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Farmer sees growth potential for gardens in Fall River

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FALL RIVER — Spring means not just the crack of the bat, but the slap of sneakered feet on running trails, the sound of a 10-speed shifting gears and the “snap” of fresh vegetables between the teeth.

All of these things were discussed Wednesday at the Healthy City Spring Workshop, described in the brochure as “a gathering to nurture ideas and action for a healthier Fall River.”

The event was sponsored by Mass in Motion, a nonprofit group, privately funded, that seeks to combat obesity and the chronic diseases that result from obesity. The Fall River host for Wednesday’s event was Healthy City Fall River, a collaboration between the Fall River Health and Human Services Department and Partners for a Healthier Community Inc.

Activities for the day included a meeting between city department heads and urban open space and gardening experts from other Massachusetts urban areas, including Groundwork of Lawrence and the Lowell and Worcester Land Conservation trusts. Those in attendance at the day of discussion took a two-hour trolley trip through Fall River, looking at sites for potential bike paths.

After that, there were workshops and a buffet dinner at Government Center.

One of the speakers was Derek Christianson, owner of Brix Bounty Farm and master farmer at Fall River’s Watson School.

Christianson believes that locally grown, organic vegetables, like the ones produced at his farm, are healthier, and he believes urban gardeners, farming small bits of city ground, can produce a healthy, significant crop of fresh vegetables.

“We’re looking at how to increase access to quality produce,” Christianson said.

Christianson said one advantage to knowing the provenance of your produce is knowing under what conditions it was grown.

“When you buy an apple in the supermarket, there’s no way to know what the nutritional value of that apple is.”

Christianson pointed out that genetic manipulation and the production of varieties that “look shiny” and are resistant to bruising during travel has not led to the best nutritional quality in apples and other produce.

Christianson said today’s consumer would have to eat four apples to obtain the nutritional value of one apple grown in 1940.

Christianson also pointed out that the use of fuel to transport produce grown in other states adds to the price you pay at the market.

“In 2008, the cost of fuel meant it cost \$8,000 to bring a truckload of broccoli from California to Boston,” Christianson said. “That had tripled since 2003.”

Christianson said that in addition to gardens at city schools, the Fall River Housing authority was making land available to residents who want to garden.

Janel Wright, community programs manager for Groundwork Lawrence said the open plots of unpaved land needed for gardens are hard to come by in the city but help storm water to sink into the earth instead of flooding streets, intersections and basements.

“The goal is to do what we can as a city to promote healthy living in our city,” said Fall River Mayor Will Flanagan.

Flanagan said that effort not only includes preservation of open space and maintenance of city parks, but changing school lunch programs to promote healthier food choices.

“We focus on people, places and prosperity,” said Heather McMann, executive director of Groundwork Lawrence, where a number of community gardens have been established, usually on city-owned land.

“We do everything in partnership with the city and businesses,” McMann said, noting that Lawrence is a poor town where low incomes often limit the number of food choices available

“It’s one of the poorest cities in the commonwealth,” she said of Lawrence.

Because of “green” efforts by her group and Lawrence, \$6 million of improvement has been made to parks in Lawrence in the last three years, 501 trees have been planted and \$40,000 worth of food has been donated to food pantries and soup kitchens.

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