

## Introduction

Food insecurity in Chicago, particularly on the South Side, is not merely an issue of scarcity but one of systemic inequity, deeply rooted in historical disinvestment, discriminatory housing policies, and a fractured urban food system. The proliferation of vacant lots in these neighborhoods serves as both a symptom of and a potential remedy to this crisis. While these unused parcels of land stand as relics of economic decline, they simultaneously represent an untapped resource for urban agriculture and community-led food sovereignty movements.

Recent data from the DePaul Institute for Housing Studies underscores how vacant lots located near existing transit infrastructure can have heightened implications for both community development and ecological revitalization ([DePaul Institute for Housing Studies, 2024](#)), with over 10,000 city-owned vacant lots across Chicago—approximately 60% of which lie within a half-mile of major train or bus lines—frequently concentrated in historically marginalized neighborhoods where land values remain low but environmental stressors (e.g., urban heat islands, stormwater runoff, and soil degradation) run high, thereby underscoring these parcels as an untapped resource for urban agriculture and community-led food sovereignty movements that Phoenix Farms Non-for-Profit (PFNFP) aims to redefine through its micro-food forest initiative focused on fostering both food security and ecological resilience.

Phoenix Farms Non-for-Profit ([PFNFP](#)) is committed to redefining urban agriculture by fostering both food security and ecological resilience. Through its micro-food forest initiative, PFNFP seeks to create a self-sustaining ecosystem where community members can access fresh, nutrient-rich food while actively participating in environmental stewardship. This report synthesizes integral takeaways from an extensive research and partnership development internship conducted during the University of Chicago Winter Quarter of 2025. The analysis first examines the structural challenges contributing to food insecurity, followed by an in-depth landscape assessment of urban agriculture initiatives, culminating in a set of strategic recommendations designed to enhance Phoenix Farms' capacity to address these pressing issues.

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## Research & Studies

### *Lot Vacancies in Chicago*

Chicago's landscape is punctuated by over 10,000 vacant lots, many of which are concentrated in historically marginalized neighborhoods ([DePaul Institute for Housing Studies, 2024](#)). These spaces, vestiges of redlining and economic downturns, reinforce patterns of environmental and economic disparity. Studies by Elevated Chicago ([2023](#)) have demonstrated how these vacant plots correlate with heightened food insecurity, reduced property values, and increased crime rates.

Despite these challenges, vacant land presents a unique opportunity for the reimagination of urban food systems. Sustained community engagement, ownership, and education are necessary to translate availability into long-term food security. This highlights the need for community-led interventions, such as food forests and cooperative agriculture, that not only provide produce but also foster participatory governance and local stewardship.

Programs like Equitable Transit-Oriented Development (ETOD) have emerged to address these structural inequities by prioritizing community-centered land use, but bureaucratic inertia and fragmented land policies continue to hinder progress<sup>1</sup>. As Chris Abraham of Kenwood Gardens noted, navigating multiple agencies to secure approvals can stall even well-planned urban agriculture projects, creating an environment where valuable community initiatives languish in bureaucratic limbo. As such, understanding how various urban agriculture initiatives navigate these constraints offers valuable insight into potential pathways for Phoenix Farms.

Equitable Transit-Oriented Development (ETOD) merges transit accessibility with equitable housing, local economic growth, and greener land use. Instead of channeling new projects exclusively into high-profit areas, ETOD encourages community-focused redevelopment near bus and train lines—helping local residents access essential services without relying on private

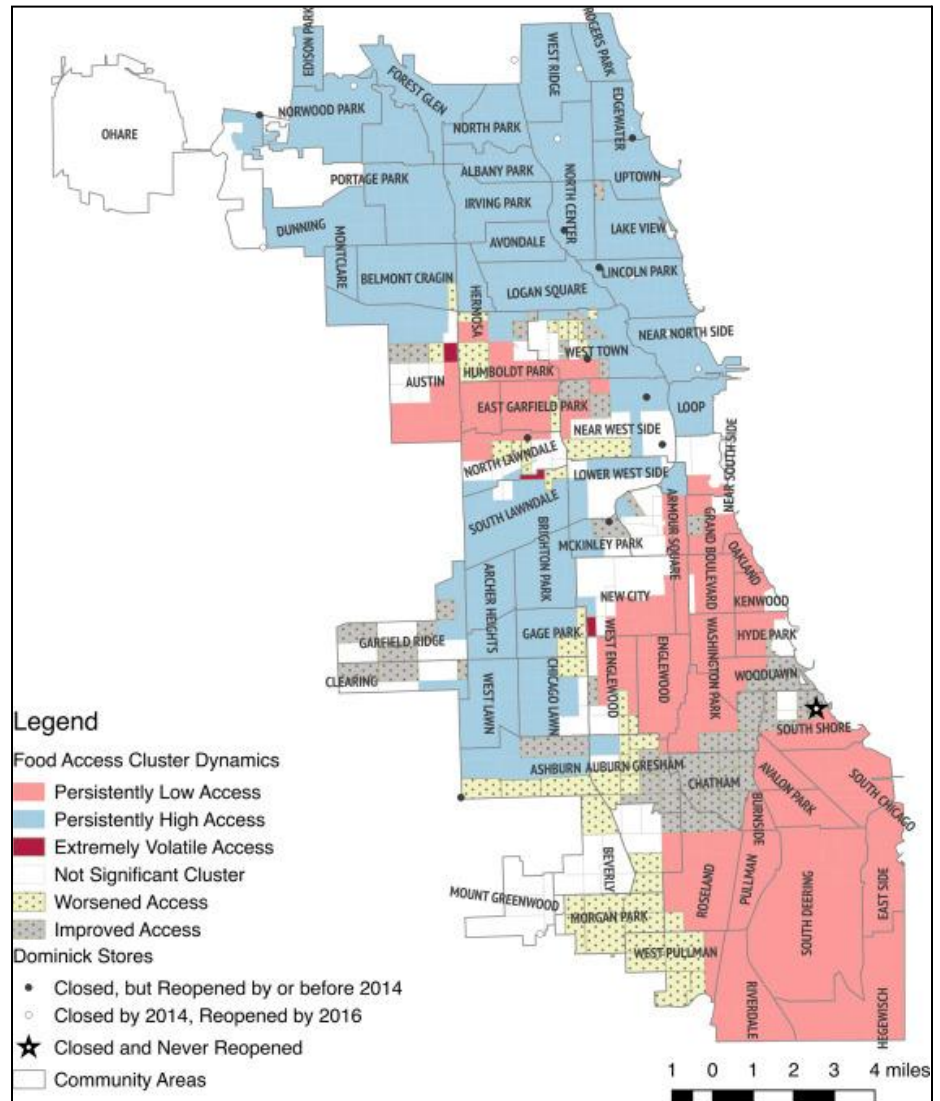
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<sup>1</sup> Equitable Transit-Oriented Development ([ETOD](#)) merges transit accessibility with equitable housing, local economic growth, and greener land use. Instead of channeling new projects exclusively into high-profit areas, ETOD encourages community-focused redevelopment near bus and train lines—helping local residents access essential services without relying on private vehicles. In Chicago, where more than 10,000 city-owned vacant lots lie dormant—an estimated 60% of them within a half-mile of major transit routes (DePaul Institute for Housing Studies 2024)—ETOD serves as a policy lens through which these underutilized parcels can be transformed into active community assets.

