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The Greening of Richmond

The efforts of Councilman Tom Butt could help urban farms change the city's hardscrabble image.

By Rebecca Rosen Lum

* Richmond City Councilman Tom Butt tends his own herd of goats and sheep.

Roses once grew in vibrant profusion in Richmond, the products of Japanese-American nurseries that thrived from the turn of the 20th century until World War II. Later, the remaining greenhouse growers were put out of business by the soaring costs of diesel fuel, and by NAFTA, which rewarded their competitors in Latin America. Weeds and wildflowers now blanket the abandoned greenhouses, and shards of glass litter the ground. But Richmond, long known for its hardscrabble image, may bloom once again thanks largely to the efforts of City Councilman Tom Butt.

The struggles that urban farms face in the East Bay have been well documented over the years, but Richmond's experience could prove to be different. Butt, an avid gardener, will soon host an urban farming summit, and his efforts to help urban farmers thrive have the backing of a majority of the Richmond City Council. It's also somewhat unusual for an elected official to take the lead in shepherding urban agriculture projects through the maze of local government. "In general, it's a group of citizens or one farmer" who presses for, and wins, the changes needed to help urban farmers survive, said Janelle Orsi, an Oakland lawyer who pilots the Sustainable Economies Law Center.

At home, Butt tends his own herd of three goats and two sheep, and keeps honeybees, and grows fruit and vegetables. The career architect describes it as "a large piece of property that's virtually useless because it's essentially vertical." His yard, nonetheless, is a can't-miss stop each year on the local Bringing Back the Natives garden tour.

After a visit to the seven-acre Sunnyside Organic Seedlings, which operates in several of the old Richmond greenhouses, Butt came back to his office and fired off a missive announcing the urban farming summit, a brainstorming session that would explore how small farming enterprises could thrive with better access to credit and capital, available land, and markets — plus more cooperation from regulatory agencies. Butt is inviting lawmakers, growers, and urban farming nonprofits to the summit, along with people in the food business, including chefs and restaurateurs.

After contacting Annie's Annuals, EcoVillage Farm, The Watershed Nursery, Urban Tilth, Richmond Library Seed Bank, Richmond Garden Club, and The Watershed Project, Butt concluded that they face common challenges. His agenda: Identify every urban agriculture operation in West Contra Costa County and create a list of contacts; find potential areas of collaboration among existing organizations that can strengthen the movement; identify regulatory constraints throughout the county that can be modified to benefit urban agriculture; and identify potential markets. "I wasn't raised on a farm, but you know something about fresh fruit and vegetables when you grow up in Arkansas," he said.

An affable man, Butt is plain-spoken and has won over voters with his tough political stances. For years, he was one of the few Richmond city leaders with the courage to stand up to Chevron while the oil giant dominated city politics. Butt also has a vision for Richmond, and was talking about smart growth, green energy, and sustainability years before they

became part of the modern lexicon. "It frustrates me to no end that most of the food we buy in this country is brought here from someplace else," he said. "Pick a vegetable — let's say broccoli. Guaranteed, somebody is growing broccoli within twenty miles of where you live, but when you go to the store, what you'll buy is broccoli that was grown 1,800 miles away. There's something wrong with this picture here."

People in the urban farming movement say not only is it unusual for an elected official to take the lead in advocating for growing policies, but that local legislators and staff often stymie plans to green urban areas and plow under lawns in favor of food-bearing plants. "A common wish of urban agriculture supporters is for local government officials to be less skeptical about their work," wrote Jerry Kaufman and Martin Bailkey in a working paper on land policy for the Lincoln Institute, a Massachusetts think tank.

Residents who wish to grow food face constraints as well. Orsi said local laws often require uniformity, especially in the front yards of residences. Green lawns and landscaping are believed to promote property values. The City of Berkeley fined a resident in 2009 for growing fruit and vegetables in his front yard, which violated zoning law, she said.

But urban farming proponents say Butt and Richmond enjoy an advantage. A majority of the council shares his vision, including retired cardiologist Jeff Ritterman, who sits on the board of Richmond Ecovillage, a five-acre teaching farm, and Jovanka Beckles, who put urban farming in her campaign platform. Mayor Gayle McLaughlin also is applauding the summit. The city, she said, can help provide matching funds, which attract private funders, and can write grants.

Butt also is making his push at a propitious time, growers say. The annual Scion Exchange by the California Rare Fruit Growers, held recently in El Sobrante, "was really swamped with people this year — lots of new people, lots of people from these various other groups, with a lot of cross-fertilization going on," said member Gail Morrison. "This frenzy of activity is new in the last year or two."

At Sunnyside Organic Seedlings, Pilar Reber sells young plants to large farmers' markets and retailers. She fills trays with her own soil recipe, seeds them using an electric seeder, then wraps stacked trays until they sprout. The company's profits increased by 14 percent last year and are likely to increase by as much again in the coming year. "People are always looking for an emerging market," Reber said. "Here it is."

But Reber was nearly a casualty of the bureaucratic resistance to urban farming. At one point, a local redevelopment official insisted that she obtain a use permit that required a costly consultation with an architect. But \$2,000 and one laid-off employee later, another county staffer told her the use permit was unnecessary. "The county really jerked me around," she said. "We want to make sure people going down this road don't have to deal with this. There are government constraints on this at every level."

Butt also is reaching beyond the city to county lawmakers to help farms in unincorporated areas — like North Richmond, where Sunnyside grows lettuce in an aquaponic garden. "We want to make sure in the county general plan, we support that purpose," said county Supervisor John Gioia, who will also participate in the summit. "This is an issue for the greater Richmond area."

Park Guthrie, former director of the nonprofit Urban Tilth, also cheers the idea of a summit that "will get everyone in the same room, talking." The challenges facing urban farmers are considerable, he said. "People don't have any idea how hard it is to make it profitable," he said. "With more space you can be more efficient. In urban areas, the biggest cost is land."

On a recent Sunday, volunteers joined staff from Urban Tilth for a workday in a flat, lush meadow, with volunteers preparing the soil for early spring crops: potatoes, mustard greens, spinach, carrots, beets, radishes, chard, arugula, lettuces, and fava beans for the nitrogen

they contribute to the soil. Surrounded by a terraced suburb, the property is owned by Adams School. Urban Tilth also has a teaching garden at Richmond High School that yielded 6,000 pounds of food in just one semester. Its other projects include a medicine garden, watershed, school gardens, and plots along the Richmond Greenway.

Butt said the first summit, scheduled for May, will look at what farmers have done to succeed, and then start crafting policy. Eventually, grocers in the Richmond flatlands could be required to carry produce along with chips and pork rinds, he said. "I dream of the day when there is no such thing as a vacant lot," he said. "You either have a building that's fulfilling some important function, or growing food for the community. What an asset."