

Public Safety & Health Committee, Seattle City Council

Public Hearing, August 26, 1983

Event 9721

Speaker: Leonard (Len) Mandelbaum (00:30:26 – 00:34:53)

LEONARD (LEN) MANDELBAUM: This is, uh, this report I have for you this morning is really the result of a study of a peach patch [sic] program undertaken by a group of graduate students at Seattle University under my leadership last spring. And the reason I wanted the delay is to hear what's new while I was in Juneau since last spring and it helped. The route problem of the P-Patch program, in my view, is not management or budget. These are symptoms of a larger issue: the lack of a clear City policy to guide program development. And I believe the statement by the Parks people right now indicates the real ambivalence and attitudes among the City people toward the P-Patch program. In characterizing the P-Patch program as a private activity, umm, you have the core of the question. The P-Patch program, in my view, is part of a larger urban agricultural program, which is very much public in nature.

When first organized, the City role was that of a facilitator to a group of energetic gardeners. The Council saw to it that land was available and later services. Now communal gardening is a larger enterprise with seemingly growing significance for food banks, Asian immigrants, the elderly, as well as middle class green thumb. There are at least three focal points for City policy, and matters will not improve the kind of problems you heard this morning, until the Council chooses which of these essential and helps design an organization suited to the goal.

One: urban gardening can be conceived as an activity like soccer, tennis and softball, a joyful recreation which is assume most...which--where the recreation has assumed most of the cost of the service. Umm, the service would be physical, providing land, insurance, and the City role would be limited. If you see this goal as pivotal, say so and assign the program to the Parks Department, whether they want it or not, [laughter from attendees] to run as they run similar programs.

You may decide, secondly, that improving the nutrition of the poor and assistance to new immigrants and the elderly gardeners is essential. If so, provide more budget for communal gardening and keep it in DHR where it belongs.

Third, you may feel that communal gardening should be part of a larger urban agriculture policy. Such a policy would embrace the objectives of serving the poor and the recreationists but would also preserve open space and develop skilled gardeners as a resource. This resource is a significant psych--psychically and socially in a technological era when people are cut off from the satisfaction of primary production. It is significant for those who can distinguish between hour-old corn and day-old corn, and it may be critical in the future when the cost of developing and transporting produce becomes uneconomical as more farmland becomes

developed or simply erodes. If this is the way you see policy, you need an organization suited for a rather complex and innovative set of objectives.

One possibility, and I say this as one possibility there are others, would be to authorize a commission with representatives of food distributors (such as food banks), agricultural experts (such as Tilth), gardeners (such as the P-Patch Advisory Council), Asian immigrants, the poor, the community leaders, and City agencies with resources and experience. That means Parks and DHR. Such a commission would have the power to recommend policy, including fees, service levels, etc. to the Council. And I would recommend a three-year experiment which this Council could review and evaluate. Any of the three approaches here would probably be justified as policy. There would be a fourth, and that is if you set a program is recreational only turn it over to the P-Patchers and provide the water insurance and the, uh, land. I sympathize with Council members reluctant to involve themselves in management detail, but this is not detail I asked you to consider; it is the heart of policy and politics. A decision for either option two or option three (that is, the people-oriented option) or the preserving open space and the complex option would be a decision for a noble experiment in urban agriculture. Even a decision to simply serve recreationists would clear the air. I congratulate the Council and its staff for setting aside time before the budget process so that these policy decisions could be faced in a more relaxed environment and on the merits of the issues involved.