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## *Food Deserts and Insecurity*

“Urban foodscape trends: Disparities in healthy food access in Chicago, 2007–2014” by [Kolak et al. \(2018\)](#) underscores how top-down expansions of supermarkets do not necessarily translate into equitable access for racially segregated and low-income neighborhoods on Chicago’s West and South Sides. Utilizing a Local Indicators of Spatial Autocorrelation (LISA) analysis, the study demonstrates that even as the number of supermarkets grew between 2007 and 2014, food deserts stubbornly persisted, particularly in areas with historical disinvestment and insufficient transit infrastructure. This highlights the spatial dimension of food inequality—where proximity to healthy food sources depends not only on raw distance but also on socioeconomic and transit barriers.<sup>2</sup>

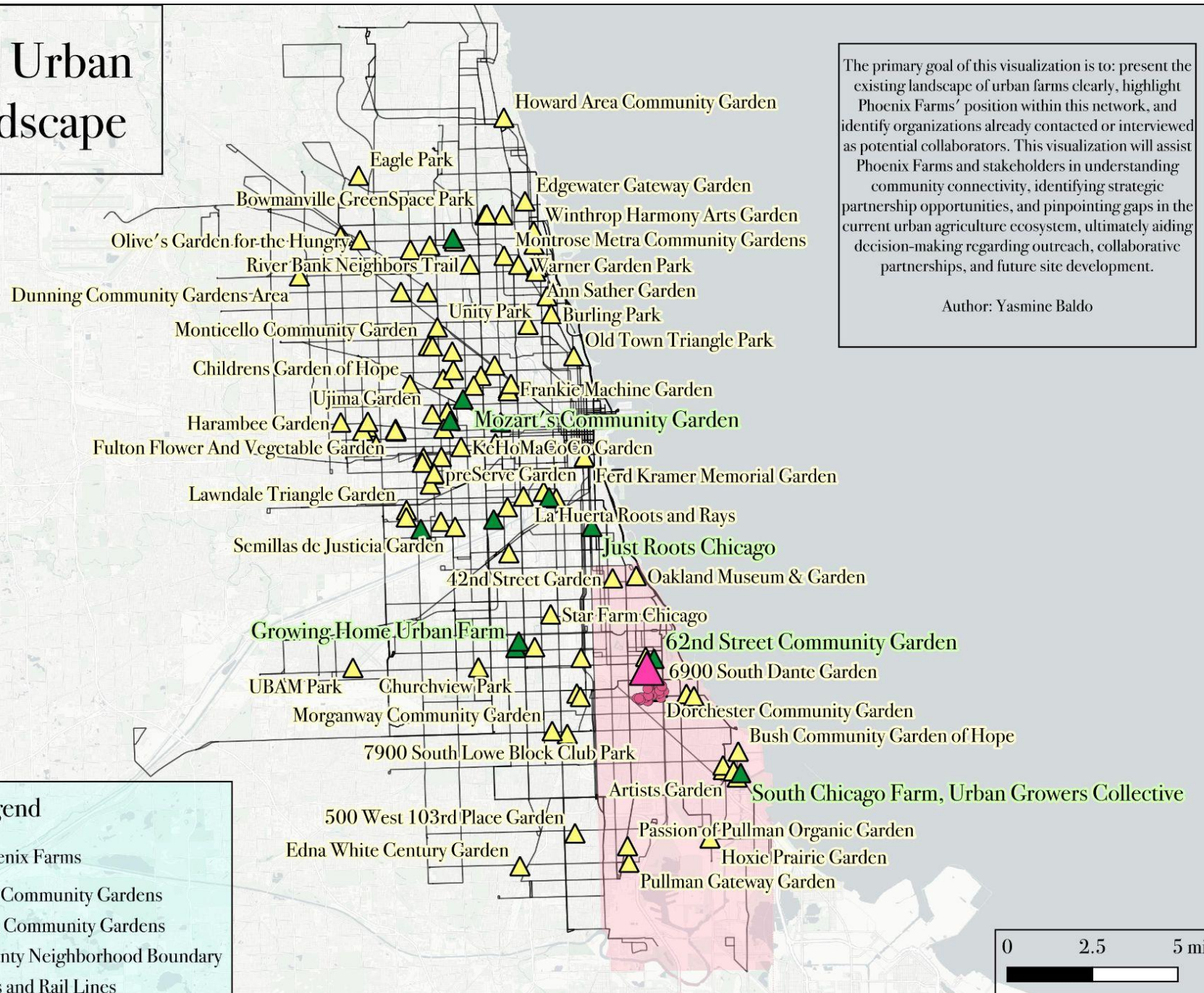


<sup>2</sup> Figure 3 from Kolak et al. (2018) illustrates longitudinal cluster analyses of healthy food access in Chicago across 2007, 2011, and 2014, categorizing census tracts by persistently high, persistently low, or volatile accessibility. The majority of census tracts with persistently low or volatile access are located on the West and South Sides, while most areas with persistently high access lie on the North Side of the city.

Source: Kolak, M., Bhatt, J., Park, Y.H. et al. “Urban foodscape trends: Disparities in healthy food access in Chicago, 2007–2014.” *Social Science & Medicine* 213 (2018): 106–114.

In light of these findings, city-wide development approaches—such as incentivizing supermarkets to open in underserved areas—often fall short if local communities lack reliable ways to access those new retail outlets. Bottom-up solutions like Phoenix Farms are thus increasingly vital: by creating community-led urban gardens and local food cooperatives, they reduce reliance on uneven supermarket distribution and help bridge the transit gap. In doing so, they offer a more holistic, ecologically grounded model for combating food insecurity, one that empowers residents to define and sustain their own food landscape rather than waiting for external commercial investments to take root.

# Chicago's Urban Farm Landscape



This map illustrates the urban agriculture landscape around Phoenix Farms, highlighting vacant parcels within a 1-mile radius sourced from the City of Chicago Data Portal's vacant land inventory. It integrates point data for local farmers' markets and grocery stores, also sourced from Chicago's Open Data Portal, emphasizing the spatial context of fresh-food access points relative to available land. Community gardens are individually labeled, situating Phoenix Farms clearly within a network of local urban agriculture efforts. By visualizing vacant lands within a 1-mile radius, the map identifies potential expansion sites or collaboration opportunities to strengthen community food systems and address food accessibility in the Hyde Park area.

