

## Session 1: Dialogue 4 - Strategies for Commercial Success for City Farms

Question: For Jen, the work you're doing in the conversion of the hot dog factory, what kind of processing is that?

Answer (Jen) : Three components to the project: commercial kitchen – crop circle kitchen. Frozen cold storage, steamers, etc. Part 2 is food trucks, they get a specific space. The staff in the kitchen will be doing value add processing. Third piece is people who have businesses and need additional space, hot sauce, sushi, etc. Opening in the middle of April. \$15 million project. Will create 150 jobs, support 50 businesses. Amazing thing for bringing infrastructure to the city.

Jamie: City growers sells tomatoes to Jane's fresh jams, this gives her more processing space.

Question: Quick follow up, what resources did you use to get the funding?

Answer (Jen): 14 sources, grant, fed health and human services money, healthy food financing money, etc.

Question: I'm curious in the different customer options for someone who is interested in producing food in the city. A restaurant is one, a farmers market is one. Can anyone talk about those and if there are others.

Answer (Jamie): There are 3 ways to sell: Restaurants (direct sales), farmers markets, and CSAs. At city growers we've focused on the retail angle, good relationship with chefs – good exposure for us. Chefs have a consistent ordering pattern. We are almost at the scale where we can custom grow for customers. Makes the chef look great and helps us to guarantee a sale.

Answer (Shani): We have those three types of customers and we started doing wholesale. We had for a long time a market farm time and CSA. Most of our customers our in our neighborhood and another neighborhood nearby. Then we have our CSA customers who are much more far flung – 5 or 6 sites where we drop boxes. JP, Roxbury, Cambridge, Somerville. Those folks are a higher income level than the folks who buy at our markets. We have a low cost share as well for low income people. Then we have lots of other people are paying full price and are more middle income. The wholesale piece has not been a big money maker, but it's a good opportunity to be in City Feed and get our name out there. City Feed might buy six bunches of beets and six bunches of carrots just to get our name out there.

Answer (Jen): Very risky model, restaurants are a more reliable customer. As a farmer you have to wear many hats, you need to use the entrepreneurial mindset to find ways to bring resources in. Every year as the season starts again you have evaluate your model from last year and figure out how to shift.

Answer (Ibrahim) : You have to figure out a price point that people are willing to pay that allows us to make some money but is still affordable. For us, it's also important to be educational on why it's important to spend a little more on these things.

Edith: There are three things that every farmer needs: land, water, and money (resources). In the city that's not an easy collection of things to come up with. Boston doesn't have a whole lot of vacant land that is not under some purpose. There is definitely vacant and underutilized land, how do we engage with the city to help make parcels available. What do they look like? When you look at a parcel what needs to be done to it, how do you make it farmable? That's before water, seeds, hoop houses, composting. It's not an inexpensive venture. I want to make sure people recognize that. The city is at the table and is looking at lots of vacant lots that they can make available. The other thing I want to throw out there is rooftop farming, that can be an interesting model in how to make urban farming efficient.

Jamie: We are for-profit, which is a little different. Restaurants have always been our strength. From there your connections and market can grow. Word spreads through the restaurant industry. Chefs are always moving around, but they remember where they buy their food. Now we're looking for secondary markets. August is rough with restaurant week and people leaving the city in general.

Question: I'm coming from a non-profit org in Worcester, we host farmers markets and education. We're largely grant supported but we're trying our best to do value add services, but we're at an irrational lens. If we're looking to make money, we wouldn't have put our organization where we did in Worcester, or our specific neighborhood. Every grant we get has an expectation for us that at the end of three years we should be self-sustainable. Is anyone making it that way?

Shani: No. They're not. We're operating in a society that's operating in inequity. We're committed to urban farming, and eliminating racism, but I'm not opposed at all to, if we have enough produce, to sell at Copley square which has the highest price point, to make some money, as opposed to the low cost markets we usually prioritize. You have to do what you can to make yourself more sustainable. We're trying to be really creative to figure out how we can get our food in the community without giving it away, throwing it away, or selling it at way below what it costs to grow it.

Jen: By definition as a non-profit it costs more to do what you do than it would for a for-profit. It's going to be almost impossible to get a break even farm that's a non-profit. You have to tell a good story and someone wants to fund you. Everyone has a good idea, it's how you tell your story. It's a fallacy from the funder side that you're going to be self sustaining.

Jamie: You look at rural farming, and there are very few farms that aren't doing some sort of value add. Very few are ag only. As people realize that food is a necessity people will be willing to pay for it.

Question: I'm wondering if there has been any process to move beyond the CSA model but to invest in a share for a discount. An investment in the infrastructure of the farm. What's going to engage communities where people need them to make sure they exist in 50 years?

Ibrahim: There is a space for that. Whether that's going to be in Springfield where this isn't a priority as much at the moment, I don't know.

Edith: I'm going to take the creative approach to my answer, which is we've seen a number of kickstarted campaigns that have been about providing infrastructure. When I look the fresh truck or fresh food generation, these are young entrepreneurs, a lot of their capital is kickstarter. There is a willingness to invest. It's a great question, it needs to reverberate out in multiple ways.

