

A ‘New Lou’ – Workshop Summary

Renewing neighborhoods through food system transformation

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The destruction that came to STL North City in the May 16 tornado has many of us thinking: Now what? On November 14, a diverse group of community members gathered to brainstorm actionable ideas for beginning to bring restoration and renewal to not only these ravaged areas but all of St. Louis – collectively envisioning what might be possible through food system transformation based on neighborhood-scale urban ag.

As I noted in a [June 3 blog](#) and in the recent [White House report on children’s health](#), the US food system is in desperate need of transformation. This is especially true in urban centers like STL North City, where the mostly African American community is plagued by a host of public health concerns, many of which are linked to the poor diets that result from a lack of access to wholesome foods like fresh fruits and vegetables (see [reports](#) from Dr. Jason Purnell, then at Wash U).

But this is exactly where urban ag can be leveraged to radically improve outcomes – by improving diets and creating a wide range of economic opportunities, including farm to fork restaurants and shops that sell value-added food products based on locally-sourced produce. Such success stories are playing out in Detroit and several other cities (e.g., New York, Chicago, Portland, DC, etc.).

In addition to the benefits of improved diet and enhanced economic opportunities, urban ag has other positive qualities. As I explained here in a recent [blog](#), actively transpiring crops provide significant cooling to our cities. Locally-produced foods also confer food system resilience to shocks, as explained in a recent [detailed report from the UK](#), which highlights such benefits in the face of wartime or other types of economic shocks.

Given my personal passion to begin seeing such benefits play out here in St. Louis, in July 2025 I began reaching out to a number of folks across the region: at Wash U, at Stark Bro’s Nursery, at Seed St. Louis, etc. Based on a list provided by [Known & Grown](#), I spoke with several urban ag farmers here in St. Louis. I also visited the [Columbia Center for Urban Agriculture](#), over in Columbia MO. During these discussions, I received unanimously positive feedback about the idea of hosting a half-day workshop to brainstorm possibilities.

The workshop was eventually held on Friday afternoon, November 14, in the Ameren Community Room at Delmar DivIne. Based on a suggestion from the folks at Food City, the workshop was facilitated by Leah Lee Pulliam (of [Growing Food Growing People](#)). As a guest speaker, I invited Phil Jones (founder of the [Detroit Food Policy Council](#)) to join us, to help us understand the Detroit urban ag experience. We had 24 workshop participants, including six STL-based urban ag farmers.

The workshop began with introductions and comments from Phil Jones. We then went round the table to let everyone introduce themselves and speak about their current activities with respect to the needed food system transformation. After a short break, we reconvened into three breakout groups that responded to three prompts: (1) What’s working well now? (2) What are the gaps/barriers? (3) What might be possible?

All three breakout groups rotated at 10 minute intervals to brainstorm on each prompt. Afterwards, all participants were given a sheet of ‘Post-It Voting Dots’ – to indicate which ideas they felt

showed the most promise. A total of 65 ideas were recorded during the breakouts. The 23 of these that received at least 4 votes are listed below in Table 1.

Next Steps: Based on the feedback listed in Table 1 and highlighted by several participants during the closing comments section of the workshop, there is considerable enthusiasm for regathering and further prioritizing the most popular of the ideas. Such a regathering is tentatively planned for January 2026, most likely in the same location. Please stay tuned and reach out to me (dgustafson@foodsystems.org) if you’d like to be added to our mail-list, which currently includes around 70 individuals.

Table 1. Most Popular Ideas Surfaced at the Workshop

Votes	Idea
19	Form a committee to prioritize next steps (develop a workable governance structure)
9	Healthier community where all can participate - logistics, pollinator gardens, community kitchens
9	Food Co-op in the city and county
8	Overcome racism/fear that prevents white folk from coming to N. City to help manage orchards, etc. HOWEVER, avoid the obnoxiousness/arrogance of the ‘know-it-all’ White Savior telling folk how things ought to be done
8	Need to find a way to more effectively collaborate (eliminate ego as a barrier to collaboration)
8	Establish alternative (esp. non-governmental) funding sources
8	Research ‘Black Farmer’s Land Trust’ idea
7	STL is good at rapid response, but needs to become far more strategic (long-term thinking)
7	Food System Library
7	Food System Equity = making everyone feel included in the food system
7	Pop-up food distribution
6	Feed on community buy-in (willingness to do work) - contagious energy
6	Smaller supply chain: infrastructure that feeds (\$, resources back into community)
5	Resources, vendors, system maps
5	Ancestral wisdom & connection to land & community is HERE
5	Policy: too much red tape to land support for Urban Ag
5	Educate ourselves on land development plans
4	Engage youth to help (e.g., knock on doors, etc.)
4	We must be sustainable: Create safe community space
4	Feed the blocks, neighborhoods, OURSELVES (cultivate sovereignty)
4	Identify & research funders, where \$ is coming from & what is their agenda