Author: Yasmine Baldo

## Legend

Farmers Markets + Grocery Stores

Phoenix Farms

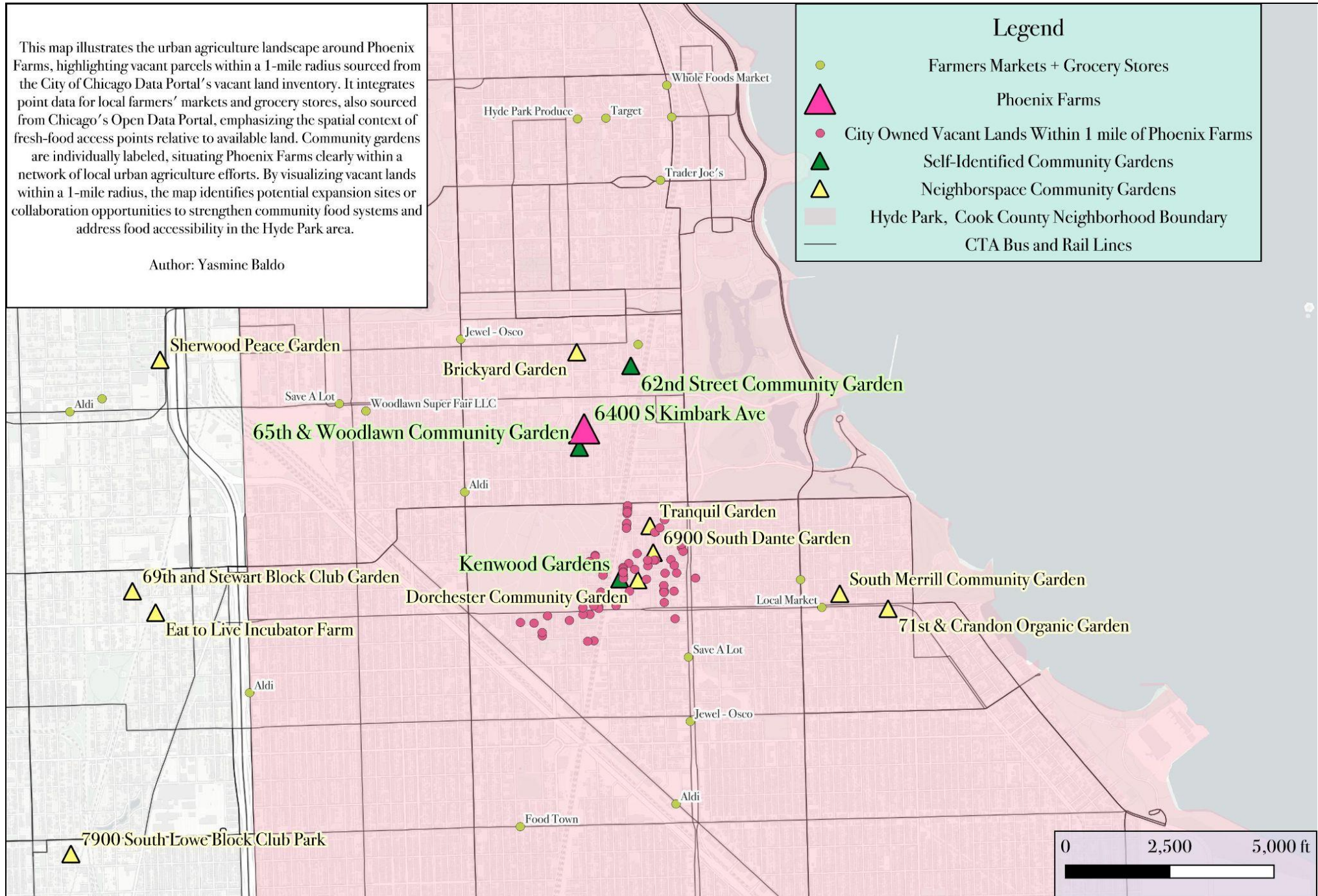
City Owned Vacant Lands Within 1 mile of Phoenix Farms

Self-Identified Community Gardens

Neighborspace Community Gardens

Hyde Park, Cook County Neighborhood Boundary

CTA Bus and Rail Lines



## What's Being Done

### Landscape Analysis: Existing Urban Agriculture Initiatives

#### *Categorization of Urban Agriculture Models*

Research was conducted across several distinct operational models to contextualize Phoenix Farms within the broader ecosystem of urban agriculture.

1. **Traditional Community Gardens:** Emphasizing collective stewardship, these initiatives rely on volunteer labor and communal governance to sustain operations.

**Examples:** [Hermitage Street Community Garden](#) (Chicago), Kumunda Community Garden (Chicago), [62nd Street Garden](#) (Chicago)

2. **Food Distribution Networks:** Focusing on direct supply chains that channel locally grown produce into food pantries and community markets.

**Examples:** [Hyde Park Food Pantry](#), [Greater Chicago Food Depository](#), [The Talking Farm](#) (Evanston, IL)

3. **Policy & Land Protection Organizations:** Securing long-term land tenure for urban agriculture projects, often through legal advocacy and zoning reforms.

**Examples:** [NeighborSpace](#) (Chicago), [Chicago Food Action Policy Council](#), [Advocates for Urban Agriculture](#) (AUA; Chicago)

4. **Market-Driven Urban Farms:** Generating revenue through CSA models, farmers' markets, and composting programs to ensure financial sustainability.

**Examples:** [Urban Canopy](#) (Chicago), [Growing Home](#) (Chicago), [Victory Gardens Initiative](#) (Milwaukee, WI)

5. **Educational & Youth Engagement Farms:** Leveraging urban farming as a pedagogical tool for environmental education and skill development.

**Examples:** [Gary Comer Youth Center](#) (Chicago), [Edible Evanston](#) (Evanston, IL), [Michigan Urban Farming Initiative](#) (Detroit, MI)

Understanding these different frameworks allows Phoenix Farms to strategically position itself as an intersectional initiative—blending aspects of policy advocacy, community engagement, and financial sustainability.

*This matrix categorizes urban agriculture organizations by their operational model, illustrating how each group fits within Traditional Garden, Food Distribution, Policy/Land Protection, Market-Driven, and Education & Youth Engagement frameworks; of course, they are all in reality dynamic organizations, but this comparison can help Phoenix Farms to better understand the diverse ecosystem of urban agriculture efforts and align its own strategies for maximum community impact.*

| Organization                                   | Traditional Garden | Food Distribution | Policy/Land Protection | Market-Driven | Education & Youth Engagement |
|------------------------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|------------------------|---------------|------------------------------|
| Phoenix Farms                                  |                    |                   |                        |               |                              |
| Hermitage Street Community Garden              |                    |                   |                        |               |                              |
| Kumunda Community Garden                       |                    |                   |                        |               |                              |
| 62nd Street Garden                             |                    |                   |                        |               |                              |
| Hyde Park Food Pantry                          |                    |                   |                        |               |                              |
| Greater Chicago Food Depository                |                    |                   |                        |               |                              |
| NeighborSpace                                  |                    |                   |                        |               |                              |
| Chicago Food Action Policy Council             |                    |                   |                        |               |                              |
| Advocates for Urban Agriculture (AUA; Chicago) |                    |                   |                        |               |                              |
| Urban Canopy                                   |                    |                   |                        |               |                              |
| Growing Home                                   |                    |                   |                        |               |                              |
| Gary Comer Youth Center                        |                    |                   |                        |               |                              |

## *Peer Cities and Regional Comparisons*

Chicago is not alone in its struggles with food deserts and disinvestment; many Midwestern cities share similar histories of industrial decline, racialized urban planning, and economic stratification, presenting similar challenges to urban gardens and food forest initiatives like Phoenix Farms. The selection of peer cities for analysis was based on overlapping socio-economic and environmental challenges. For instance, meteorological variability and proximity to the Great Lakes lead to unpredictable weather patterns with evident implications for operational logistics in urban infrastructure and farming. Cities most proximate to Lake Michigan are both uplifted by the commercial benefits of waterfront recreation and development but also potentially susceptible to flood risk, shoreline erosion, and groundwater contamination.