Question: Ibrahim, when you make an agreement to lease a land, how long are they? It's hard to make an investment if you are only going to be there for a year.

Ibrahim: It's a year to year sort of thing. We talk to the guy twice a year. The city gave us another piece of land. We are trying to buy some land that was just made available to the city.

Edith: The city of Boston is now in the process of engaging in this conversation of selling these parcels of land. Each parcels is between 3 and 7000 square feet, and they're grouped together. We've sent out an RFP for three larger parcels. The city is selling it for \$100 a parcel with the caveat that it has to stay as a

farming endeavor. It's been an on going conversation in Boston. Constituents come and shake the rafters at city hall. If it's not Boston, go to city hall in your city and engage people.

Jen: One conversation I know happening in Lawrence. What if we go to these private owners and get you a tax abatement for x number of years?

Jamie: Tying the two conversations together, rarely do we own our lands. Where in rural lands you have collateral with which you can get loans. In urban farming you have to be more creative to stay afloat. We don't have the same resources, loans, etc.

Questions: For people looking to get into urban farming, can you provide a narrative of what to do?

Edith: I would start with a place like Tufts where you can learn what it takes to become a farmer. I would talk with the people at the department of neighborhood development. The city is going to have a great website that is going to show where you are able to do farming in the city. Engage with D&D, the trust for public lands, the Dudley neighborhood initiative – all these places that are working to make land available in one way or another. If you know that a parcel is vacant and it's something that you know the community doesn't have any other plans for, you can engage the city and then go there. If you don't have land or have access to land, then that's the part where it becomes more difficult. The city really wants to make making the farm, the permitting process of it, as easy as possible. That should not be where people get hiccupped. We are creating a real process and a way to just walk through it that is very focused on empowering the farmer.

Shani: If you're transitioning from some other career, do as much as you can outside of your day job to get experience and get to know people. Get experience doing also community on the ground organizing that compliments the actual agricultural piece. Build skills and relationships. The network of people that are interested in this sort of work is really pretty small.

Jen: Go talk to people. It's easy to make mistakes and lots of us have already made those mistakes – so go make new ones.

Question: I was at a conference in Denver and there was a day long symposium on food system planning. The Denver housing authority is trying to get urban agriculture across the city including a public kitchen and place for anyone to farm on and a market where they can sell their own food. They are trying to think of ways of how they can get urban farming at public housing facilities. What are your thoughts on that?

Ibrahim: I think that's great. They should do that here.

Edith: The department of neighborhood development and the BRA have been very active in this conversation. The Boston Public housing has occasionally come to the table but not in the same way. Individual sites have come to us and said they want to do X and we've helped them, but that's unusual. Bringing BHA to the table would be great, sounds like a plan.

Ibrahim: Since Boston is surrounded by towns with large farms I don't think they see it as much of a priority.

Question: A program that starts a garden at a school in the spring and then a housing program watches it in the summer and then gives it back to the school in the fall could work.

Ibrahim: One problem in Springfield is that they can't use the food they grow in the cafeteria. You can take it home or eat it in the classroom, but they can't use it at lunch.

Question: I'm wondering if you have any thoughts on the Boston public market and if that's going to be a viable opportunity for small local growers?

Operations Manager: There will be three different levels of opportunity. There will be opportunities on the outdoor plaza for a farmers market, good for smaller farmers. We're starting that market up this Spring 2014.

Question: I had a question about the website that you mentioned. Would it also include possible brownfield sites?

Edith: I wouldn't necessarily say that brown sites are easy sites to farm. We're working through legal issues such as freight containers being able to be used as containers on brown fields.

Jen: When you work in the city, everything is essentially brown fields. If you're going to grow and then sell there are going to be rules. That's just part of the story. There's a lot of work happening as to what is available and what we can do with it. The city is doing great, a lot of work. If you're looking to do something soon though, this isn't the way. It's going to be a long process.

Question: I'm trying to work out a model of economic viability of raised beds. I feel like the land part of the farming experience should be used treating the soil and not just bringing in raised beds.

Jamie: Most of the soil in the city is not that good. At city growers, that's what we have to do.

Edith: One thing I would caution you on is, certainly you could go out and purchase a parcel in the city and test it – then you're liable. You have to remediate that soil, and that could be hundreds of thousands of dollars. If you're going to grow food in soil in Boston and sell it, you have to test it.

Question: Testing, even these standards, we lack a consensus on what standards are acceptable in terms of growing.

Ibrahim: There are two worlds of agriculture, rural and urban. We don't look at the food, we look at the soil. In terms of city growing, it's more important to look at the nutritional value and what you can grow. We are working with NOFA to look at ways to improve the soil. The soil is the most important thing.

Question: Boston is not the only city that's doing this, there are lots of cities. What are some of the reasons that cities want do this?

Edith: We want vibrant, healthy city neighborhoods. People connect around it, they build jobs around it. Hopefully, we can help them engage in a really healthy manner around it and food becomes a healthy part of their lives. Hopefully they can build agency around it and connect with food in a healthy way.

Shani: People have been doing it anyway for years. The city wants to be engaged in it and have a way to monitor it so they're not liable for it and people growing in poisoned soil.