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Back to the Future at Waltham Field Station

The proposed Center UMass Center for Urban Sustainability will bring new vibrancy to a historic site.

By Chris O'Brien, MCH

Sometimes moving forward means it's "Back to the Future." That may be one way to view the UMass Extension proposal to create a Center for Urban Sustainability at the site of the Extension's Waltham Field Station. In conjunction with the environmental bond bill now under discussion by the state legislature, UMass has developed a \$20 million project for that site organized around the many aspects of urban agriculture.

Once a vibrant part of a network of outposts across the state, Waltham Station was an important experimental site for UMass Extension, but over the past several decades, it was the victim of budget cuts and neglect. Staff was withdrawn, programs were reduced, and maintenance was virtually eliminated. There is an ongoing Extension presence in Waltham, but it is a fraction of what was once there. The original buildings remain, but entire sections, including the auditorium, have been permanently closed for safety reasons.



Photos courtesy UMass Extension Waltham Field Station

The proposed Center for Urban Sustainability would reverse that history and create a hub where all things agricultural meet the urban experience. The UMass Extension project outline states the objectives:

We envision this 58-acre site, 10 miles from downtown Boston, filled with the practical application and demonstration of cutting-edge sustainable agriculture and landscape methods, including a 20,000-square-foot "green" building that will act as a front door portal for "all things sustainable." Science-based practices that benefit the citizenry and economic vitality of the Commonwealth will be showcased.

The vitality of the facility will resemble UMass Amherst and will host a panoply of private and public organizations and agencies as metropolitan Boston's "sustainability mall," with organizational offices, conference, and learning spaces inside the building complemented by community-supported farming, agricultural incubator enterprises practicing urban farming of the future, applied research, and demonstration of the best green landscape practices for urban and suburban residents on the surrounding land.

Priority objectives include programs related to food security and access, environmental stewardship, urban agriculture, and workforce development in urban settings. The goal is to create a financially self-sustaining entity.

MNLA and many other green industry and agriculture organizations support the UMass Center for Sustainability. The state legislature is the key arena as it takes up consideration of a new environmental bond bill to finance environmental projects throughout the state including this one. Hearings on the bond bill have been held over the summer, and approval of a multi-year bonding authorization could occur later this calendar year. Ultimate approval, which would involve the governor's office, followed by design and construction of the UMass Center for Urban Sustainability in Waltham could be several years away — but sometimes going back to the future takes time.

R. Christopher O'Brien, MCH, is a principal at Howard Garden Designs, Inc. and serves as chair of the Government Relations Committee.

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