**Detroit, MI:** Once a thriving industrial hub, Detroit now faces widespread food insecurity exacerbated by an abundance of vacant land. The Detroit Black Community Food Security Network ([DBCFSN](#)) spearheads multiple urban farms, a co-op food store, and extensive youth programming aimed at building food sovereignty in predominantly Black communities. They emphasize collective ownership of both land and decision-making processes, ensuring that residents have a direct say in the organization's direction. DBCFSN also hosts regular workshops on topics like composting and seed saving, helping community members develop deeper agricultural skills. Their work underscores how grassroots collaboration can reclaim vacant parcels for long-term community benefit. By leveraging Detroit's abundant open land, DBCFSN provides a blueprint for how Phoenix Farms might scale up its own micro-forest model.

**Milwaukee, WI:** The city has invested in urban agriculture as a means of bolstering food access while simultaneously tackling climate resilience. The [Victory Gardens Initiative](#) focuses on turning home and community gardens into robust sources of local produce, emphasizing the empowerment of everyday residents. Their annual "Blitz" event involves installing hundreds of raised beds in backyards and neighborhoods throughout Milwaukee, rapidly expanding food access. Beyond food production, Victory Gardens Initiative integrates educational programming for youth, teaching them gardening skills, environmental stewardship, and healthy cooking techniques. They also collaborate with restaurants and local markets to promote a locavore movement, creating supply chains that favor small growers. This model of widespread, decentralized food production offers Phoenix Farms ideas on how to engage residents who might not have large plots or existing gardening experience.

**Evanston, IL:** Evanston has taken a more proactive stance in embedding urban agriculture into local governance. [The Talking Farm](#) in Evanston runs on a hybrid model combining educational programming with a semi-market-driven approach to help fund its operations. Their Howard Street Farm showcases season-extension techniques (like hoop houses) that allow them to grow produce nearly year-round. Through partnerships with local schools and community centers, The Talking Farm offers hands-on workshops in sustainable agriculture, composting, and beekeeping. Surplus produce is sold at community markets, reinforcing a closed-loop economic system that supports their educational work. By highlighting these self-sustaining revenue strategies, The Talking Farm exemplifies how Phoenix Farms could balance community engagement with financial resilience.

**Gary, IN:** As a post-industrial city with limited economic diversification, Gary shares many of the structural barriers present in Chicago's South Side. The [Gary Food Collective](#) has adopted a cooperative ownership model, allowing neighborhood residents to be both contributors and beneficiaries. This collective pools resources—land, labor, and small-scale capital—to run urban farms that supply fresh produce at below-market prices. They place a strong emphasis on civic engagement, running monthly meetings where members collaboratively set goals, plan planting schedules, and decide how profits are re-invested. Partnerships with local schools and churches expand both distribution and volunteer networks. Such cooperative frameworks highlight how Phoenix Farms might increase community buy-in and long-term sustainability, particularly in neighborhoods that have faced persistent disinvestment.

These cities provide valuable insights into adaptable strategies for Phoenix Farms—particularly in securing long-term land rights, fostering community participation, and leveraging educational programs as catalysts for sustained engagement.

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## **Benchmarking Analysis: Best Practices & Challenges**

### *Methods*

After completing the initial landscape analysis, a targeted set of urban agriculture organizations were identified based on their alignment with Phoenix Farms' goals, geographic proximity, and operational models. Each group was then contacted—primarily through email—to request informational interviews on topics such as funding structures, community engagement approaches, and land-tenure strategies. These interviews, combined with publicly available data (websites, mission statements, and news coverage), formed the basis of the comparative assessment. By categorizing organizations under Traditional Garden, Food Distribution, Policy/Land Protection, Market-Driven, and Education & Youth Engagement frameworks, Phoenix Farms gained a nuanced understanding of different best practices, ultimately informing its own strategic direction.

## Key Findings from Interviews

### 📍 Kenwood Gardens



### Kenwood Gardens & Rebuild Foundation

Kenwood Gardens, a project spearheaded by Theaster Gates and supported by Chris Abraham, exemplifies a community-driven approach to urban revitalization. Gates' philosophy centers around small-scale, incremental development that allows for deep community engagement, ensuring that projects respond to local needs rather than imposing top-down solutions. This strategy has been instrumental in transforming 13 vacant lots into a flourishing green space that fosters community pride and environmental stewardship. Abraham emphasized that building trust with local residents was a crucial first step. Initially met with skepticism, the garden gradually became a symbol of community cohesion as its aesthetic and ecological benefits became evident.

A key lesson from Kenwood Gardens is the role of visibility and media exposure in fostering engagement. When the project received attention from local media outlets like the Chicago Tribune, it attracted volunteers and interest beyond the immediate neighborhood, broadening its

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<sup>3</sup> Manny Ramos, photograph of Kenwood Gardens, in "Kenwood Gardens Transforms Vacant Lots in Greater Grand Crossing: 'It's Something the Neighborhood Can Be Proud Of,'" *Chicago Sun-Times*, September 1, 2021, <https://chicago.suntimes.com/news/2021/9/1/22652625/kenwood-gardens-st-laurence-school-arts-incubator-theaster-gates-greater-grand-crossing>

impact. Phoenix Farms could leverage similar tactics by collaborating with local publications, such as [\*The Chicago Maroon\*](#), to generate awareness and invite community participation.

Kenwood Gardens also provides a model for dealing with vacant lots. Given the challenges of converting brownfield sites into arable land, Abraham employed a strategic approach using gravel as a substrate to establish drought-resistant plantings. While this method is not ideal for food production, it demonstrates a low-maintenance approach to land reclamation. Phoenix Farms, in its expansion efforts, could consider alternative methods such as raised beds or soil remediation to overcome similar challenges in transforming vacant urban lots into productive spaces.

Funding strategies for Kenwood Gardens illustrate the benefits of leveraging both private and public partnerships. Gates, an internationally recognized artist, was able to secure funding from a mix of private donors and public sources, including the City of Chicago. Abraham, in turn, developed relationships with municipal officials to secure funding for additional community gardens on Chicago's West Side. A potential avenue for Phoenix Farms would be to explore municipal grants or build relationships with local government entities interested in urban agriculture as a tool for community development.

Another successful model integrated into Kenwood Gardens was the Green Corps program, a federally funded workforce development initiative focused on reintegrating formerly incarcerated individuals into the labor market through hands-on training in gardening and landscaping. This initiative not only provided the manpower necessary to construct the garden but also fostered trust and skill-building within the community. Phoenix Farms could benefit from a similar partnership, securing labor while also contributing to job training programs that benefit marginalized populations.

### *Central Takeaway*

For Phoenix Farms, a central takeaway is the necessity of early, tangible wins that signal progress and invite local buy-in. Collaborating with city agencies (like the Chicago Mayor's Office or Department of Planning and Development) and investing time in building relationships with local civic leaders can open doors to grants or unused municipal land. Additionally, capitalizing on workforce development programs, such as Green Corps Chicago or reentry job initiatives backed by organizations like the Chicago Jobs Council, can help Phoenix Farms

bolster its labor force while fulfilling a social mission. By emphasizing visible environmental improvements and forming strong institutional partnerships, Phoenix Farms can similarly anchor its micro-food forests in local pride and communal momentum.

