

## Urban Ag Zoning Change Debate

By [Lindsay Banks](#)

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*Editor's Note: Does the future of Chicago include urban agriculture. Is urban agriculture integral to our local food system. Many believe that urban agriculture is the future and it does matter to a thriving local food system. Can Chicago support and encourage urban agriculture. Proposed changes in how Chicago zones for agriculture activities (as well as for community gardens) has caused a bit of consternation. Beetnik Lindsay Banks, who is paid to look at the future of Chicago, looks at the latest developments. She finds it, perhaps not as bad as feared. You can read her earlier exploration of zoning for urban agriculture [here](#). (Also, while Lindsay is paid to look at the future of Chicagoland, the opinions rendered by her below are her thoughts alone and not those of her agency.)*

Listening to various groups talk about the urban agriculture zoning changes can undoubtedly lead to confusion. The overall consensus in regards to Mayor Daley's proposed zoning amendment seems to be that the recognition of urban agriculture as a legitimate land use in the City of Chicago is a great **step forward**. All underlined text found in the [Zoning Amendment](#) for Section 17-2-0207 of the City's Zoning Ordinance represents the changes that the City has proposed.

For example, in the Public and Civic section, "Community Garden" is now a permitted use in residential zoning districts.

PUBLIC AND CIVIC		Zoning Districts						
		RS	RS	RS	RT	RT	RM	RM
H. Parks and Recreation (except as more specifically regulated)		P	P	P	P	P	P	P
1	<u>Community Centers, Recreation Buildings and Similar Assembly Use</u>	S	S	S	S	S	S	S
2	<u>Community Garden</u>	P	P	P	P	P	P	P

Although community gardens exist throughout the city and are allowed, the current zoning code does not officially recognize them as a land use; this amendment would change that. The legislation was introduced by Daley this past December and represents the arduous work that has been underway for the last several years in Chicago, in coordination with the [Chicago Food Policy Advisory Council](#), [Advocates for Urban Agriculture](#), and other community groups and local farmers.

Now that the legislation has been finalized, with compromises made on both sides of the debate, there are **some folks** who feel that the City did not go far enough. The main concerns – **excellently documented in the [Urban Food Policy blog](#)** – are size limits, prohibition of sales of goods on-site, agriculture as a temporary use, and rooftop agriculture. The City's defense primarily rests on protecting the rights of all citizens – many of whom may not want a large farm in their quiet, residential neighborhood. I personally think that urban farms represent an improvement upon vacant lots, but I do not speak for all of Chicago. The City also felt the need to limit size so as to prevent giant industrial agricultural farms from setting up shop, and to reflect the size of the majority of existing farms. The size limits do seem small – especially when you look at some established farms in the City of Chicago who exceed the size limits. Those farms, however, were established with a variance, and future farms could probably do the same.

There is also concern over the wording that compost operations may not accept waste from off-site locations, and may not distribute compost soil off-site. This is not a change to the current legislation; this reflects the City's existing [Composting Ordinance](#), passed in June of 2007. This is an ordinance that I would have liked to see amended with this new legislation. Composting is a simple, cost-effective way to eliminate waste that would otherwise go to a landfill where the city must spend money to bury it and deal with the climate-change-inducing methane gas that results when organic materials break down in an anaerobic state. [According to the US EPA](#), our nation spends about \$1 billion dollars disposing of food waste every year.

There are many exciting, innovative ways to compost organic waste – and the City should encourage organizations to do more composting and even experiment with different techniques – (like [Bokashi!](#)) as long as they don't create a nuisance. Some urban farming operations rely on composting to reduce costs for sourcing organic, healthy soil – and they currently collect restaurant food scraps, which requires an expensive permit. Under Municipal Code (Section 11-4-2540), the permit required for composting is essentially the same as a full-scale Class II recycling facility, only more expensive – \$3,000, good for 3 years.

Overall, this legislation a step in the right direction but I hope to see further changes in the future, similar to [San Francisco's "neighborhood agriculture" proposal](#), and improved regulations for composting organic waste.

*Promoting sustainable local food systems is one of the 12 recommendations outlined in the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAA)'s [GO TO 2040 plan](#).*

- [http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/letters/chi-110112rhodes\\_briefs.0,1981349.story](http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/letters/chi-110112rhodes_briefs.0,1981349.story)
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- <http://www.urbanfoodpolicy.com/2011/01/chicagos-urban-agriculture-zoning.html>
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