

Mill City Grows



FOUNDED: 2011

CURRENT ORGANIZATION BUDGET: \$200,000

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INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITY

Mill City Grows seeks an investment of \$800,000 over the next two years to expand urban food production space in Lowell to over 170,000 square feet, and to increase outreach and gardening education programs. This investment will enable Mill City Grows to provide 5,700 residents with access to fresh fruits and vegetables while producing over 50,000 pounds of food.

Mill City Grows (MCG) increases access to healthy and fresh food in Lowell, Massachusetts, by revitalizing vacant lots with urban food production. MCG develops community gardens and urban farms, supporting them with outreach, education, partnerships, and a social enterprise.

A former mill town, Lowell has endured several decades of economic challenges resulting in many blighted and vacant lots. With a poverty rate of 18 percent, many Lowell residents face barriers to leading a healthy life and are at increased risk of serious diet-related health issues, including obesity, diabetes, and high blood pressure. Many Lowell neighborhoods lack full-service grocery stores; 4 in 10 Lowell residents (43,000 people) say they cannot access fresh fruits or vegetables near their homes.

Through its work, MCG is transforming Lowell's food system one lot at a time, breaking the cycle of poverty and increasing health outcomes for Lowell residents.

TWO-YEAR GOALS

- Grow Mobile Market produce sales from \$9,000 to \$170,000
- Increase pounds of food grown from 12,000 pounds to 50,000 pounds
- Triple urban food production space from 51,000 to 170,000 square feet
- Increase the number of people who have access to fresh produce through community gardens and the Mobile Market from 500 to 5,700

WAYS TO INVEST

FINANCIAL

- \$30,000 funds farming of half an acre of land per growing season (yields 4 tons of food)
- \$20,000 funds the installation and organizing efforts for one community garden
- \$3,000 funds one Mobile Market location per growing season (1 stop/week for 20 weeks)

IN-KIND

- Farming equipment, including tractor, tiller, disc harrow, chisel plow, bed former, to support farm operations
- Legal services
- Accounting support
- Office and field technology, including hardware and software

Mill City Grows: From Vacant Lots to Vibrant Communities

Mill City Grows transforms vacant urban land into vibrant, healthy spaces by creating opportunities for urban food production and community engagement.



LEADERSHIP & GOVERNANCE

Francey Slater and Lydia Sisson are the co-founders and co-directors of Mill City Grows. Francey is a seasoned educator and gardener, and she is especially skilled at program development, cultivating volunteer participation, and establishing community partnerships. Lydia is an experienced commercial farmer and small business owner, with expertise in crop production, crew management, marketing, and business planning.

Mill City Grows is supported by a 14-member board of directors, led by Co-Chairs Jessica Wilson and Craig Thomas.

Urban Food Production

Mill City Grows develops two types of urban food production spaces: community gardens and urban farms. MCG has partnerships with the City of Lowell and private landowners to lease farm land for \$860 annually. Land for community gardens is leased at no cost: MCG works with city planners to identify and develop parcels into gardens.

Community Gardens

Mill City Grows has developed community gardens covering 45,555 square feet in five Lowell neighborhoods. Area residents rent 4 x 10 foot garden plots for the season, decide which crops to grow, and maintain the plots throughout the season. MCG staff provides support to gardeners through technical assistance and maintains the garden sites throughout the year.

Urban Farms

Mill City Grows staff operates its two urban farms with the support of community volunteers. The farms, which currently occupy a total of 5/8 of an acre, grow food for sale and donation and provide demonstration sites for MCG educational programs.

MCG sells produce from the urban farms via its “Mobile Market,” which creates new fresh food access points across the city. In 2013, the Mobile Market sold 4,000 pounds of food at six pilot locations. Additional produce is sold, wholesale, to area restaurants, and a portion of the produce is donated to emergency food providers. MCG directs all of the revenue generated from the urban farms back to its urban food production programs. Over the next five years, MCG expects revenue from the urban farms to increase from \$9,000 to \$170,000.





The City of Lowell sees the Mill City Grows model as an innovative approach to transforming vacant, non-buildable lots into community assets. We believe that their progressive community development initiatives are making a lasting impact on Lowell, and we are thrilled to partner with MCG through the City’s Community Garden Program in order to provide access to land, water, infrastructure, and insurance to make this work possible.

Diane Tradd
City of Lowell, Department of Planning & Development



KEY FUNDERS AND SUPPORTERS

- THE THEODORE EDSON PARKER FOUNDATION
- THE LENNY ZAKIM FUND
- PROJECT BREAD
- MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES
- GREATER LOWELL COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