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### 📍 The Urban Canopy



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### Urban Canopy

Urban Canopy, a for-profit urban farming organization, offers a unique model of financial sustainability through diversification. While its growing operations are not inherently profitable, it sustains itself through a multi-pronged approach, including composting distribution, a community-supported agriculture (CSA) program, and partnerships with local farmers' markets. This model demonstrates the importance of identifying alternative revenue streams to support urban agriculture initiatives. Phoenix Farms, as a nonprofit, might consider integrating a similar approach by establishing partnerships with composting programs or implementing a CSA system to generate sustainable revenue.

One of Urban Canopy's most innovative strategies is its closed-loop production system, which utilizes compost collected from residential and commercial sources as a growing medium. This practice reduces input costs and enhances soil health while promoting environmental

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<sup>4</sup> The Urban Canopy, photograph on "The Urban Canopy" website, <https://www.theurbancanopy.org/>.

sustainability. Additionally, they source free materials such as wood chips from local tree trimmers and nitrogen-rich burlap sacks from coffee roasters like Intelligentsia. These strategies showcase a cost-effective method of soil enhancement that Phoenix Farms could adopt, particularly given the challenges of soil contamination in urban settings.

Community engagement remains a logistical challenge for Urban Canopy, particularly during the growing season when farmers and residents have limited availability. However, they have addressed this issue through open-door policies and partnerships with local organizations such as the Resilient Food Network and the University of Illinois Urban Farming Extension Office. These collaborations provide mutual support, shared resources, and increased visibility. Phoenix Farms could benefit from engaging with similar networks to amplify its presence and foster collaboration with like-minded urban agriculture initiatives. Urban Canopy also participates in capacity-building grant programs, such as those offered by the Advocates for Urban Agriculture (AUA). These grants provide funding for infrastructure improvements and expansion efforts. This presents a viable funding opportunity for Phoenix Farms, particularly as it looks to scale its operations and improve its facilities.

### *Central Takeaway*

For Phoenix Farms, the concept of turning compost into a reliable revenue source could be critical, particularly if extended to a subscription-based model that underscores the importance of sustainable waste cycling. Engaging with local coffee shops, restaurants, and landscaping companies to secure free or low-cost inputs can help reduce overhead costs while improving soil quality. Moreover, supplementing micro-forests with a CSA component can both diversify income and forge stronger ties between farmers, community residents, and potential donors. Viewing the farm as an integrated system rather than a standalone garden—where composting, distribution, education, and workforce training all feed into each other—can create a robust operational framework poised for growth.

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## 📍 Hermitage Street Community Garden



### Hermitage Street Community Garden

The Hermitage Street Community Garden, founded by Cordia Pugh, offers a model of long-term sustainability despite its challenges in securing funding. Originally self-funded for 15 years, the garden only recently transitioned into a NeighborSpace property, not for resource access but to secure long-term land tenure. This demonstrates the importance of establishing legal protections for community gardens to prevent displacement and ensure longevity. Phoenix Farms may consider exploring similar land trust arrangements to safeguard its future.

A distinctive feature of Hermitage is its collective gardening model, in which plots are managed cooperatively rather than assigned to individuals. This approach fosters a greater sense of shared responsibility and community ownership. For Phoenix Farms, adopting elements of collective gardening could encourage greater engagement and participation from residents who may be hesitant to take on individual plots.

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<sup>5</sup> Hermitage Street Community Garden, photograph on the “Hermitage Street Community Garden Workday” event page, *Chicago Community Gardens*, <https://chicagocommunitygardens.org/event/hermitage-street-community-garden-workday-3/>.

Hermitage Street Community Garden also actively organizes programming events to strengthen community ties. While connectivity issues in Englewood pose logistical challenges—Pugh noted that she often has to leave the neighborhood to make phone calls—she has nonetheless built a strong network of supporters. This underscores the importance of establishing reliable communication channels for community organizing. Phoenix Farms might explore digital outreach strategies, such as text-based community alerts or social media engagement, to overcome similar logistical barriers.

Furthermore, Hermitage recently received an AUA Capacity Building Grant, which has provided resources for infrastructure improvements. This reinforces the importance of seeking external funding opportunities to sustain and enhance urban agriculture initiatives. Phoenix Farms should actively pursue such grants and partnerships to ensure financial viability and long-term success.

### *Central Takeaway*

This experience highlights two major points for Phoenix Farms. First, ensuring permanence through land trusts or partnerships with organizations like NeighborSpace and Advocates for Urban Agriculture helps guard against displacement, a common concern in rapidly changing neighborhoods. Second, collective gardening arrangements can serve as a blueprint for sharing responsibilities, encouraging resident participation, and maintaining consistency in site upkeep. By embedding community gatherings into its calendar—perhaps leveraging local schools, churches, or block clubs—Phoenix Farms could deepen local stewardship of each micro-food forest. Together, these measures ensure the farms remain rooted in the neighborhood’s collective well-being rather than relying solely on a few individuals.

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## 📍 Victory Garden Initiative



### Victory Garden Initiative

Victory Garden Initiative (VGI) in Milwaukee has been active since 2009 and offers a valuable peer-city model for Phoenix Farms, demonstrating how to build robust, community-centered urban agriculture programs. Founded by Gretchen Mead, VGI initially made its mark through a “Great Blitz,” installing garden beds in residential backyards—expanding from just 35 to over 7,000 in a few years. By 2014–2015, the organization had established a 1.5-acre urban farm that now anchors educational programming. These classes cover everything from container gardening and soil health to broader nutrition and culinary skills, reflecting a commitment to engaging families and young people across Milwaukee’s diverse neighborhoods. VGI’s flagship “You Pick” initiative in the food-insecure Harambee community allows residents to harvest fresh produce directly from the farm free of cost, supported in part by a “pay what you can” farm stand model. Despite outreach challenges—particularly ensuring local residents are aware of these benefits—VGI has consistently innovated in community engagement, hosting events like neighborhood block parties, a large-scale Thanksgiving “Gather and Gobble,” and offering a community room to foster direct interaction between staff, volunteers, and neighbors. This inclusive, celebratory environment helps bridge cultural and generational gaps while reinforcing VGI’s mission of achieving “food for all.”

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<sup>6</sup> *Urban Milwaukee*, photograph in “The Rise of Victory Gardens,” published March 15, 2019, <https://urbanmilwaukee.com/2019/03/15/the-rise-of-victory-gardens/>.

### *Central Takeaway*

For Phoenix Farms, VGI’s multifaceted approach underscores three key recommendations. First, sliding-scale or sponsor-based fee structures for raised garden beds can facilitate wider access to fresh produce while generating essential revenue—allowing higher-income participants to cross-subsidize costs for low-income families. Second, extensive community-building events (e.g., block parties, seasonal gatherings) can serve as both outreach and celebration, drawing in individuals who might not otherwise engage with an urban farm. Third, VGI’s emphasis on diversifying leadership and staff to match local demographics speaks directly to the importance of cultural competence, trust-building, and outreach in historically marginalized areas. Making deliberate efforts to recruit people of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and residents from the immediate neighborhood for both staff roles and board positions aligns the farm’s governance with the community it hopes to serve. By committing to these strategies, Phoenix Farms can reinforce its micro-food forest mission, leverage corporate and philanthropic grants (as seen in VGI’s partnerships with retailers like Walmart and Trader Joe’s), and nurture a self-sustaining cycle of engagement that yields generational change.

