

Urban Tilth launches new farm in North Richmond



Ten-year-old Zaire Dunmore waters seedlings at Urban Tilth's new North Richmond Farm. Photo by Reis Thebault.

By [Reis Thebault](#) Posted October 19, 2016 9:00 am

When local nonprofit Urban Tilth broke ground at its new farm in North Richmond on Saturday, it signaled the beginning of something new—and a chance for the community to reconcile with its past, said executive director Doria Robinson.

“Here in Richmond, in North Richmond, not just the soil, but the people have been dumped on for generations,” Robinson said.

Robinson, who was born and raised in Richmond, said preparing soil and growing food can be restorative.

“It’s like a healing process,” she said. “Healing the soil is an opportunity for every person who gets involved to go through that process themselves.”

Saturday’s groundbreaking was roughly three years in the making—the culmination of land transfers, permit applications, and collaboration with county government and community members. The farm,

located at Fred Jackson Way and Brookside Drive, will serve as the headquarters for Urban Tilth, which operates several community gardens and urban farms in Richmond.

The availability of fresh, healthy food will be a boon to a community underserved by grocery and produce stores, Robinson said.

“People are excited,” she said. “Every day, whenever they need it, they can come get whatever they want.”

The North Richmond Farm will be more than a place to grow crops; it will also eventually be home to a café, a farm stand, an amphitheater for movie nights and other gatherings, and a bike shop operated by Rich City Rides. Robinson said she imagines it’ll be a gathering place, something of a “village square.”

Annie King-Meredith, a lifelong Richmond resident and a member of the North Richmond Municipal Advisory Council, said the farm complex will bring energy back to the area, which experienced extreme economic hardship in the years after Richmond’s World War II industrial boom.

“As years went on, as the war ended, people left,” she said. “But there were still people that had hope, and the hope is still alive, as you can see today.”

Robinson credits District I Supervisor John M. Gioia for coming up with the idea for the farm, which is a collaboration between Contra Costa County, Urban Tilth and community members, who shared input through an advisory committee. Gioia said he was inspired by a similar farm he visited in Portland, Oregon.

North Richmond’s farm sits on three acres of county land, which is leased to Urban Tilth for 30 years and a nominal annual fee. Citing Urban Tilth’s work at Richmond Greenway, Gioia said the organization’s track record in the community demonstrated that it was the right group to partner with.

“I think this is going to be a central place—not just for North Richmond, but for West County,” Gioia said. “This is truly going to be a model, and it’s going to change lives and it’s going to change community.”

North Richmond Farm will open incrementally. An interim garden is already growing herbs and vegetables, and temporary greenhouses, a potato patch and an orchard with 200 fruit trees are on the way. But the permanent buildings will not be complete for another three to five years, Robinson said.

The property, however, has already come a long way, said one of the organization's collective members, Luis Chavez. The parcel of land is within a mile of a county landfill and a Republic Services recycling center and has been the site of much illegal dumping, he said. When Urban Tilth first began work on the farm site, it was full of trash and chunks of asphalt, and covered in invasive species.

"You knew the land was here but you just couldn't see it," Chavez said.

While North Richmond Farm is a long way from complete, Chavez said the weekend's groundbreaking was an important first step.

"It's in a place that needs that infrastructure, that needs a glimpse of something good," he said.

And for that, Robinson said, there's nothing better than farming.