

# UP FRONT



## NEIGHBORHOOD STORIES

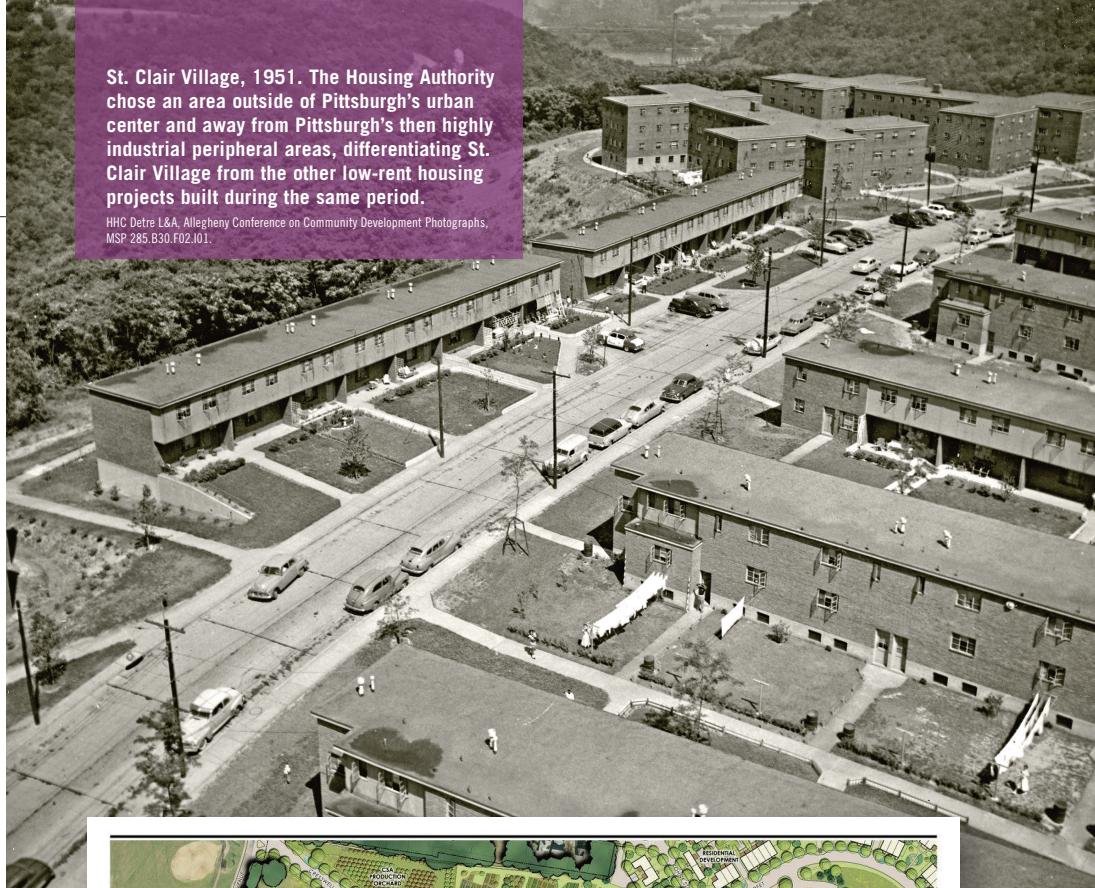
By Bette McDevitt

### Hilltop Urban Farm

A large farm being created in the midst of a city does make one turn their head, as does Hilltop Urban Farm, at 107 acres, in the south Pittsburgh neighborhood of St. Clair. It is the largest urban farm in the country, training young people to become farmers and quadrupling food production in the City of Pittsburgh.

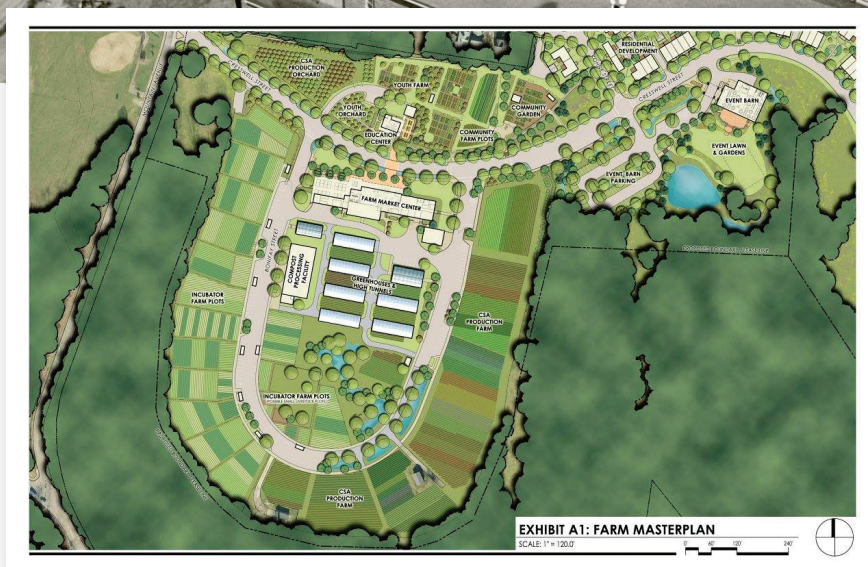
St. Clair, on a hilltop above the South Side, was at one time made up of small farms. After World War II, facing a need for more housing, the Housing Authority of the City of Pittsburgh created a large housing development, St. Clair Village, containing 70 buildings housing over 1,000 people.