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### *Case Study: Kumunda Community Garden*

#### 📍 Kumunda Community Garden




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<sup>7</sup> *Hyde Park Herald*, photograph in “From Kenwood to Woodlawn, Neighborhood Gardens Cultivate Community,” published October 12, 2022, [https://www.hpherald.com/evening\\_digest/from-kenwood-to-woodlawn-neighborhood-gardens-cultivate-community/article\\_5722eba6-4a79-11ed-af0c-3f88f3223992.html](https://www.hpherald.com/evening_digest/from-kenwood-to-woodlawn-neighborhood-gardens-cultivate-community/article_5722eba6-4a79-11ed-af0c-3f88f3223992.html).

Kumunda Community Garden's proximity to Phoenix Farms' target neighborhoods underscores its potential as a practical, site-specific reference. While Kumunda employs standard urban agriculture techniques—like raised beds and pollinator-friendly plantings—its most striking feature is a dedication to “urban gardening ethics,” a concept emphasizing land as a shared civic resource rather than as a purely utilitarian asset<sup>8</sup>. This aligns with academic frameworks like Nate Ela's “Urban Commons as Property Experiment,” which views community-managed green spaces as living laboratories for collective ownership. By foregrounding cultural, educational, and ecological values, Kumunda fosters an inclusive environment that resonates with local youth, elders, and families.

For Phoenix Farms, embedding cultural or heritage crops and emphasizing shared land stewardship could anchor the micro-food forests more firmly within their respective communities. Partnerships with local schools and youth programs—similar to Kumunda's outreach—can amplify intergenerational learning while tying the farm's mission to broader social objectives like healthy eating, environmental justice, and even cultural reclamation. Viewing urban green spaces as “commons” rather than closed-off properties also encourages residents to become co-creators of the farm, reflecting Kumunda's ethos of communal engagement and longevity.

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<sup>8</sup> Ela, Nate. “Urban Commons as Property Experiment: Mapping Chicago's Farms and Gardens.” SSRN Scholarly Paper ID 2744294. Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, 2016.  
[https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2744294](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2744294)

## Phoenix Farms' Role & Strategic Recommendations



**Diversify Funding Streams:** Pursue municipal grants, engage in revenue-generating activities such as a CSA program, and explore composting initiatives to sustain operations.

### *Potential Funds*

[AUA Funding Opportunities](#) provides small grants and technical support for Chicago-based urban agriculture projects, which Phoenix Farms could use to strengthen infrastructure, expand services, and build organizational capacity.

[The Pollination Project](#) offers daily micro-grants to social change projects around the world, allowing Phoenix Farms to secure early-stage or niche funding for community-driven food forestry initiatives.

[Whole Kids Garden Grant Program](#) focuses on funding school and community garden projects, helping Phoenix Farms partner with educational institutions to integrate youth programming into its micro-food forests.

[Neighborhood Opportunity Fund](#) provides financial support from the City of Chicago for economic development projects on the South and West Sides, aligning with Phoenix Farms' mission to revitalize vacant lots for food production and community engagement.

[Pre-Development Fund](#) offers grants for pre-construction planning, allowing Phoenix Farms to cover initial design, environmental assessments, or community workshops before breaking ground on new sites.

[Gro More Good](#) awards grants focused on children's garden initiatives, giving Phoenix Farms a chance to expand its youth programming—especially in neighborhoods with limited green space.

[USDA Patrick Leahy Grant](#), a federal program supporting Farm-to-School and related agricultural education efforts, which Phoenix Farms could leverage to embed educational components in its micro-forests.

[Great Lakes Environmental Justice Grant](#) funds environmental justice initiatives in the Great Lakes region, which may help Phoenix Farms address food deserts and pollution-related issues through sustainable agroforestry practices.

[Community Development Grants](#) City- and state-level grants designed to spur neighborhood revitalization; Phoenix Farms could utilize these to finance physical improvements (raised beds, compost stations) and youth employment programs.

[IAM-Chi Micro Grants](#) are small-scale micro grants for local community projects, enabling Phoenix Farms to pilot new outreach events or sustainable planting strategies with minimal overhead risk.

[Cultivating Healthy Environments](#) provides support for organizations promoting health and environmental well-being, which aligns perfectly with Phoenix Farms' vision of nutrient-rich, self-sustaining urban foodscapes.

[Youth Service America](#) focuses on youth-led community service projects, offering Phoenix Farms a chance to engage teens and children in leadership roles within the micro-forest.

[Native Plants Grant](#) supports the purchase and cultivation of native flora, helping Phoenix Farms diversify plantings that restore soil health, strengthen pollinator habitats, and reduce maintenance costs.

[Jewel Osco](#) regularly supports nonprofit food initiatives, giving Phoenix Farms an avenue for grocery retail partnerships—ranging from store donations to branded sponsorships of garden expansions.

[Green Corps Chicago](#) provides horticulture training and employment to individuals facing barriers to workforce reentry, aligning with Phoenix Farms' social mission while supplying skilled labor for garden maintenance.

Grants like AUA Funding Opportunities and the Neighborhood Opportunity Fund directly address both infrastructure and organizational growth. AUA has historically funded small but impactful enhancements—similar to the compost initiatives at The Urban Canopy—while the Neighborhood Opportunity Fund can help with larger-scale expansions and the renovation of vacant lots. The Pollination Project's micro-grants can cover niche or experimental projects (e.g., a specialized mushroom compost system), which was a tactic used by Kenwood Gardens for small-scale improvements that captured community interest.

### **Tying to Interview Findings**

At The Urban Canopy, revenue diversity (from CSA shares, compost sales, and farmers' markets) has been key to financial stability. Phoenix Farms can replicate that approach by blending traditional fundraising (grants/donations) with direct-to-consumer produce boxes and compost subscriptions. Victory Garden Initiative (VGI) underscores the value

of tiered pricing models for garden beds—letting higher-income participants subsidize the costs for low-income families. Phoenix Farms could adapt a similar structure for micro-food forest memberships or workshop fees.

#### **Additional External Resource**

According to the USDA’s [Urban Agriculture Toolkit](#), short-term pop-up markets or “harvest fairs” can boost revenue while raising community awareness. Phoenix Farms might combine these events with a sliding-scale fee system, using the proceeds to offset operational expenses.



**Leverage Media and Publicity:** Utilize local media to raise awareness and attract volunteers, similar to Kenwood Gardens’ experience with *The Chicago Tribune*. Crafting a signature logo or symbol can also help to widen Phoenix Farms’ exposure and leave a lasting impression.

