

Urban Farmers Seeking Support

City Staff Recommends Against Amending Growing Ordinance

By **CANDACE SIPOS**
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HARRISONBURG — When Sam Frere and Dan Warren turned their tiny city yard into a huge gardening experiment, they had no qualms about dreaming big.

Everything from their tomatoes to their goals for micro-farming in the city have been scaled up.

Wednesday evening presents their first opportunity to change city code, allowing what was once merely an experiment to become a business and simultaneously open doors for other food producers in the city.

The Harrisonburg Planning Commission on Wednesday will hear a proposal to amend Harrisonburg's zoning ordinance to allow city residents to grow plants outside for business purposes. The commission meets at City Council chambers at 7 p.m.

The city's planning staff, however, has decided not to recommend it.

The urban farmers are now searching for outside support.

Shared Interests

Frere, 21, and Warren, 22, met as freshmen randomly assigned to the same suite four years ago.

They quickly discovered a shared passion for gardening and common farming backgrounds — Frere grew up on a family-owned farm in Lancaster, Va., and Warren, of Mount Jackson, worked on an orchard in Michigan as a child.

The students moved into a house on Collicello Street together last year and, with the blessing of their landlord, quickly transformed the less than an acre of yard surrounding the rental into a plant haven.

Using no-till practices, companion planting, only homemade, plant-based sprays and their own worm tea created with worm castings and rainwater runoff, the guys are trying to be as sustainable as possible.

They had hopes of operating the first year-round community supported agriculture program in the area. A CSA is an enterprise formed when individuals or groups pledge financial support to a farm, usually pre-harvest, essentially making the shareholders part-owners of the operation. The customers then receive a portion of the harvest every so often, usually each week.

There's one major problem for Frere and Warren: They can't acquire a business license for their CSA because the city's zoning ordinance doesn't allow it.

So far, they've had to ask for donations from "customers" in exchange for their produce.

They want to see the ordinance amended to sanction business licenses for horticulture land uses citywide.

'Comprehensive' Approach

According to the staff report that will be presented to the Planning Commission, city officials "concluded the amendment would create more problems than it would solve."

It cites various concerns, including the possibility that outside storage of equipment, noises and odors could conflict with the area's residential nature, while also addressing the inclusion of all horticulture uses being too vague and the potential complication of the city's tall grass and weeds ordinance.

"We have to look at it from a very comprehensive approach," said city planner Adam Fletcher. "We are a very worst case scenario group of individuals, because we have to be. People are always pushing the boundaries of what they can and can't do with a property."

If the commission approves the amendment, it will be presented to City Council on Jan. 8.

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