

# Growing community: The case for local government involvement in urban community gardens

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## Introduction

Community gardens are an important resource for food access by providing fresh fruits and vegetables at a local level. Gardens also enrich communities by offering a variety of benefits such as fostering relationships among people, providing educational opportunities, and honoring cultural values. Yet despite their myriad benefits, people seeking to establish and sustain community gardens may encounter challenges such as land access, funding, and stagnating interest that often hamper efforts to launch garden projects in the community. Research focused on the ways in which communities can overcome these barriers, with consideration for the role of local government involvement in community gardens. In an effort to enrich communities and implement the other benefits associated with them, local governments should take a facilitative role in community gardening.

### What is a Community Garden?

"Land set aside for community members to grow edible or ornamental plants. The land may also include active or passive recreation space or other amenities"<sup>1</sup>

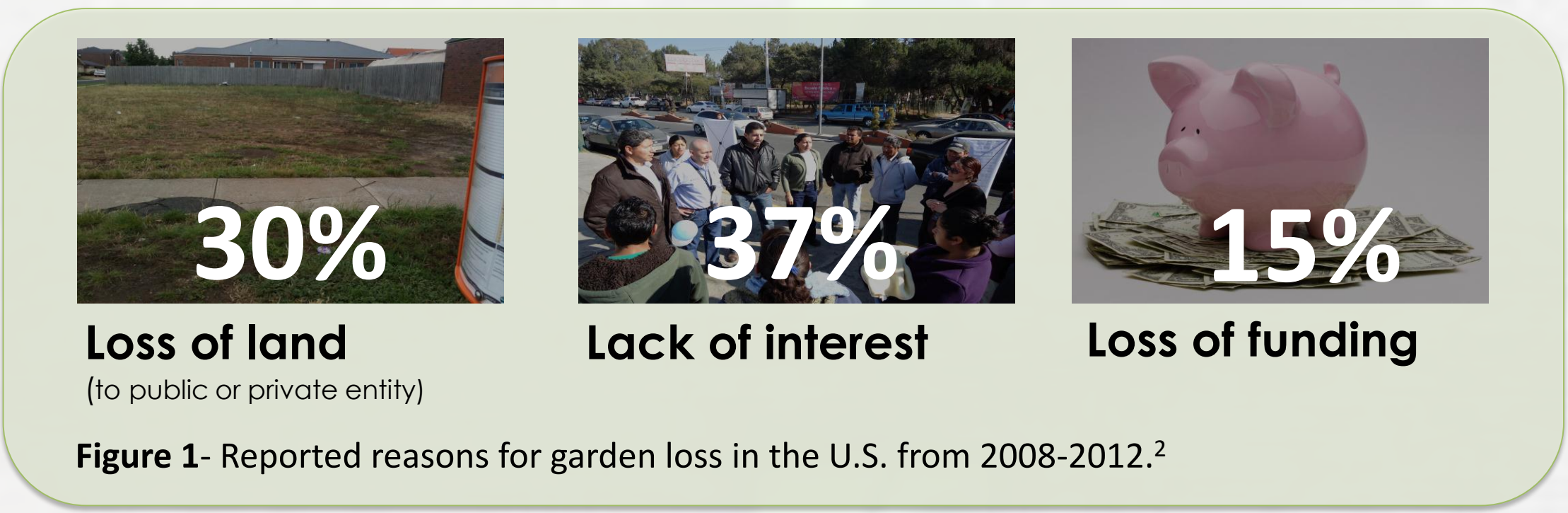


Photo Credit for above, below right: Growing West Side

## Methods

In this research, I draw from scholarly articles, published books, and national surveys of community gardens to outline the common benefits and challenges for community gardens in the U.S. Personal interviews with garden facilitators and those involved in local government also play a role in providing first-hand accounts of common challenges to community gardening. Finally, I use a case study to assess the role of local government involvement in overcoming challenges to community gardening in a St. Paul, MN neighborhood.

### Barriers to Community Gardening:



## Results

### Overcoming the Barriers:

Community gardeners may take action collectively to overcome common barriers that are shown in Figure 1. In Table 1, possible solutions to each of these barriers are listed.

Table 1- Solutions to common barriers encountered in community gardening.

Securing Land Access	Sustaining Interest	Ensuring Funding
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Seek long term, stable land access:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Purchase of land</li><li>Use of of land in trust, easement</li></ul></li><li>Cooperate with local government to ensure legality of land use</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Offer programs, events to engage community at garden site</li><li>Secure dependable garden coordinator or leader to ensure stability, organization</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Apply for available grant-in-aid opportunities through local government and private sources</li><li>Pursue community sources of funding/materials</li></ul>

### Making local government part of the solution:

Local governments may pursue involvement in community gardens across a spectrum of intensity. As minimal means of involvement, existing zoning policy can be modified to allow community gardening on land that would not ordinarily be permitted. At the opposite extreme, local government may implement all solutions up to and including municipal ownership and operation of community gardens (Figure 2).

