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Push for urban-garden rights sprouts into political movement

By Ralph Montañó - Bee Staff Writer

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Taylor Mesich, left, and Emery Mesich, both 10, prepare to plant seeds in their front yard in east Sacramento in May. Urban gardeners are pushing the city to lift rules against front yard vegetable gardens. Sacramento Bee/Florence Low

Gardens across Sacramento are largely dormant for the winter, but the issues being raised by some urban growers are anything but sleepy.

What began as a neighborhood squabble has been slowly growing into a political movement across the city. Garden advocates say that is because the issue of what people can grow in their own front yards stretches beyond personal freedom. It also touches on improving the environment and helping the city reach its own professed goal of sustainability. Bill Maynard of the Sacramento Area Community Garden Coalition said the Sacramento City Council is expected to discuss their goal of sustainability early in the new year. Gardening advocates see their goal of unrestricted front yard gardens as tied to this council objective.

"Hopefully, (the council) will have a little more knowledge on the issues of edible landscaping by then," Maynard said. "The city should be proactive, not reactive. Ozzie and Harriet landscaping is fine, but times are changing." More than two years have passed since the flower and vegetables in the front yard of Karen Baumann's east Sacramento home caught the city's attention through an anonymous complaint. According to the city's landscaping code, her vegetables, perennials and annuals were illegal.

Attempts to change and update that code have been long and plodding. Garden advocates have argued that people should be able to grow any fruit or vegetable and as much vegetables as they want in their front yards, as long as the yard is well-maintained. But the majority of the City Council's Law and Legislation Committee doesn't agree.

The committee has reviewed the matter twice, the first time shooting down a proposal entirely and sending it back to staff. The last hearing on the issue was in November, when the committee agreed to recommend a modified proposal that allowed gardens to take up to 30 percent of a front yard but banned anything that wasn't a fruit tree to be grown over a height of 4 feet. That means no tomatoes, corn or climbing pea trellises.

Steve Cohn was the lone member of the committee who voiced support for the gardeners.

"We are singling out veggies and fruits with a height limit and a percentage," Cohn said. "I don't know why we are discriminating against fruits and veggies. It makes no sense to me whatsoever. Gardens should be kept and maintained just like a lawn."

Kim Glazzard, a garden advocate with the group Organic Sacramento, pointed out that the council has approved a proposed strategic plan for the upcoming budget year that identified sustainability as one of five goals for the city.

Sustainability, or the ability of a community to sustain its own needs, is what home gardening is all about, Glazzard said. Gardening promotes water conservation, water quality, waste management, air pollution reduction and personal health.

"I don't think there's anyone here who is against people growing fruit and veggies in the front yard," said Councilwoman Lauren Hammond, who chairs the committee. "The issue is corn stalks and tomatoes."

Councilwoman Sandy Sheedy proposed shifting from 20 percent to 30 percent how much of a front yard could be a garden. Councilman Robbie Waters and Hammond supported the measure, while Cohn voted against it.

The proposal will next go to the Planning Commission in January before it can reach the full City Council.

Maynard said Baumann's garden remains a popular topic among gardeners, many of whom would still like to see the code changed. Grass-roots organizations like the East Sacramento Front Yard Garden Club and Sacramento Citizens for Sustainable Landscapes have sprung up because of the issue, and gardeners from across the city are now becoming involved.

"The longer it takes (to resolve this issue) the more people we are seeing get on board," Maynard said. "Every time there's an Earth Day or eco-landscaping, I'm being asked about the ordinance. The word is getting out, and people want to know what's going on and how it is that the city dictates what's grown in our front yards."

About the writer:

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Emery Mesich, 10, cuts some lavender while his mom Karen Baumann gathers flowers from their front yard. An effort by urban gardeners to change city code restricting what can be grown in front yards is growing fast. Sacramento Bee/Florence Low