre lot beside Bodnar-Mahoney Funeral Home on Lorain Avenue crunches under your feet like a hard-candy shell. Jocelyn Kirkwood, co-founder of the fledgling Gather 'round Farm, is tossing feed to 16 hens and their fat rooster prince. Shifting from foot to foot, Meagen Kresge, the operation's other half, is surveying the lot's tidy bald mounds and their promise of spring. "A farmer's supposed to be taking vacation this time of year," says Meagen, 38, with a weary roll of the head. "Ha."

Meagen leaves her chickens' eggs in front of her nearby apartment, and customers pay through the slot. On warmer days, the flock can lay a dozen eggs and earn their owners a whopping \$3. They break even. What helps, though, is how the chickens seem to draw a lot of city kids, with parents and their purse strings not far behind.

"I think 50 people came to the chickens' birthday party," says the 28-year-old Jocelyn. "Only five people came to my birthday party."

In 2006, the lot's owner leased the weed-choked parking lot to Meagen for \$1 a year. They laid earth over the asphalt that first year, layering compost and donated soil, and then bulbs before the first freeze. The lot was verdant and productive for the first time in years. A sign at the street, painted by a friend, shows the logo for radiation morphing into a peace sign - a symbol of the guiding spirit here.

"I don't need food from California," says Meagen, "when me and my friends can grow it for ourselves right here."



But, like all new farmers, they're learning what works and what doesn't, and for whom: like how you can end up with 10 rowdy roosters if you buy your little lot as chicks; how those neighbors at the funeral home will start to have a problem with all the cock-a-doodle-doo-ing; and how much red tape can suck from the bottom line once the officials of a post-industrial behemoth are called in to work things out.

Though all their neighbors except Bodnar-Mahoney endorse the enterprise, all this clucking over the chickens has caused some headaches for Gather 'round. Both women have to work other jobs - Meagan in lawn care, Jocelyn as a janitor - despite sometimes working nearly 60 hours a week at the farm three out of four seasons.

"It's been a long saga over a chicken coop," laments Meagen. "But this was an empty lot before, and I think we're on the mend with them now." The funeral home owners won't comment, so it's hard to tell if that's the case.

This summer, after jumping through hoops for months, Gather 'round Farm received a land-use variance from the Board of Zoning Appeals, allowing them to keep their current chickens. It was an action that's prompted a round of new regulations which Cleveland City Council is expected to consider January 5, to give a little breathing room to those who'd like to raise bees or chickens. But it would also add limits and layers of bureaucracy where once there was open frontier.

"I hope this will actually help people be able to keep chickens in the city, to encourage the practice," says Meagen. "My only reservation is that the regulations might make it more difficult for people to accomplish anything worthwhile."

They have great hopes for the future. They're adding popular items like asparagus to next year's crop. More than 100 people signed in for a fall open house. The Appleseed Child Enrichment Center next door is becoming a partner. They've now cobbled together enough of a clientele to start their own community-supported agriculture business, a program that has customers paying in advance for weekly grab-bags of goodies throughout the growing season. A \$5,000 grant from the Cleveland Foundation will help it get rolling.

And they're already planning to expand to greener and broader expanses. Several acres behind Riverview Towers on nearby Detroit Road can't be developed because of fear they're on the verge of falling into the Cuyahoga. "Seems perfect for a flock of sheep," says Meagen on a trip around the site.

Faced with resurrecting a city built for a million but populated with half that now, Cleveland's City Council continues to tweak its idea of what Cleveland could and should be. And Gather 'round stands ready beneath the skyline's shadow to fill in yet another of the Rust Belt's gaping cracks.

If you're already raising chickens or bees in Cleveland, you're probably breaking the law. Any hive or coop is supposed to be at least 100 feet from adjoining properties. City Planning Director Bob Brown notes, "It would be almost impossible to find a residential lot that would allow you to place

a coop or hive that far from your neighbor's property."

The new law would change that, requiring just 5 feet of side setback and 18 inches of rear setback for coops and hives. But there are new constraints too: The law would limit the number of chickens to one per 800 square feet of property (that's six chickens for the average 4,800-square-foot lot) and one beehive per 2,400 square feet. Roosters would get the boot completely unless you've got a full acre. ("It's not gender discrimination," says Brown. "They tend to be noisier than their female colleagues.")

Perhaps the most contentious changes: licensing and building department requirements, lot diagramming and new fees to pay for the added oversight. Brown says, however, that if coops are kept smaller than 8 feet high and 30 feet square, building fees can be waived. But there still would be a permit fee of around \$40.