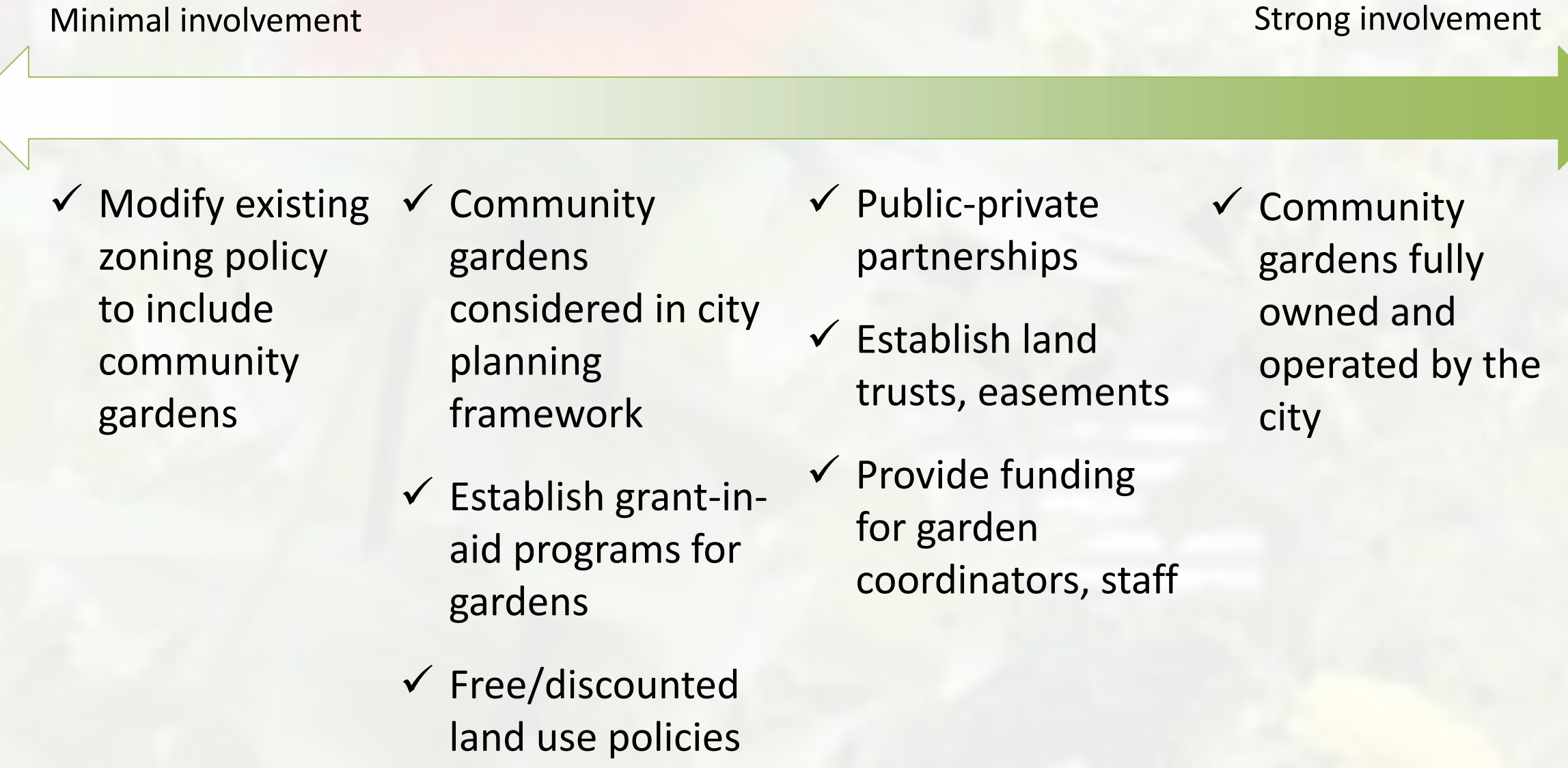


Figure 2- Spectrum of involvement for local government in community gardening.

## Solution in Action: A West Side Story

The West Side of St. Paul, MN is a vibrant cultural community as well as a practical example of local government involvement in different models of community gardening. The Stryker Community Garden and the on-site gardens at the Torre de San Miguel affordable housing complex (Figure 3), each receive the support of local government through St. Paul's district council organization, the West Side Community Organization (WSCO). Table 2 highlights the ways in which WSCO facilitates each community garden.



Figure 3- St. Paul's West Side and the gardens at Torre de San Miguel (above right), and the Stryker Community Garden (right).

Table 2- Involvement of local government (WSCO) in West Side community gardens

Stryker Community Garden	Gardens at Torre de San Miguel
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Partner for garden programming and events</li><li>✓ Liability insurance coverage provided through WSCO</li><li>✓ Assistance in land search for relocation/expansion</li><li>✓ Grant-writing efforts to acquire additional financial resources</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Organization, coordination of culturally-appropriate, on-site gardening workshops</li><li>✓ Funding for gardening materials through general operating budget</li><li>✓ Outreach to residents to broaden gardening participant base</li><li>✓ Grant-writing efforts to acquire additional financial resources</li></ul>

## Conclusion

Community gardens offer numerous benefits to communities. For this reason, barriers faced by gardeners in individual localities warrant serious consideration and steps should be taken by local government to aid in overcoming them. The most successful gardens are those developed from grassroots interest and sustained through local government policies and programs that recognize the benefits and provide steady support over time. Ultimately, local governments should maintain a role that allows community gardens to meet the needs and interests of the community. This role will be unique in every community, though in all cases it should facilitate and not hinder those seeking to establish and sustain community gardens.

## References

1. Lawson, Laura, and Luke Drake. "Community Gardening Organization Survey: 2011-2012." 2012.  
2. Ibid.  
3. Smith, Jeremy N. *Growing a Garden City*. New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2010, 31.