

Richmond Confidential

North Richmond agriculture summit draws big crowd



Ladonna Redmond urged urban farmers to be politically active. "You can't just sit on your duff in your garden," she said.

By: [Robert Rogers](#) | June 6, 2011 – 8:00 am

Addressing a crowd of government and business leaders, urban agriculture aficionados, commercial growers and others with interests in the growing niche of locally-grown foods, LaDonna Redmond told listeners that she took a different route to urban agriculture.

"I didn't get into urban agriculture because I love trees," Redmond said, adding that 20 years ago she didn't know or care much about global warming or recycling either. "I came to urban agriculture because I had to feed my son."

[Redmond, who is based in Chicago](#), is the president and CEO of The Institute for Community Resource Development (ICRD), a non-profit that assists residents of urban communities in accessing fresh foods. She served as the keynote speaker for Saturday's West County Urban Agriculture Summit, a gathering organized by local city and county officials and held in a cavernous greenhouse operated by [Sunnyside Organic Seedlings](#).



County Supervisor John Gioia joined Councilman Tom Butt, Mayor Gayle McLaughlin, and other local leaders in promoting urban agriculture.

The summit's organizers and sponsors included Contra Costa County, the City of Richmond, Bay Area Rescue mission and a host of nonprofit groups and foundations.

The event was the first of its kind in West County, organizers said, and drew nearly 200 people to Sunnyside's greenhouse, tucked away near a dirt road in unincorporated North Richmond.

Heavy rains and soggy conditions didn't deter the attendees, who heard several speakers and panel discussions on topics including the benefits and challenges of urban agriculture, various models of sustainability, and discussions about what local governments can do to promote the growth of urban agriculture.

Nationwide, the growth of urban agriculture is strong, according to a report published early this year by the American Planning Association, which found that by the mid-20th Century cities across America no longer included farming as a recognized land use, effectively outlawing urban food production.

Today, as arable land per person continues to decline and soil on industrial farms suffers from declining yields, local and urban food production is enjoying a renewed emergence. Farmer's markets nationwide have more than doubled since the late 1990s, as have sales of locally grown foods, according to [U.S. Department of Agriculture statistics](#).

County Supervisor John Gioia, who joined Richmond City Councilmember Tom Butt in initiating the agriculture summit, told the crowd Saturday that municipal and county governments play a major role in enabling urban agriculture.



The audience was overwhelmingly supportive of the ideas in support of urban agriculture.

Gioia said city and county land use statutes have often thwarted productive use of soil rather than encouraged it, and he suggested that parts of North Richmond should be rezoned to allow additional farming.

Especially important, Gioia said, is for cities and counties to coordinate in their land use plans.

“By working together, we are more effective,” Gioia said.

Butt took a similar view, saying the goal of this and other urban agriculture meetings must be to “ensure cities and counties do all they can to encourage urban agriculture.”

During the panel discussions, speakers said many methods could be used to generate growth in urban agriculture.

Among the ideas were working to support robust community engagement by both government and nongovernment organizations, updating land use policies to support food production for personal consumption or sale at community farmers markets, and providing economic development support in providing financial and technical assistance to new farmers.

Perhaps most important, Redmond said, is to increase awareness about the many benefits of urban agriculture activities including the health, social, economic and environmental benefits. The process, she added, is already well underway.

“Twelve years ago, if I said I wanted to build an urban farm on a vacant lot in the hood, you would have looked at me like I had two heads,” Redmond told the crowd.

Richmond Mayor Gayle McLaughlin and Councilmember Jeff Ritterman were also on hand, even though the event was held outside the city.

City and county leaders have been particularly keen on working more closely together in the border area that divides the city and unincorporated county regions of North Richmond, a tight-knit but deeply impoverished and high crime community.

The city of Richmond has produced a working draft assessment of local urban agriculture progress and opportunities for improvement. The draft identifies more than 20 local groups engaged in some form of urban agriculture, including Urban Tilth and the city’s seed libraries.

The document concludes that land use ordinances in the city “generally don’t restrict agriculture,” but finds that access to funding and arable land remains a major hurdle for local agriculture.

But for all the challenges, McLaughlin, the only Green Party mayor in the country who governs a city of more than 100,000 residents, said Richmond is in the forefront of urban agriculture and environmentally-friendly policies.

“Richmond is greening itself all over,” McLaughlin said. Green policies, she said, “are putting Richmond on the map.”

Ritterman made an economic case for urban agriculture.

“We spend money on food, that’s a given,” Ritterman said. “If we can keep more of that money in Richmond, we can start to build an economy.”

[In North Richmond, where decades of economic malaise have left the community](#) with no grocery stores or restaurants and dotted with vacant lots, a nonprofit urban agriculture program called Communities United Restoring Mother Earth has converted two vacant lots into small farms in recent months, and is working on a third.

With the help of money from a county mitigation fund, [CURME](#) employs several local youths as urban farmers.

But progress in building farming capacity in a challenged community has not been without setbacks, sometimes tragic.

At one point, CURME’s director, Iyalode Kinney, began her remarks on urban agriculture by asking for a moment of silence to honor one employee, 21-year-old [Ervin Coley III, who was shot and killed in a drive-by in March](#) after a day of work in a local garden.

The crowd was overwhelmingly supportive of increasing urban farming, having mostly registered in advance to attend. But just a handful came from North Richmond, and most of those who did were working as parking attendants.

The meager representation of North Richmond residents troubled Kinney.

“The greatest success must come from getting the whole community involved,” Kinney said.

Attendees hailed the event as a great start toward building more leading Richmond to the forefront of urban agriculture.

“We in Richmond were behind the curve for a long time,” said Adrienne Harris, a longtime resident of the city of Richmond. But we are really progressing in a lot of areas, and that’s exciting. Let’s not make our way forward on urban agriculture at a snail’s pace.”