"My only concern," says Meagen, "is that by requiring licenses and drawings and specifics about how many feet are here and there, are we making it tougher for people who've been keeping chickens peacefully for years?" She's not alone in her fears. At a handful of recent public hearings, several home farmers expressed similar reservations. Early in the hearings, the biggest worry was how a building permit of about \$140 would be required from the Building and Housing Department. Add to that a licensing fee (not set at press time) and you've got a situation that even the ordinance's sponsor, Ward 13 Councilman Joe Cimperman, agrees "seems over-regulatory."

City farmer Josh Klein notes that in cities as large as Chicago, Minneapolis and New York, no limits are placed on the number of chickens a citizen may keep. Still, others like Detroit, Boston and Portland, Maine have outright bans. (Most, like Cleveland, fall somewhere in the middle.) "I think they're making this a little more complex than they need to," says Josh. "Cats cause more problems than chickens. And cats are everywhere." Karin Wishner, a beekeeper with hives scattered across a handful of city lots, was one of several urbanites at a recent Planning Commission meeting who balked at having to pay the new fees, just before the new ordinance was unanimously recommended to council for approval, with promises from Brown and Cimperman that the administration would be strongly urged to reduce the fees.



"I'm actually going to have to pay a \$100 fee?" she said to a neighbor about an estimated figure given for a building permit. "You might as well just keep it illegal."

Morgan Taggart of OSU Extension, which supports both large and small agricultural enterprises, helped Cimperman craft the legislation. She says, "This is one of those" - and she laughs here -

"wonderful opportunities for consensus so it doesn't put undue burden on the city to regulate or put an undue burden on residents who want to do this. It's tricky."

Cimperman began working with OSU Extension and other land-use groups nearly three years ago on a series of ordinances that, so far, has given hope to the modern engineers of the local food movement. In early 2007, Cimperman pushed through legislation creating an urban garden zoning district to protect community gardens from a whole host of development aims. At least one of the city's approximately 170 community plots - Kentucky Gardens at West 38th and Franklin - dates back to the Victory Gardens of World War II, which helped the area produce about 40 percent of its own food.

Opportunities to recapture some of that seem to abound.

"It's been hard to see the neighborhoods and all the houses closed down and boarded up," says Matt Russell at Case's Center for Health Resources. "But on the flip side, it's opened up opportunities for people to make lemonade out of lemons."

It's happening all over. For at least a decade, three Collinwood apartment buildings sat empty and boarded up along East 156th Street near Corsica. Last Friday, OSU Extension's Brad Melzer was taking soil samples for the plot's inclusion into the city's Summer Sprout program, which last year helped 4,000 gardeners tend about 200 community gardens. The yield: more than \$2 million in produce.

"It's really been exploding over the last few years," says Melzer. About 25 groups are on the waiting list.

Even though another boarded-up building, not unlike the three that were finally razed, stands catty-corner to his office, Brian Friedman believes that every step you take gets you closer. As executive director of Collinwood's Northeast Shores Development Corporation, he's had to undergo a not-so-subtle shift in his thinking in recent years.

"Before the mortgage meltdown, I'd have anticipated that these would be good sites to build new homes," he says. "But with this housing crisis and the continuing erosion of the population, to propose that would be ridiculous."

He doesn't see a problem with residents adding some barnyard characters to the mix either. He came to Collinwood from a CDC in South Lorain, a predominantly Hispanic area. "I used to joke that there were more roosters and chickens in South Lorain than people," he says. "So I've seen how they're not a nuisance at all."

Northeast Ohio was recently ranked by the American Farmland Trust as one of America's urban areas most depleted of farmland due to traditional patterns of land-use change. Cleveland produces only about 2 percent of what it consumes. The average distance our food travels is 1,300 miles, according to the Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Food Policy Coalition.

The sustainability movement counters this national trend from the ground up.

"We know that Cleveland is covered by food deserts," says Cimperman, referring to urban areas with anemic produce options, many without grocery stores at all. "You're three times more likely to have access to a Big Mac here than a banana."

Even the chickens and bees could help in this regard. Cleveland residents spent \$14.6 million on eggs and \$2.5 million on honey last year, says Taggart from the OSU Extension. "What if we had some enterprises that were able to get a sliver of that and we could keep more of our money here? We can use this as a tool for not only sustaining families and providing nourishing foods for our families, but as an opportunity to use all this vacant land that we have."

And really, no one seems to be complaining all that much about chickens and bees.

Matt Carroll, the city's director of public health, says he doesn't have a problem with making the licensing fees low and absorbing some new duties if it means helping urban farmers thrive. Of approximately 20,000 nuisance calls Carroll's department got last year, just three concerned chickens and none involved bees.

A week before Monday's council meeting, Cimperman said he had 10 of the 11 votes he needed for passage. He wanted to get the vote over with before the holidays. But it was postponed until next month.

