

# EXPLORING URBAN AGRICULTURE AS A VACANT LAND USE SOLUTION IN SAGINAW

Suitability map created by the Dow Fellows team (large). Ted Lind, Director of Community Conservation at SBLC, directs a group of volunteers (inset). *Inset photo by Zachary Branigan*

**D**riving through the quiet neighborhoods of East Saginaw at the height of spring, you might be surprised to find some of the vacant lots peppered with native wildflower blooms.

Covering 260-acres in just three years, this neighborhood conservation initiative was part of a project led by the Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy (SBLC), a local non-profit working to rewrite the narrative of vacant land in a city with 6,000+ vacant parcels.

Reaching its peak population of 98,265 in 1960, the City of Saginaw has seen continued population declines and property foreclosures that rack up perennial expenses in demolition, mowing, and snow removal. Given the strains of urban blight on the local government and the limited availability of locally sourced and fresh, nutritious food in Saginaw, SBLC is now considering alternative vacant land uses to address the most pressing needs of the community in areas where traditional redevelopment is unlikely in the near future. A 2020 Dow Fellows team from the University of Michigan partnered with SBLC to begin a multifaceted feasibility assessment around implementing an urban agriculture program on vacant lots in Saginaw.

// Rather than continually working on new lots, we are looking for creative approaches on the lots where we have already done some level of restoration. We want to continue to elevate those landscapes and look for other alternative land cover options, such as urban agriculture."

— Ted Lind, *Director of Community Conservation at SBLC*

## NEXT STEPS: FROM FEASIBILITY TO FOOD

Despite the challenges presented by COVID-19, the Dow Fellows team and SBLC remained committed to understanding the perspectives of Saginaw’s community and organizational leaders on urban agriculture and food accessibility in the region. Dow Fellow Allie Martin described the virtual interviews conducted by the team as, “a step to more community research that will need to be done in the future.” The team’s work can serve as part of a larger effort to anticipate how urban agriculture might impact community dynamics, networks, and health in the surrounding neighborhoods.

The final deliverables provided by the Dow Fellows team include a community engagement piece, a case study compilation, a policy review, and a suitability analysis. With these tools, SBLC can now carry out the following actions:

- Evaluate the feasibility and fit of urban agriculture as a sustainable option for vacant land use in Saginaw
- Communicate data and key insights from the Dow Fellows report to interested stakeholders and potential community partners
- Consider the next steps toward sustainable land use solutions and plan for additional research and continued conversations with community members to ensure that any program implemented is meeting the community’s most salient needs



Breath fogging in the cold, Dow Fellow Bella Mayorga stands with leadership from Asbury Farms, a large-scale faith-based urban farm located in Flint, during a full-day “Garden Movers and Shakers Tour” organized by SBLC’s southeast Michigan collaborators. As part of their feasibility study, the Dow Fellows team reviewed urban farming programs in Detroit, Flint, and Lansing and compiled a collection of best practices and lessons learned. *Image by Jamie Lee, Dow Fellow.*

### PROJECT TEAM

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### FACULTY ADVISOR

- Jeremy Moghtader, Manager, the **U-M Campus Farm @ Matthaei Botanical Gardens**

### CLIENT

- **Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy**

### READ MORE

- [Full Project Report](#)
- [Dow Sustainability Fellows Program](#)
- [Dow Global Impact Series](#)

This project addresses the following United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



The Dow Sustainability Fellows Program at the University of Michigan (U-M), made possible by **Dow**, supports full-time graduate students at U-M who are committed to finding interdisciplinary, actionable, and meaningful sustainability solutions. The program prepares future sustainability leaders to make a positive difference in organizations worldwide. We believe that diversity, equity, and inclusion are key to individual empowerment, and the advancement of sustainability knowledge, learning, and leadership. See: <http://sustainability.umich.edu/dow>