Adapting to stay fresh: West Broad Farmers Market update, pg. 5

Feature Story
Williams Farm grows a new generation of farmers, pg. 6

Financial counseling for housing becomes a bigger part of the mission, pg. 8
The flexible model of a community land trust -- trying, learning, adapting. Williams Farm has been a great example. We’re coming up on 8 years since groundbreaking. I can date this event easily because I remember being very pregnant as we shoveled dirt in the serious heat! I also remember the community goodwill as all types of folks came together to celebrate the feat of saving an intown farm from becoming the next student development.

I’ve learned a lot in those years about running a farm -- it’s really expensive to get all the infrastructure to make it viable, and financing to get the infrastructure is often outside the box.

Now here we are with drip lines, wash stations, cold storage, hoop houses, a green house. But the truth of the matter is small farming doesn’t happen without people who care about the land and about healthy food. Now we’re making the farm available for small farmers to incubate before they outlay all the capital needed to start their own farms.

The expectations of "success" can be daunting -- did they go through our first-time homebuyer class and immediately buy a house? Did they go through our youth program and go out and start a farm?

I think about measuring success differently -- how many small farmers tried their hand at farming without going into debt and decided that maybe it wasn’t the perfect fit? How many came to a class and learned that they weren’t ready to buy? To me that’s also success. And that’s where community land trusts can make a difference -- people can gain experience and knowledge to inform their path to success without shouldering the risk alone.

Athens Land Trust is a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organization whose mission is to improve quality of life for all and to strengthen the fabric of the community through education and the stewardship of land for purposes of affordable housing, conservation, agriculture, and economic development. We respond to community-identified needs and build individual and collective power among historically marginalized people.
In April, the ACC Mayor & Commission passed a voluntary inclusionary zoning policy to encourage multi-family housing developers to include affordable units. In Athens, where the average rent for a 3-bedroom apartment is over $1,200, ALT has been on the forefront of education on inclusionary zoning since 2015. The amendment -- recommend by the Inclusionary Zoning Working Group -- changes codes to allow for more density in exchange for including units reserved for low-income renters. It also lets developers pay into a fund for affordable housing construction and preservation by local organizations. ALT is proud to be part of the Working Group, which is exploring strategies to expand this policy for single-family housing. And we’ll keep creating affordable, energy efficient rental and home ownership opportunities!

In our last issue we shared the story behind the vision for the West Broad community campus and the exciting developments that are moving this project forward. The architect team, Arcollab, is working with ACC staff and campus stakeholders -- neighborhood residents, future users, Athens youth, and others -- to design a space that meets the community’s needs. On May 19th, the public had an opportunity to offer comments on the site selection process, and to get one step closer to seeing their vision become a reality! Get more updates at westbroadrising.com

We’re a proud grant partner of the Clif Family Foundation, which like ALT believes in a holistic approach to community wellness by supporting strong food systems, equitable health outcomes, and environmental stewardship. Team CLIF Bar was recently in town for the Athens Twilight Criterium and spent some time learning more about our work, including volunteering at Williams Farm and a warm-up ride to the West Broad Farmers Market drive-thru pick-up!

ATHENS HOUSING
BY THE NUMBERS

- 62 percent of housing units occupied by renters
- 50 percent of renters paying more than 1/3 their income to rent
- 4 NEW HOMEOWNERS so far this year
- 13 PERMANENTLY AFFORDABLE UNITS under current development
- 56 FAMILIES achieving first-time homeownership with ALT since 2001

Above: Clarke County School District Culinary Arts Coordinator Manny Stone (left) explains the features of the learning kitchen at the Career Academy to architects for the West Broad community campus during a tour in April 2022.

On the front cover: Students in the Young Urban Farmers program, who gain work experience while learning about agriculture and food systems, spend time working alongside farmers at the Williams Farm Incubator site. Learn more about the incubator program on pages 6 - 7.
Tony Gayles is a new farm entrepreneur and the coordinator for Athens Land Trust's Young Urban Farmers (YUF) program. Originally from Jacksonville, Florida, Gayles graduated from Morehouse College with a degree in English, and went on to teach in New York City public schools for 10 years. There, he found a new passion: school garden programs. In 2020, Gayles moved back down south to start Littlefoot Farm in Maysville, just north of Athens.