Residents were glad to have an affordable place to live, with a large multi-purpose community center, a basketball court, and a playground providing year-round activities. There was a hair salon, grocery store, dry cleaners, clothing store, and bakery. Ron Scott grew up in the Village, along with two siblings. "I was there in my formative years," Ron said. "My uncle owned a grocery store and Bell's Lounge, both within the Village. That's where I got my entrepreneurial spirit." Ron owns a cleaning supply business in the city, and his son Marty is director of sales. "I learned a lot of valuable of lessons as I was coming of age there. It made me what I am today and I'm okay with that, yes I am."



St. Clair Village, 1951. The Housing Authority chose an area outside of Pittsburgh's urban center and away from Pittsburgh's then highly industrial peripheral areas, differentiating St. Clair Village from the other low-rent housing projects built during the same period.

HHC Detre L&A, Allegheny Conference on Community Development Photographs, MSP 285.830.F02.J01.



Tom Smith, a board member of the Hilltop Alliance, lived with his parents and siblings in the Village in the 1960s. The site of his childhood home is now part of a fruit tree orchard. "There was a real sense of community there," he said. "My parents had no reason to be concerned for our safety." From kindergarten on, Tom and his sister walked to the school across the road from the development.

When the mills closed, hard times came down especially hard on people who had few resources to fall back on, and the community

found itself plagued with violence. In the 1990s, the Housing Authority began demolishing the buildings, and by 2009 the land was bare. It would be easy to slip into a metaphor about the phoenix rising out of the ashes, but that would be inaccurate; those who work on the Hilltop Urban Farm project approach it with respect for the land and those who lived there. The pathways and sidewalks that existed in the Village were incorporated into the design of the farm area. The existing infrastructure, though in need of repair, was seen as an advantage,



as was the access to water and electricity. Soil testing indicated there were no contaminants, but lots of big rocks and hunks of concrete.

Much of the acreage is hillside, and some is set aside for other green projects, but 23 acres will be farmed which is enough to have a real impact. This farm is a project of the Hilltop Alliance, a non-profit community organization, composed of 11 city neighborhoods and Mt. Oliver Borough.

More than 100 residents of the hilltop, especially those from St. Clair and Mt. Oliver, were involved in a community planning process around the reuse of the vacant land in 2013 and '14. Along with the Hilltop Alliance and partner organizations, they agreed that creating an active green space and having

access to healthy food was their priority. A survey had determined that nine of the hilltop communities were classified as "Food Deserts," a term indicating a lack of grocery stores, farmers' markets, and healthy food providers. The other two communities were classified as "Food Gaps," having access to only one grocery store.

With funding from local and national foundations, the transformation began in 2016 and Sarah Baxendell joined the staff as Director of Green Space Projects at that time. It might have been her destiny. Sarah's grandfather's home was five houses away from the gate of the farm, on Mountain Avenue, and she is the seventh generation to have lived or worked on the Hill.

"We're growing organic food here," Sarah said, "and we're growing farmers, short ones at the kids' farm, tall ones in the farmer incubation program. This summer, we constructed the kids' farm. This winter, we plan to hire a youth farm program manager. In the spring, we plan to start the youth program where they'll learn about growing and eating healthy food." The school across the road, Arlington PreK-8, and the nearby church, Lighthouse

**LEFT: Sarah Ashley Baxendell, Director of Green Space Projects.**

Photo courtesy of Urban Hilltop Farm.



**Fruit trees being planted at Urban Hilltop Farm.**

Photo courtesy of Urban Hilltop Farm.

Cathedral, are already interested in being partners in the youth programs at the Hilltop Urban Farm.

"Then, in the summer of 2019, if we raise enough money, we'll build out the structure for the farmer training program, and in the fall, we'll open the application process for that program. The program, operating over the winter, will offer classes in business and farming, and in the spring of 2020, they will put their crops in the ground." People who reside in the adjacent communities will have priority in securing a spot among the applicants.

The average age of a farmer in Allegheny County, Sarah reminds me, is 67. "We're growing the next generation of farmers, and it comes down to having farmers who know how to grow food and run a financially sustainable business. These young farmers will be able to move on and acquire or lease farmland throughout the county."

When the crops are ready, expected in summer of 2020, the next move will be getting the food to where it is needed. "We'll have an on-site farmers' market and a mobile market to serve our 11 communities and beyond." The goal is that 100% of the food grown will stay in the Pittsburgh metro area, widely defined, extending throughout the county. The new farmers will sell their produce through these channels, and may also sell to local restaurants. The farmers' market will accept subsidized vouchers.

Aaron Sukenik, Executive Director of the Hilltop Alliance, has been involved with the farm every step of the way. "What is so remarkable is how excited the community members are. Everyone likes it. As a means to help reinvent the community, this is fun!" 🌟

The Hilltop Urban Farm has monthly tours in the spring, summer, and fall and they welcome volunteers. Learn more about the project at [www.hilltopurbanfarm.org/](http://www.hilltopurbanfarm.org/) or call 412-586-5807.

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