#### **Applying Lessons from Kenwood Gardens**

Chris Abraham leveraged media coverage to attract new volunteers, making visibility a key factor for success. Phoenix Farms should consider tapping local publications, from *Block Club Chicago* to university newspapers, with press releases about any new partnerships or farm expansions. Creating a recognizable logo or symbol is essential for brand identity; as Theaster Gates used art and creative storytelling to draw attention, Phoenix Farms might collaborate with local artists or design students to develop a cohesive visual presence on signage, flyers, and social media.

#### **Additional External Resource**

The Chicago-based nonprofit marketing platform [Forefront](#) offers workshops on effective storytelling and brand building for small organizations. Engaging with these resources can help Phoenix Farms hone its media strategy. In essence, Forefront is a one-stop hub for nonprofits looking to maximize their impact, and Phoenix Farms stands to benefit from membership or even occasional workshop attendance. From refining your brand identity to matching with the right funders and learning about emerging policy trends, Forefront’s services can bolster the sustainable, community-centered growth Phoenix Farms aims to achieve in Chicago’s urban agriculture landscape.

 **Strengthen Community Partnerships:** Collaborate with organizations like the Resilient Food Network, NeighborSpace, and local workforce training programs to build support and expand impact.

### **Relating to the Interviews**

Hermitage Street Community Garden achieved longevity by transitioning to NeighborSpace property status, securing land rights and external support. Phoenix Farms can similarly benefit from establishing formal land tenure agreements and forging co-ops with city agencies or nonprofits. The Urban Canopy's success in forging partnerships with the University of Illinois Extension demonstrates how academic networks can offer research, volunteer labor, and specialized knowledge—vital assets when scaling new micro-forest sites.

### **Additional External Resource**

The [Chicago Jobs Council](#) fosters workforce development programs that often seek community-based training sites. Phoenix Farms could partner with them or Green Corps Chicago to train unemployed or formerly incarcerated individuals, simultaneously meeting labor needs and social-impact goals.

 **Adopt Sustainable Land Use Practices:** Implement raised beds, composting initiatives, and alternative soil remediation strategies to address contamination concerns.

### **Implementing Interview Insights**

Both The Urban Canopy and Victory Garden Initiative stress the necessity of free or low-cost organic materials—like donated wood chips or coffee burlap sacks—to mitigate expenses and remediate poor soil. Phoenix Farms can replicate these closed-loop systems by collaborating with local tree-trimming companies, coffee roasters, and compost providers. Hermitage Street Community Garden's focus on cooperative growing can augment land-use efficiency; a collective approach ensures shared accountability for maintaining raised beds and compost heaps.

### **Additional External Resource**

The [EPA's Brownfields Program](#) offers guidance on safe soil remediation and best practices for vacant urban lots. Though not a direct funding channel, the program's technical resources can support Phoenix Farms in ensuring healthy planting conditions and community safety.



**Secure Land Tenure:** Explore land trust arrangements, like NeighborSpace, to ensure long-term stability and prevent displacement.

### **Interview Correlations**

Hermitage Street Community Garden and Kenwood Gardens highlight the importance of official legal structures to protect against gentrification or municipal land reallocation. Phoenix Farms should investigate land-trust frameworks early, especially if it plans to establish multiple micro-forests across the city. Kenwood Gardens relied on Chris Abraham's relationships with city officials to facilitate expansions. Similarly, forging ties with aldermen or neighborhood councils can expedite the process of obtaining vacant lots or city grants.



**Expand Community Engagement Efforts:** Establish clear communication strategies, organize events, and consider collective gardening models to foster inclusivity.

### **Direct Interview Applications**

VGI's block parties, Thanksgiving gatherings, and "You Pick" events exemplify how celebrating harvests and community milestones can generate ongoing goodwill and awareness. Phoenix Farms can organize seasonal festivals or harvest fairs, inviting local DJs, food vendors, and nonprofits to create a genuinely communal atmosphere. Hermitage Street Community Garden overcame limited digital infrastructure by hosting frequent on-site events and staying engaged with local schools, churches, and block clubs. Phoenix Farms might replicate that approach by coordinating door-to-door outreach, especially in neighborhoods with fewer tech resources.

### **Additional External Resource**

[Chicago Cares](#) offers support for grassroots volunteer events, connecting local organizers with people seeking service opportunities. They often collaborate with nonprofits to structure volunteer opportunities that balance an organization's specific needs (e.g., weeding, composting, or raised-bed construction) with volunteer interests and skill sets. By signing up as a partner site, Phoenix Farms can tap into Chicago Cares' pool of individual volunteers, as well as corporate teams seeking group service opportunities. In doing so, Phoenix Farms may free up staff time, accelerate project timelines, and extend its outreach.

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## **Conclusion**

Urban agriculture is both a remedy and a form of resistance—a reclamation of autonomy in neighborhoods historically burdened by systemic inequity. Vacant lots across Chicago’s South Side symbolize not only past disinvestment and neglect, but also immense possibilities for revitalization. These empty spaces embody both a painful history and a promising future, waiting patiently to be nurtured into vibrant ecosystems of food sovereignty, resilience, and communal healing.

Phoenix Farms stands uniquely positioned at this transformative intersection, ready to harness these opportunities into lasting change. By blending innovative funding models, strategic partnerships, and sustained community engagement, Phoenix Farms can create not only gardens but thriving hubs of empowerment and equity. The vision extends beyond food production alone; it includes nurturing community stewardship, fostering intergenerational learning, and empowering residents to reclaim and redefine their local food systems.

## Comprehensive Contact List

These are the bulk of the organizations I reached out to during the duration of this internship. I include a status of whether I: received no response, received a response without a follow-up, or received a response and was able to secure an interview, including any relevant contact details.

At the board's discretion, it may be helpful to follow-up again with the organizations and individuals that did not follow-up on an interview time.

| Organization                               | Status                                                                                                                                                     |
|--------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Neighborspace                              | No Response ▾                                                                                                                                              |
| Rebuild Foundation                         | Interview Secured (Potential Partnership) ▾<br>Contact: Chris Abraham<br><a href="mailto:chris.abraham@gmail.com">chris.abraham@gmail.com</a>              |
| Urban Growers Collective                   | No Follow-Up ▾<br>Contact: Erika Allen<br><a href="mailto:erika@urbangrowerscollective.org">erika@urbangrowerscollective.org</a>                           |
| 65th & Woodlawn                            | No Follow-Up ▾<br>Contact: Ann Lindsey<br><a href="mailto:65thandwoodlawn@gmail.com">65thandwoodlawn@gmail.com</a>                                         |
| 62nd Street Garden                         | No Response ▾                                                                                                                                              |
| The Urban Canopy                           | Interview Secured (Potential Partnership) ▾<br>Contact: Alice Cusick<br><a href="mailto:theurbancanopy.alice@gmail.com">theurbancanopy.alice@gmail.com</a> |
| El Paseo Community Garden                  | No Response ▾                                                                                                                                              |
| Grow Greater Englewood                     | No Response ▾                                                                                                                                              |
| Plant Chicago                              | No Follow-Up ▾<br>Contact: Karen Salas<br><a href="mailto:karen@plantchicago.org">karen@plantchicago.org</a>                                               |
| Chicago FarmWorks                          | No Response ▾                                                                                                                                              |
| Chicago Honey Co-op                        | No Response ▾                                                                                                                                              |
| Big Green (formerly The Kitchen Community) | No Response ▾                                                                                                                                              |
| GrowIN Chicago (sometimes "Growing         | No Response ▾                                                                                                                                              |