If a young person asked you about the Young Urban Farmers program, how would you answer? Young Urban Farmers work to support community gardens, plan a business, and learn leadership skills. I would say it’s an alternative for young people who don’t want to spend their time and energy making profits for fast food or retail establishments. Environmental justice is at the nexus of so many freedom movements, and will inevitably become more important as we adapt to global warming. We’re making sure there are students in Athens who are informed and equipped to create solutions.

What is Littlefoot Farm? What do you grow there? Littlefoot Farm is a small biodynamic farm up in Maysville, in Banks County. I grow a range of fruits and vegetables with lots of help from friends and family. The farm’s produce is Certified Naturally Grown and eventually the space will be a learning center for curious students and new farmers. I started planning to steward land in 2018 at Soul Fire Farm in New York after leading a couple of school garden programs. Ultimately, I’d like to see the space become a food commons, where community members tend the land collaboratively and share the harvest.

You're not a classroom teacher anymore, but educating is still a major part of your work with the YUF program, isn't it? Yes, education is my first love, so to speak. It’s how I found that I enjoy growing things! I would come to school every day past this abandoned garden in the schoolyard and it didn’t sit right with me. We received grant funds to plant trees and buy compost, and the students got to work deciding what to plant and how it should look. As excited as they were, I think I enjoyed it even more. Now, I’m still figuring out how to be most effective with older students in a less structured environment, but the challenge has been motivating.

Do you have a favorite book to recommend about farming or agriculture? Farming While Black by Leah Penniman [of Soul Fire Farm] covers so much that I open it up to reference it over and over. There’s also Letters to a Young Farmer from the Stone Barns Center which is full of wisdom for folks new to growing and it seems like there’s plenty to keep teaching me well into my new career.
In May 2020, just months into the COVID-19 pandemic, the West Broad Farmers Market had to quickly pivot to meet community needs in a time of uncertainty. Market staff shifted from operating an in-person market to hosting the drive-through market at 300 S. Rocksprings Street. Thanks to this partnership with the Athens Housing Authority, the West Broad Farmers Market has been operating nearly year-round ever since. This location has allowed local farmers, bakers, artists, and other vendors to have a safe and reliable avenue for weekly sales.

The weekly ordering option for customers was made possible by supporting our vendors in joining the West Broad Farmers Market online market, which was established using software from Athens Locally Grown -- a site that has helped local farmers and growers market their goods since 2001.

When Athens Locally Grown ended operations last year, it illustrated how even longstanding institutions face daunting odds in times of economic uncertainty, and how fragile the network of resources for small farmers can be. We are proud to have recently welcomed a growing number of farmers from the Locally Grown family who are now selling through the West Broad Farmers Market's online market!

During the 2022 season, in addition to the weekly drive-thru market we have also been able to host monthly in-person celebrations. We are grateful to be able to meet the needs of Athenians through not only providing fresh, healthy local produce and other goods, but through fostering the sense of community and connection that comes from gathering together at the farmers market.

With the search for the site of the West Broad Community Campus underway, the West Broad Farmers Market is one step closer to finding its permanent home. The SPLOST Office, architects, and the public are working together this summer to move through the site selection process. We are excited for what the near future brings and to have a place to call home soon.

The market provides an affordable venue for micro-entrepreneurs to sell local foods and handmade goods, including original art and upcycled fashions from joe hobo.
What if you’ve got a green thumb and dream about starting a small farm, but you lack the needed cash flow, haven’t honed your farm skills and don’t have land?

The Farm Incubator Program at Athens Land Trust’s Williams Farm provides an answer, as well as a response to the historic discrimination from banks and the federal government that small farmers of color have faced.

That’s exactly what nine people --most from Clarke County or nearby-- did beginning last spring.

These program participants are now growing produce, herbs, and flowers at Williams Farm, and many are selling what they grow at ALT’s West Broad Farmers Market or other area markets. A few participants are supplying materials for their own small businesses from what they’re growing, and are using the program’s affordable infrastructure to expand their businesses.

Farm Incubator: the basics

“We’re giving folks who’ve got some serious gardening experience under their belts a chance to see if making the move to becoming a small-scale farmer is the right move,” says Seth Nivens, Williams Farm manager.

Nivens explains: “We provide access to land, training and other resources to beginning farmers who come from groups who’ve been subject to racial or ethnic prejudice. Our goal with this program is to help these farmers eventually develop independent, sustainable farm businesses.”

“It’s a way to try farming out without having to invest so much up front,” Niven says. “A way to get into farming without all the risks.” The program is funded by the United States Department of Agriculture’s 2501 program, which targets assistance to socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers across the country.

