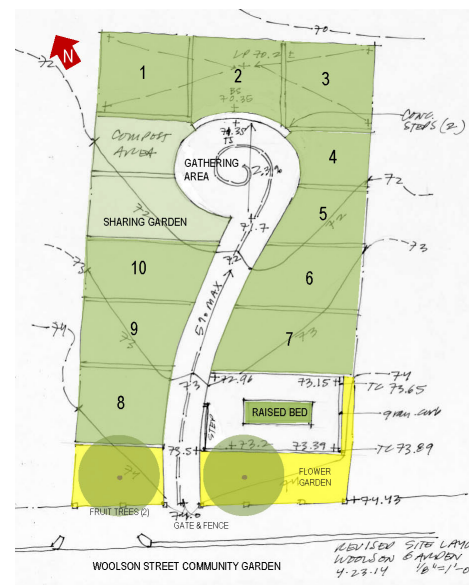




Parks and Greenspaces for Mattapan



Mattapan Food & Fitness Coalition

Mattapan Food and Fitness Coalition (MFFC), begun in 2005, grew out of an effort to draw on the wonderful ethnic and cultural diversity of the Mattapan community to promote a healthy living environment.

We focus on access to healthy foods and the promotion of physical activity – as well as improving access to parks and green spaces. Positive changes in these areas complement other efforts to decrease health problems like diabetes, heart disease, obesity and other health conditions that plague our community.

While working on issues of health inequities, we highlight the positive attributes of our community.

MFFC has recognized the need for more community gardening spaces and education around growing and eating healthy foods in Mattapan.

Woolson Street Lot Transformation

Working with the City of Boston Department of Neighborhood Development, Boston Natural Areas Network, and the Fairmount Greenway Coalition, we surveyed empty city owned lots in Mattapan for possible community investment as green spaces. An empty lot at 44 Woolson Street was selected because of the history of violence on that street and the surrounding area.

An important first step was to connect with the Mattapan Violence Intervention Program—organizing in that area in response to that history of trauma. Our relationship with Vital Village Network also helped us broaden our understanding of the relationship between physical environment and social/emotional health – and in particular, the role that building community cohesion through projects like transforming an empty lot into a source of community pride can have on community health.

The Process

We began reaching out to community residents by knocking on doors to talk with neighbors about their vision for their neighborhood. We held multiple community meetings, dinner meetings on the empty lot, flower planting activities, Zumba classes, and door knocking activities, and most recently a community clean up.

The community settled on a community garden with space for gatherings that could promote neighborhood cohesion, education, and healing. Working with Boston Natural Areas Network and Community Design Resource Center, we held a series of charettes with community members and youth to design the garden space. A welcoming floral border with fruit trees, raised beds for physically challenged residents, a gazebo like structure, and peace poles are parts of the design. Construction begins June 2014



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Woolson Street residents planting new community garden
 By India Smith, *Special to the Reporter* May. 8, 2014

Right now 44 Woolson St. is a vacant lot – but not for long. Come by in eight weeks and you will see a community garden, complete with new fencing, planting beds filled with seedlings, and two young pear trees flanking the entrance.

The project is the work of the Mattapan Food and Fitness Coalition, Boston Natural Areas Network, and many neighborhood residents, including Mirlande Joseph and Reann Gibson.

After an incident in 2010 in which four people including a toddler were dragged outside and shot, Woolson Street has come to symbolize urban violence. A dozen other shootings have occurred there over the past 20 years. But according to Joseph, who is resident coordinator for the new garden, the five-block street has many long-time residents with a sense of community. Those residents believe a garden is the natural way to strengthen that bond.

“And many of the residents are from Haiti and the West Indies,” said Joseph. “They like to garden and know how to grow their own food.”

Three years ago, Vivien Morris, chairman of the Mattapan Food and Fitness Coalition, took a look at the city-owned lot at 44 Woolson St. “We were initially attracted to the site because of its proximity to the Fairmount Greenway and the opportunities for biking,” said Morris. “Developing that lot would add to the green space and attractiveness of the area.” With Reann Gibson helping to recruit the neighbors, MFFC held several gatherings to explore how residents would like to use the space. Alternatives included a playground or a small park. “But right from the beginning there was a strong consensus for a garden,” said Morris.

At this point, Morris turned to the Boston Natural Areas Network. According to interim director Vidya Tikku, BNAN has a mandate to turn city-owned land into community gardens. BNAN has prioritized several sites in Dorchester and Mattapan. “Woolson Street was at the top of the list,” she said.

According to Tikku, the city has many vacant parcels that could be used for community gardens. “But we don’t release any of those parcels unless the neighborhood is really committed to maintaining the garden,” said Tikku. The people of Woolson Street will appoint coordinators, set the rules and manage the garden themselves. BNAN engaged architect Gretchen Schneider to meet with residents over the winter, sketch out their vision and develop a design. Construction is about to begin.

On Saturday, May 3, residents came out to sign up for individual plots and help clear the lot as part of Boston’s annual cleanup, known as Boston Shine. Devon Campbell, 46, was the first to sign up. “I’ve lived on this street for ten years,” said Campbell. “This is now my home.” Like many people from the West Indies, Campbell prefers to cook from scratch. He likes the idea of growing his own fresh ingredients. He knows that gardening is hard work, but he has decided that his son and daughter, 6 and 12, will help. “They don’t know that yet,” Campbell said with a smile.

The new garden will have ten individual plots arranged in a gentle curve leading to a common area for community gatherings. A compost area in back will turn weeds and clippings into fresh soil. Waist-high beds and pathways will be accessible to wheelchair users. The residents plan a memorial within the garden for victims of violence on the street.

Looking at her neighbors spread along Woolson Street, wearing Boston Shine tee shirts and raking out shrubbery, Joseph declared success. “I have my street back. I have my community back,” she said.