|                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                               |
|------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Home” or “GROWIN”)                                   |                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Enlace Chicago                                       | No Follow-Up ▾<br>Contact: Jadhira Sanchez<br><a href="mailto:jasanchez@enlacechicago.org">jasanchez@enlacechicago.org</a>                                                    |
| Getting Grown Collective                             | No Response ▾                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Global Garden Refugee Training Farm                  | No Follow-Up ▾<br>Contact: Jessica Davis<br><a href="mailto:info@globalgardenschicago.org">info@globalgardenschicago.org</a>                                                  |
| Just Roots Chicago                                   | No Follow-Up ▾<br>Contact: Celie Davis<br><a href="mailto:celie@justrootschicago.org">celie@justrootschicago.org</a>                                                          |
| Mozart Community Garden                              | No Response ▾                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Hermitage Street Community Garden                    | Interview Secured (Potential Partnership) ▾<br>Contact: Cordia Pugh<br><a href="mailto:hermitagestreetcommunitygarden@gmail.com">hermitagestreetcommunitygarden@gmail.com</a> |
| Diversey & Roscoe Community Gardens                  | No Response ▾                                                                                                                                                                 |
| DBCFSN Detroit Black Community Food Security Network | Interview Secured (Potential Partnership) ▾<br>Contact: Shakara<br><a href="mailto:styler@dbcfsn.org">styler@dbcfsn.org</a>                                                   |
| MUFI Michigan Urban Farming Initiative               | No Response ▾                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Victory Garden Initiative                            | Interview Secured (Potential Partnership) ▾<br>Contact: Sandra<br><a href="mailto:helpusgrow@victorygardeninitiative.org">helpusgrow@victorygardeninitiative.org</a>          |
| Evanston Environmental Association (EEA)             | No Response ▾                                                                                                                                                                 |

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## Notes on the Above References

- Many of the listed websites (e.g., *NeighborSpace*, *The Talking Farm*, *Urban Canopy*, etc.) were cited in the body of the report to illustrate existing organizations, models, or best practices in urban agriculture.

- Some organizations (e.g., *Gary Food Collective*, *Growing Home*, etc.) are mentioned by name but did not include a direct link in the text. Where no specific URL was provided, they are still included in this works-cited list for completeness.
- The references to granting entities and city programs (like the *Neighborhood Opportunity Fund*, *Pollination Project*, or *Green Corps Chicago*) appeared in the report's recommended funding and partnership options. Where the text included a link, it is listed here.
- All hyperlinks replicate those embedded in the PDF. Where multiple references link to the same home page (e.g., repeated references to city-owned vacant land data), the domain is listed once.

## Appendix: QGIS Workflow & Vacant Land Addresses

The visualizations leveraged [CTA](#) data to illustrate the proximity of transportation infrastructure, highlighting equitable transit-oriented development potential for vacant lands. Data from the Chicago Open Data Portal for [grocery stores](#) and [farmers' markets](#) were included to identify gaps in healthy food access, pinpointing neighborhoods underserved by existing food retail outlets.

Additionally, vacant land data from the [City-Owned Land Inventory](#) were cross-referenced to map available city-owned parcels, emphasizing opportunities for community-based agriculture and urban renewal initiatives.

For community garden locations, data were drawn from multiple sources to ensure comprehensive coverage. The [Chicago Community Growers Association](#) maintains a publicly accessible Google My Maps interface (updated as of early 2023) where garden operators can self-report their sites.

These points, originally available as a KML/KMZ file, were combined with a separate map, where [addresses listed by NeighborSpace](#) were manually added, a land trust that safeguards properties for community gardens across Chicago. Finally, these data were reprojected into QGIS for spatial integration and visual layering. Each step—such as copying and pasting addresses or exporting coordinates from Google Maps—helped create a unified dataset of urban agriculture sites that can be compared against the aggregated vacant-lot tracts, illustrating both the potential and existing green spaces in Hyde Park.



Pictured right: [Chicago Community Gardens](#), created by Yasmine Baldo

*Potential Vacant Properties for Expansion*

Below is an address list for the 71 vacant sites (extracted within QGIS) located from the City-Owned Land Inventory database for potential expansion by Phoenix Farms.

1. 6922 S DORCHESTER AVE
2. 1449 E 69TH ST
3. 1509 E 67TH PL
4. 6951 S DORCHESTER AVE
5. 7046 S HARPER AVE
6. 1428 E 69TH PL
7. 6927 S DORCHESTER AVE
8. 1447 E 69TH ST
9. 7018 S HARPER AVE
10. 7015 S HARPER AVE
11. 1501 E 69TH ST
12. 6953 S DORCHESTER AVE
13. 6947 S DORCHESTER AVE
14. 7016 S DORCHESTER AVE
15. 1429 E 69TH ST
16. 6933 S DORCHESTER AVE
17. 6708 S DORCHESTER AVE
18. 6704 S DORCHESTER AVE
19. 6822 S STONY ISLAND AVE
20. 7016 S HARPER AVE
21. 6718 S DORCHESTER AVE
22. 7000 S HARPER AVE
23. 6738 S DORCHESTER AVE
24. 1515 E 69TH PL
25. 6700 S DORCHESTER AVE
26. 1526 E 71ST PL
27. 1510 E 69TH PL
28. 6941 S STONY ISLAND AVE
29. 6712 S DORCHESTER AVE
30. 7020 S HARPER AVE
31. 1426 E 70TH ST
32. 6746 S DORCHESTER AVE
33. 6955 S DORCHESTER AVE
34. 6748 S DORCHESTER AVE
35. 6939 S DORCHESTER AVE
36. 6935 S DORCHESTER AVE
37. 6736 S DORCHESTER AVE

38. 6748 S DORCHESTER AVE
39. 6943 S DORCHESTER AVE
40. 6945 S DORCHESTER AVE
41. 6716 S DORCHESTER AVE
42. 6857 S DORCHESTER AVE
43. 6840 S STONY ISLAND AVE
44. 6846 S STONY ISLAND AVE
45. 6801 S DANTE AVE
46. 6828 S STONY ISLAND AVE
47. 1500 E 68TH ST
48. 1469 E 69TH PL
49. 6830 S STONY ISLAND AVE
50. 1223 E 71ST ST
51. 1229 E 72ND ST
52. 7122 S ELLIS AVE
53. 7008 S KIMBARK AVE
54. 6943 S KIMBARK AVE
55. 1317 E 71ST ST
56. 7051 S KIMBARK AVE
57. 7053 S KIMBARK AVE
58. 6941 S KIMBARK AVE
59. 7157 S DOBSON AVE
60. 1213 E 72ND ST
61. 7105 S WOODLAWN AVE
62. 7052 S WOODLAWN AVE
63. 6949 S KIMBARK AVE
64. 7119 S UNIVERSITY AVE
65. 7106 S GREENWOOD AVE
66. 7044 S KIMBARK AVE
67. 7149 S DOBSON AVE
68. 7124 S DOBSON AVE
69. 6900 S KIMBARK AVE
70. 6902 S KIMBARK AVE
71. 6917 S WOODLAWN AVE