Ward 11 Councilman Mike Polensek is one of the worriers, but, first and foremost, he wants the record to show that his backyard is full of garden delights: He's got fruit trees and long rows of ready soil. His teenage son is sick of delivering produce to the neighbors. And Polensek doesn't mind the bees one bit. He's squeamish about the chickens.

Polensek proposed waiting until January, or however long it takes, to create an ordinance with some teeth that will make mediating disputes tidier. Coops should be off the ground, he says, maybe not so close to the property lines, and "they can't just be put together with a bunch of shit, you know?" He also claims that building inspectors have raised the issue of whether neighbors who don't want to look at a "crappy chicken coop" have any rights in all this.



"With all the crap we're dealing with now," he adds, "I don't want to be dealing with chicken-shit calls. If we don't set down clear restrictions, I can assure you we are going to have a royal-ass mess on our hands. We're going to have people basically setting up Green Acres in their backyard. I'm not about to turn my neighborhood into a scene from Deliverance."

The intent of the urban-farming legislation, explains Cimperman, is to broaden the appeal of becoming more self-sufficient, healthy and productive. There's enough meat to begin the experiment now, he believes, and besides, a sunset clause would require council to revisit the law in a year.

He's ready to put this one down and put together his next piece of legislation: a law that would allow for more wide-ranging and acre-consuming urban farming, potentially even in residential areas wracked by foreclosures. The goal: patch as many wounds as possible. We're talking barnyards, vineyards. A plan to turn a "forgotten triangle" plot of land into a tree farm is already underway, says Cimperman, who's not alone in believing that such a shift could be a game changer. Cleveland finished 16th among the county's 50 largest cities in the most recent SustainLane green ranking, up from 28 last year, and many credit all this holistic-minded planning going on.

"What I'm absolutely inspired by is the degree to which the individual dots are being illuminated and tied together, not just with public policy but actual projects and the way we're advancing the food system as a way of dealing with the food deserts," says Paul Alsenas, a sustainability cheerleader and director of the Cuyahoga County Planning Commission. "Land use. Economic development. Green space. Quality of life. Community building. It's all tied to this wonderful new movement now."

And while Polensek may be worried about crappy coops and irresponsible newbie farmers, he's excited about where all this urban farming talk might lead.

"In some areas, where it's just streets and no factories or houses that are viable anymore, through our new housing construction program, we could build homes on these big lots, with lower tax rates, and zone them agriculture. Through city planning, let's design it. Home-arama. Let's create urban farms, where we can drop people back in who want a little piece of God's Green Acre."

Josh Klein has had his hands in the soil about eight years now. He likes the idea of building his family's meals from scratch for the purity of it, the self-reliance. The 34-year-old considers himself qualified now to help organize his own little quadrant of the revolution.

When the Akron native's not whipping up grub at Melt in Lakewood, he of the heavy-gauge earrings and sleepy eyes is engaging in a small-scale assault on the seemingly languorous progress in his current neighborhood off Franklin Avenue in the city's EcoVillage district.

In a nearby empty lot, stolen cars were stripped and abandoned. One was set ablaze. Then the house next to the lot burned down. So last year, he and his wife, along with friends at EcoVillage Produce and a group of herbalists calling themselves the Thymekeepers, started layering on new soil and compost like lasagna.

Now that the burned house is demolished, they're heading over there next. "If people can just dump at will around here," says Josh, "then people can garden at will too."

As four white chickens peck at weeds through broken icicles near their coop in his backyard, Josh describes the first four chickens he bought last year for \$4 each. Though he and his wife usually observe a vegetarian diet, he ended up using them for chicken stock. He went to a farm and learned how to slaughter them. These new four, he says, are for eggs.

He brags about the cinnamon sticks his wife spread along the walkways of their house. Great Lakes Brewery recently dropped off a huge mound of them and he's going to make scented mulch for the winding path that cuts through the center of the garden. Next year, he's also going to plant a freebie garden near the front gate to help satisfy the "two-legged deer" who sometimes pillage community plots.

The Ward 17 Farmers Market he helped to establish at West 65th and Clinton Avenue is finally starting to get some attention, so he's ready for the next step. He recently started meeting with a group of urban farmers to plan the development of much larger lots around the city. He estimates that at least 20 agrarian types on each side of the Cuyahoga have aims like his own: to turn more of the city back over to the country.

"If people are fleeing the city, that's fine," he says. "We don't need you. We're the central hub. We'll feed people from the city and the country, but the city first. We want to make a living but with an eye toward providing healthy food for people without the sticker shock you get, even at Whole Foods. Since Trader Joe's won't move into the city, we'll be the Trader Joe's. No problem."

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