Resources at Williams Farm

Williams Farm is a 2.5-acre Certified Naturally Grown urban farm located two miles from downtown Athens, just off of North Ave. The property, owned by Athens Land Trust, is fenced, irrigated and has full utilities -- electricity, plumbing and wi-fi.

Participants lease available plots -- each about 30 inches and 50 feet long -- or space in the two covered growing areas on the site. All growing beds have been managed as no-till for the past three years, and are well-balanced in terms of nutrition and texture. (No-till is a farming technique that tries to minimize disturbing the soil to preserve the nutrients and biodiversity in it.) A maximum of 22 beds is available for rent per farmer.

Participants can use a covered wash/pack facility, complete with walk-in cooler, 3-compartment
Participants can also tap into help from ALT’s Young Urban Farmer program. Working on incubator plots gives the young people in the YUF program hands-on farming experience.

Participants and produce
According to farm manager Nivens, most participants are new to farming but have had extensive gardening experience. Some discovered the program via Georgia FarmLink, another service of Athens Land Trust, with operates as an on-line matching service between aspiring farmers and landowners.

What's being grown? Well, there's a wide variety of plants -- tomatoes, herbs, flowers, peppers, lettuces, kale, cabbage, turnips, corn, radishes, okra, blueberries, pears, figs, apples and others -- most of which are grown for sale in farmers markets, but some of which are used as components in other products such as soaps, loofahs, infusions and bouquets.

What's next?
While the program is designed to allow people to "get their feet wet" and explore whether farming is something they want to do, Nivens say he hopes many participants will decide to become small scale farmers. "We keep learning about the challenges facing the participants and this allows us to offer better help to future participants," Nivens says. "I'm excited to keep recruiting new participants so we can help grow a new generation of farmers for Georgia."

The growers

Jean Young operates Freedom City Gardens, which grows a variety of seasonal vegetables.

Joy Brown grows a variety of seasonal produce for sale at local farmers markets under the name of Oluchi Gardens.

Deijhon Yearby, former Young Urban Farmer, uses a high tunnel for Cozybear Nursery and grows ornamental and edible plants. He also operates Cozybear Market Garden in Nicholson, GA.

Imani Scott-Blackwell and Gabriel Osoria grow a variety of seasonal vegetables.

Gabrielle Daniels grows herbs, flowers & vegetables.

KyKy Dany'All is planning to specialize in loofahs, which are made from a gourd in the cucumber family.

Almeta Tulloss runs The Georgia Vinegar Company and Cherokee Moon Mixology. She uses space at Williams Farm to grow ingredients for these businesses.

Emlyn Resetarits grows a variety of seasonal vegetables for Emlyn’s Tiny Farm.
Athens Land Trust

Counseling renters, homeowners, future homebuyers is growing part of ALT’s housing mission

Athens Land Trust is known for helping folks purchase homes on affordable terms, and for advocating for and building affordable housing. But ALT’s mission has always included providing a broader range of help to homeowners, renters and prospective buyers — and this part of the mission is growing.

Spurred by the pandemic’s escalation of Athens’ housing affordability crisis, and by the availability of federal funds to address housing issues, ALT has expanded staff and programming related to housing counseling.

"During the pandemic much of our workload was forced into emergency mortgage/rental and utility assistance for low-income individuals hit by reduced hours, layoffs, and shutdowns," said Joanne Selgin, ALT’s Interim Director of Housing Counseling. "We were identified as one of a few local organizations to oversee the disbursement of federal aid and other emergency funding by the Athens-Clarke County Mayor and Commission."

ALT is a Department of Housing and Urban Development certified housing counseling agency—a designation that qualifies ALT to receive and disburse certain kinds of federal housing funds. With that funding ALT provided emergency counseling, worked with landlords, magistrate courts, and utilities providers, and distributed more than $783,000 in federal and local relief funds to prevent evictions for approximately 590 households.

"Our program provided support not only by offering direct financial assistance but also by listening to families who are in crisis and offering real life coping strategies for navigating the financial hardships brought by the pandemic," Selgin explained. "And we’re continuing to do much of the same work now."

The focus now is on providing housing stability counseling for people who are behind on their rent or mortgage. The Georgia Department of Community Affairs provides rental and mortgage assistance. ALT’s counselors are available to assist people with applying for these funds. The Georgia Mortgage Assistance Program requires applicants to receive housing counseling as part of the application process.

