

From an abandoned Richmond lot, a dream of bounty and health

By Karina Ioffee

kioffee@bayareanewsgroup.com

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RICHMOND -- Sixty years ago, the land around North Richmond flourished, with greenhouses that grew roses and carnations and abundant lettuce and cabbage fields that earned the area the moniker of "The Cabbage Patch."

Today, most have been replaced by mechanic shops, scrap metal yards and weed-covered lots. But an effort to build an urban farm here -- complete with a year-round produce stand, amphitheater, bike repair cooperative and coffee shop with Wi-Fi -- aims to recapture the area's agricultural roots and serve as both an educational resource and a gathering space for the community.

"Many kids in Richmond have a complete disconnect from the natural world: They don't know what broccoli looks like or how photosynthesis works," said Doria Robinson, the executive director of Urban Tilth, the organization spearheading the project with the help of county and private funds. "They think food comes from a bag, bought in Safeway."

The organizers, who expect to break ground next summer, have the highest of hopes. They say the farm, to be located at the corner of Fred Jackson Way and Brookside Drive on a three-acre parcel in unincorporated Contra Costa County, has the potential to not only provide a steady supply of fresh, organic produce to Richmond residents but also change people's attitudes about food.

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The project is expected to cost \$3.4 million, with \$600,000 coming from county funds.

"This is a huge opportunity to restore the rich culture that has been lost in North Richmond," said Tania Pulido, a community engagement manager for Urban Tilth, which oversees 13 community gardens in Richmond and teaches a course on urban farming at Richmond High School. "There will be opportunities for people to work on the land and transform their lives in the process. ... When kids grow their own vegetables, they will eat them."

More than 50 percent of all children in Richmond are either obese or overweight, and most will stay that way as they get older, according to a 2011 study by Contra Costa Health Services. There are many reasons for this: families' lower education levels, poor role modeling by parents and unequal access to fresh and affordable produce, according to experts.

Healthy food options in North Richmond -- both within city limits and the unincorporated area that is home to about 3,000 people -- are scant. The nearest grocery store, Food Barn, is nearly a mile away in San Pablo, and many residents rely on corner stores for their essentials.

At Sunset Market & Liquor, food options include canned tuna, bread, instant noodles, soda and about a dozen types of chips, cookies and other sugary snacks. The produce case stands on one side, but it's empty and unplugged.

At Moms, Pops & Sons on Fred Jackson Way, the produce consists of a small selection of unappealing tomatoes, lemons, bananas and onions, while the chips and soda aisles brim with options.

The owner, Anwar Imtair, would carry more healthy food, he said, if there was just more demand for it.

"People here don't want organic too much," Imtair said. "They're not used to eating the stuff. I end up taking most of the fruits home with me."

That's something Urban Tilth is trying to change. The group will hire several North Richmond residents to work on the farm and eventually become a Community Supported Agriculture project, selling boxed fruit and vegetables to customers. Fresh produce will be available year-round, and events, held at the amphitheater, will serve as a way to attract residents to the site, said Pulido, the community organizer.

Returning the parcel to its agricultural roots will also be an apt way to honor the Japanese-American families who had to abandon their Richmond greenhouses when they were relocated to internment camps during World War II, said county Supervisor John Gioia. Gioia proposed an idea for an urban ag project to Urban Tilth after visiting a similar farm in Portland, Oregon.

"This will not be just a farm but a vehicle to develop environmental stewardship and healthy eating," he said. "It will be a place for the entire community to go to."

Contact Karina Ioffee at 510-262-2726 or kioffee@bayareanewsgroup.com. Follow her at [Twitter.com/kioffee](https://twitter.com/kioffee).