



Reimagining the Right-of-Way: Opportunities for Enhancing Urban Agriculture in Toronto's Hydro Corridors

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Executive Summary

Urban agriculture is increasingly recognized for its social, environmental, and economic benefits. However, the urban agriculture movement and its practitioners encounter several barriers and challenges, including accessing land for food production, obtaining financial capital, and navigating municipal obstacles. These issues are particularly prominent for individuals in marginalized communities. There is an opportunity to improve policies and decision-making processes to integrate healthy food and farming more effectively into the urban fabric and cultural practices of cities.

One-way municipalities are actively supporting urban agriculture is by reimagining and repurposing vacant or underutilized public spaces for urban food production. The City of Toronto's transformation of hydroelectricity corridors into productive farmland through the Community Engagement and Entrepreneurial Development (CEED) Garden program is a notable example of this effort. Although community and allotment gardens have existed in these corridors for years, the CEED Garden program stands out as an innovative, partnership-focused, and community-driven urban agriculture model within hydro corridors. For the first time, food grown in the corridors owned by Hydro One, the provincial electricity company, will be made available for sale within the community through market gardens. Additional research is required to explore the possibilities of urban agriculture in these spaces and understand how governments and planners can effectively support it to promote healthier and more resilient cities.

The primary objective of this report is to identify ways of enhancing urban agriculture opportunities in hydro corridors, using the City of Toronto as a case study, with emphasis on the CEED Garden program. It examines the key factors that hinder or enable the integration of food production in these urban spaces.

In response to the objective, this study was guided by the following three research questions:

- What policies, programs, and plans address urban agriculture in the City of Toronto, specifically its integration within hydro corridors?
- What is the experience with urban agriculture within hydro corridors in Toronto, particularly in relation to the Community Engagement and Entrepreneurial Development (CEED) Garden program?
- How can policy enhance urban agriculture opportunities in hydro corridors?

A qualitative case study approach was applied, consisting of a literature review and a document analysis. The literature review provided essential information on the integration of urban agriculture in right-of-ways by using search terms in the domains of food security, food justice, sustainable communities, hydroelectricity corridors, and urban planning. The document analysis synthesized the planning framework and experiences related to urban agriculture by referencing official plans, by-laws, guidelines, strategies, staff reports, municipal webpages for the City of Toronto, and provincial legislation and policies. The process identified three overarching theme

groups and six study themes that formed the foundation for exploring how to enhance urban agriculture opportunities in Toronto. The theme groups included governance and partnerships, community building and inclusion, and resources and incentives. The six study themes included sustainability in decision-making, the role of governments and policy, effective collaboration and relationship building, community engagement, education and skill building, and financing.

The main results included:

- i. Integrating secondary land uses like urban agriculture in hydro right-of-ways provides an opportunity to use land efficiently for a variety of community purposes.
- ii. Urban agriculture projects in right-of-ways, particularly those pursuing social objectives, face distinct concerns, even when well-supported organizations collaborate with the city. Persistent difficulties include land access, infrastructure development, misalignment across tiers of government and planning entities, and funding.
- iii. The success of urban agriculture initiatives depends heavily on effective coordination and cooperation among municipalities, institutional actors like utility companies, community partners, and engaged individuals who help maintain a balance of objectives.
- iv. Policies and strategies related to urban agriculture and utility right-of-way development, including land use policies, by-laws, and regulations, have a significant impact. These policies shape initiatives and help frame them within the broader goals and vision of the city, contributing to various priorities, such as energy and climate change; health, safety, and wellbeing; local economy; and natural areas, parks, and recreation.
- v. The CEED Garden program aimed to free up city land for marginalized, low-income communities to engage in urban agriculture. However, navigating the governance processes and requirements for establishing innovative garden spaces on public land presented challenges. There is a clear need for resources and specialized expertise.
- vi. Factors that hinder or enable the integration of food production in these urban spaces include health and safety concerns, site characteristics and context, regulatory and policy challenges, and institutional change.

This research highlights key lessons learned from urban agriculture initiatives in right-of-ways, particularly the CEED Garden program, to promote future creative and beneficial uses of public land. Drawing on the major findings and results, a series of recommendations are proposed to enhance urban agriculture in right-of-ways as follows:

- Reform municipal by-laws and policies to enable and support urban agriculture.
- Foster meaningful public and community engagement.
- Cultivate creative partnerships and collaborations.
- Ensure hydro corridor policies on secondary uses reflect minimums for electricity and transmission purposes.
- Consider urban design connections between urban agriculture and public spaces.
- Use urban agriculture as a means to oppose, rather than contribute to, the displacement of communities.
- Support urban agriculture opportunities in both public and private spaces.