Context

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the City of Pittsburgh lost roughly half its population to suburbanization, shrinking household size, and out-migration following the decline of local industries. Today, this drop in population is visible in the over 28,000 vacant lots in the city, including parcels where homes and buildings were demolished, wooded hillsides, blighted side lots, and informal parking areas. These vacant lots compromise quality of life for residents, reduce property values and weaken the City’s tax base. The Open Space Plan, adopted in 2013, determined the annual cost of maintaining the roughly 7,300 city-owned vacant lots to be nearly USD 4 million. These areas, however, have a high potential in terms of urban gardening, and also in relation to the updated zoning code, which replaced the onerous previous regulations and created an enabling environment for food production within the city.

Overview of the food practice

In July of 2015 Pittsburgh City Council enacted a series of amendments updating the zoning code in the interest of improving and increasing agriculture within the City. Under the previous process, only 13 people had applied for and obtained the permit. At present, homeowners and renters can get a permit in a single visit by submitting an application with a scaled site plan and paying an occupancy fee of only USD 70. The program is off to a very promising start, and within the first two months, the City had as many applicants as in the previous four years combined. The update established urban agriculture as “permitted by right,” rather than by special exception, as was the case in the previous zoning code. The scope was also expanded to make agriculture “permitted by right” in as many zoning districts as practical, involving all city residents. The specific terms regulating what is permitted have been designed to ensure residents’ rights to produce what is necessary to sustain themselves. Moreover, specific regulations now allow a variety of small to large scale agricultural uses, ranging from a commercial farm to a chicken coop in a backyard.

Within the legal framework provided by this new set of regulations, in 2015 the City of Pittsburgh launched the Adopt-A-Lot Program, which permits temporary licensing or leasing of vacant lots to allow individuals and groups to participate in gardening activities. These activities provide the opportunity for residents to improve the condition of lots through regular maintenance, and the creation of food, flower, and/or rain gardens. The aim of this program is to reduce the financial burden of vacant lots, while adding value to communities, increasing food security and encouraging environmental stewardship among the population. In early 2016, the Adopt-A-Lot program generated nearly 100 inquiries, leading to the adoption of 35 lots totaling more than five acres. As of April 2018, the city counts 114 adopted lots, covering 10 acres. One project has already outgrown the Adopt-A-Lot program and is now a designated City greenway.

Results and lessons learned

The new zoning code was the result of a collaboration between the City of Pittsburgh Planning and Zoning Departments, private actors, advocacy groups and the Pittsburgh Food Policy Council. This inclusive approach led to a successful implementation of the legislation, establishing urban agriculture as an essential right of city residents and giving them the opportunity to legally access land owned by the City. This generated several benefits, including those related to the Adopt-A-Lot Programme. In fact, these lots serve an important function in the local food system, as they provide residents with the opportunity to produce quality fruits and vegetables to share with their community, which in turn encourages sustainable diets and nutrition. Social and economic equity are embraced by providing opportunities for any city resident to access vacant land for edible, flower, or rain garden projects. These projects inspire neighbors and communities to come together as stewards of vacant land through planning, design, funding, construction, and maintenance. Additionally, much of the city’s vacant land is concentrated in underserved neighborhoods, many of which have higher concentrations of low-income residents and low food access. The Adopt-A-Lot program provides new opportunities for residents of these communities to invest in their land, create green spaces and produce their own food. This encourages and empowers residents to develop a more inclusive food system, thanks to an innovative and comprehensive policy for urban agriculture responding to the needs of the local population.