Community Engagement

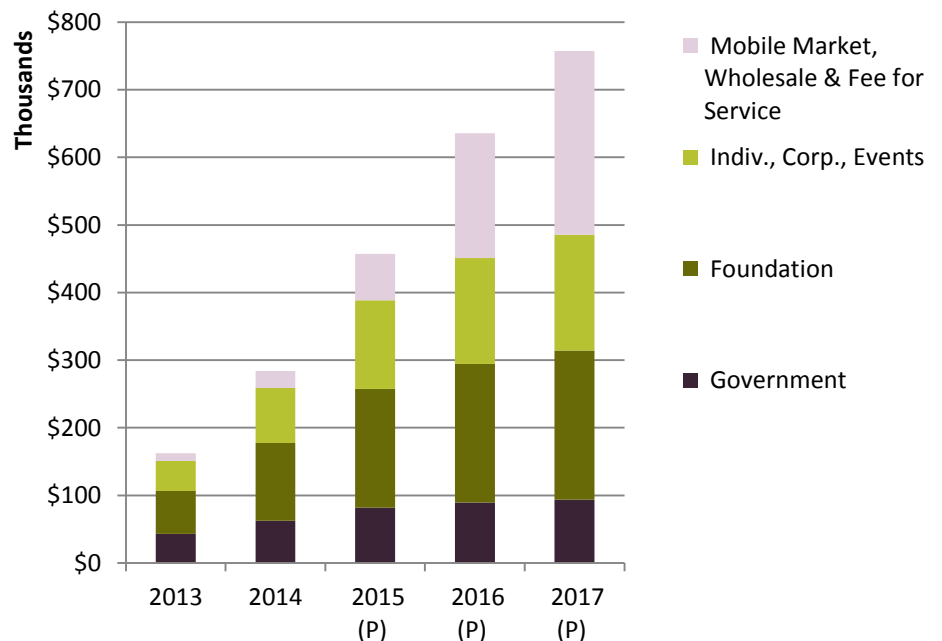
Mill City Grows uses grassroots organizing, education, and partnerships to engage deeply with individuals and organizations in the Lowell community.

- **Grassroots Organizing:** MCG initially engages community residents during the community garden site selection process. By going door to door and hosting community meetings, MCG enlists community support for the gardens even before they are established. This inclusive style of organizing promotes neighbor-to-neighbor communication and strengthens resident engagement in the gardens.
- **Practical Education:** In addition to providing technical assistance to gardeners, MCG offers comprehensive gardening, nutrition, and food education curriculum to community members, schools, and partner organizations. MCG also offers the *Garden Coordinator Institute*, an advanced gardener and leadership training, during the winter.
- **Partnerships:** MCG forges robust relationships with local government officials and institutions to ensure widespread support for its work. The City’s in-kind support of the community garden program is an example of this partnership at work. MCG also works with other organizations, such as UTEC, to process herbs for sale through the Mobile Market, and with the WIC program to provide classes on cooking with fresh produce.

Financial Sustainability

Over the next several years, as MCG rapidly scales and increases its farmed acreage, revenue from the Mobile Market and wholesale accounts will increase significantly. MCG’s earned revenue stream will provide stability, as MCG will be less dependent on grants and donations.

Revenue by Source



SUCCESS STORY: KRISHNA

Krishna and her family moved from Bhutan into an apartment building in the Back Central neighborhood of Lowell six years ago. Like many of her neighbors, Krishna has the knowledge and skills to grow her own food, but had no place to do so until she saw a flyer about Mill City Grows' Rotary Community Garden. In 2012, Krishna and her family joined Mill City Grows' first community garden and have continued to reap the benefits of growing safe, healthy food in their own neighborhood.

Krishna's children love the garden and they come every day to water their bed. Krishna uses traditional growing practices that she brought from Bhutan and teaches her children these traditional practices, growing well over 100 pounds of produce each summer for her family.

In addition to sharing her knowledge and experience with fellow gardeners, Krishna attends many Mill City Grows workshops and Mobile Markets, learning more about nutrition and safe urban gardening.



Program Performance and Organizational Health

Below is a summary of the key measures that Mill City Grows uses and will continue to use to demonstrate progress, capture lessons learned, and make course corrections as needed.

	2014 (P)	2015 (P)	2016 (P)
PROGRAM PERFORMANCE			
Pounds of food grown	20,000	31,000	50,000
Number of community gardens	3	4	5
Acres of farmland	5/8	1 1/8	2 1/8
Number of people with access to fresh produce through community gardens and Mobile Market	3,450	4,575	5,705
<i>Number of community gardeners</i>	425	550	680
<i>Number of Mobile Market customers</i>	3,025	4,025	5,025
Number of weekly Mobile Market sites	6	10	10
ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH/CAPACITY-BUILDING			
Staff growth:			
Administrative/development	1.75 FTE	2.5 FTE	3 FTE
Farm	1.25 FTE	2 FTE	2 FTE
Community garden & education	1.5 FTE	2 FTE	2 FTE
Seasonal	2.5	5	6
Total revenue	\$280,000	\$460,000	\$635,000
% earned income	10%	16%	30%

Social Impact

In just two years, Mill City Grows' urban food production has improved the health of the community, and it has also strengthened residents' connections to each other in a powerful way. MCG gardeners have reported increased health benefits from gardening, including reduced blood pressure and cholesterol. The gardens and farms have transformed formerly blighted urban land, turning negative spaces into productive and beautiful community resources. MCG will continue to gather data and build capacity to evaluate its impact on the following measures:

INDICATOR		
Improved health	% of community gardeners who eat more produce	DATA AVAILABLE IN 2014
	% of community gardeners who are more physically active	
Engaged residents	% of community gardeners who have increased their relationships within the community	
Transformation of the environment	Total urban food production space (square feet)	51,000
Increased economic opportunity	Amount of money saved per family per season from growing food in the community garden	\$250