ALT’s services also include free and low-cost prepurchase homebuyer education, fair housing, foreclosure mitigation, credit counseling, and financial literacy. “Our goal,” Selgin said, “is to support low-to-moderate income individuals in realizing housing and financial stability through access to safe, decent rental housing and the opportunity to achieve homeownership.”

For a housing counseling appointment or more information, contact Athens Land Trust at 706-613-0122.

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Funding made available for these affordable housing projects by Athens-Clarke County Department of Housing and Community Development HOME and CDBG Programs of the Unified Government of Athens-Clarke County, an Equal Opportunity Employer. Participants will not be discriminated against based on race, color, religion, disability, familial status, or national origin.
With her appointment to the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) newly created Equity Commission, Athens Land Trust board member Shirley Sherrod brings a unique set of qualifications to the independent commission’s task of evaluating USDA programs and services and recommending how to reduce barriers for accessing them.

Alongside her husband Rev. Charles Sherrod and other civil rights activists, Ms. Sherrod established New Communities, Inc. in 1969 on 5,735 acres in Lee County, GA to provide a safe haven for Black farmers at a time when many worked land owned by white people, with no secure tenure or opportunity to build financial equity. Amidst the civil rights movement, the founding of New Communities represented a milestone in subverting the entrenched barriers to building individual and community wealth through ownership and control of land and resources --and a power structure that for centuries tortured and exploited Black people through this land-based wealth-building model.

New Communities families farmed over 1,800 acres and operated a farmers market on site, with a vision to become fully self-sufficient with plans for collective housing. A severe drought in the mid-1980s, coupled with a discriminatory denial of USDA farm loan funds, led to foreclosure and loss of the land. After a decade-long class action lawsuit, New Communities was granted restitution in 2009 and now operates as an institute addressing Black land loss; and environmental, economic, food, and social justice issues.

The replication of New Communities' model for contemporary Community Land Trusts -- with more than 200 operating nationwide including Athens Land Trust -- is a testament to the contributions Ms. Sherrod has made to the movement for historically disenfranchised people to have control over the development of their communities, including ownership and stewardship of land-based resources for housing, food production, and economic development.

Her fight for Black farmers and landowners in the South helped contribute to the passage of the Minority Farmers Rights Act (Section 2501) in 1990. It’s under this Act that the "2501 Program" provides grants such as the one that is supporting ALT in the operation of the Williams Farm Incubator Project (pg. 6).

And her work continues -- she's now leading the Southwest Georgia Agri-Tourism trail, a partnership with Airbnb to encourage visitors to southwest Georgia to book stays at Black-owned farms and learn the history and present-day realities of Black agricultural communities.
One of ALT’s core aims is to protect land with conservation easements. We’ve been successful, preserving more than 20,000 acres across Georgia. These protected acres contribute health and ecosystem benefits to the broader community.

But many Black, Brown, and low-wealth people don’t experience these benefits as often. ALT’s Young Conservation Stewards program (YCS) was created to address this. The program trains youth from these backgrounds in the skills to become environmental stewards in their own communities by introducing them to the conservation field.

The summer YCS term started with an emphasis on sharing the benefits of the outdoors more equitably: participants heard from educator, artist and sportsman Durrell Smith.

As a boy in Atlanta, Smith “...grew up thinking certain spaces were for certain people.” He says this mindset can be as great a barrier as the structural barriers that have resulted in more limited access to outdoor spaces for people of color.

Smith’s passion for the outdoors, grown from hunting and fishing with his grandfather and an introduction to a group of Atlanta-area Black horsemen, has led him to bird dog handling, a profession with a rich, complex history rooted in Southern quail plantation culture.

In 2020, Smith and his wife Ashley founded the Minority Outdoor Alliance, with the mission of

"cultivating inclusivity for a healthier outside."

When Durrell gave the YCS a lesson in bird dog handling, he introduced them to a unique outdoor experience that also showed them how breaking down their own internal barriers in the face of a new experience is an important part of interacting with the dogs in nature.

In addition to conservation knowledge, YCS Crew Leader Bo Roddis hopes the YCS develop an emotional attachment to the outdoors. “You don’t have to farm, fish or hunt to have a connection to the natural world.”

Smith – who sits on ALT’s Conservation Committee, which brings recommendations from conservation professionals to ALT’s Board of Directors – sees investing in kids as a way to plant seeds for the long-term benefits of conservation practices. “We’re manifesting something new...and doing it for the future.” ♦

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