

## Community Garden report for 2024

### **St. Anthony Park Community Gardens ..... What is it? Where is it? Why is it? And How did it get there?**

The community council owns the land between Robbins Street and the first spur rail track from Raymond to Cromwell. In addition to the east end of the property used by Ettel and Franz, this piece of land includes two sections: the St. Anthony Park Community Garden and the St. Anthony Park Prairie Heritage Garden.

The community gardens were started in 1981 and grew out of a neighborhood leaf composting project of the district council on land owned by and rented from the railroad.

In 1999, when the railroad said they were going to sell the land for construction of a steel coil off-loading facility, the gardeners and district council responded by organizing a political effort to prevent the loss of the gardens and the construction of a disruptive use incompatible with the residential neighbors. This was truly an amazing “David and Goliath” effort helped by politicians. The final help was Bruce Vento, a Congressman from St. Paul, who was then serving on the Transportation Committee in Washington. The gardens provide a “green” buffer between the residences and the transportation corridors of railroad tracks, Energy Park Drive and Highway 280.

The district council and gardeners raised over \$150,000 to purchase the land, including over \$25,000 in individual contributions from neighborhood residents and businesses. The railroad finally agreed to sell the property to the Community Council in 2000.

An important part of the effort was an agreement with Ettel and Franz to allow them to continue parking on a portion of the property if they would support the neighborhood’s attempt to acquire it. They agreed and provided a large contribution that matched a STAR fund grant and got the fundraising started with some real chance of success. They have continued to be a good neighbor to the garden and have helped the gardeners with specific projects. Ettel and Franz added a storage building on the east end of the property in 2012 which they use. They were able to do this in a way that did not impact the gardens.

### **Management of the Land and Money**

As the owner of the land the district council is responsible for paying any costs associated with the property. **But** all expenses associated with the land are paid for out of garden plot rental fees and garden donations. Assessments, water, water system repair, fence and tree issues, tilling, printing, mailing...any expense associated with the land is paid for out of garden funds. Garden funds, maintained separately from council funds, are used for current garden operating expenses and as reserves for future needs of the gardens. The community gardens are a self-organizing project of the district council. Garden policies and management oversight are coordinated by a garden steering committee elected by the gardeners. Governance and policies are posted on the Community Council website. **All the tasks of managing and maintaining the gardens are done by volunteers.**

### **Property Taxes**

The portion of the property that is used by Ettel and Franz is taxed as industrial property, and Ettel and Franz pay these taxes. On the remainder of the property that is used for gardens, the property taxes have been abated. To qualify for a tax abatement, a non-profit must use the property to further its mission. The Community Council has promised that the gardens will provide fresh vegetables for benefit of a food shelf, resulting in not having to pay property taxes on the garden property. For several years, the fresh vegetables have gone to the Seal Hi-Rise public housing. All residents of Seal qualify for use of a food shelf, but not all are able to easily get to a food shelf. Having fresh vegetables delivered to their building has been a service to them. This year three garden plots were set aside for food shelf benefit. Community gardeners and others in the community maintained the plots and harvested them. The Equity Committee delivered the produce to Seal. In 2024, the community garden donated over 1000 pounds of produce to Seal. In addition, knowledge of the donations from the community garden have led to other neighbors donating vegetables from their home gardens to Seal.

### **2024 Community Gardens**

This year the large spring meeting was held over Zoom. At this meeting gardeners are reminded of expectations for garden maintenance and for volunteering to help with common area tasks and have a chance to meet other gardeners with a plot near theirs. This year 92 plots were rented, with over 150 people involved in the gardens. We had more requests for plots than we were able to satisfy again this year. Many gardeners have commented on how valuable it has been to have the garden as a calm place to come during times of anxiety and stress.

We modified some volunteer tasks in 2024 to reduce the time it takes for one volunteer to complete and instituted a new volunteer opportunity of monthly volunteer workdays to do tasks in the common areas of the gardens. We asked each gardener to join one of the monthly workdays during the gardening season. This proved to be very successful with many gardeners coming for at least one workday and some coming for more than one. During the workdays we installed a border in front of the flower beds, transplanted elderberry shoots from a neighbor's house to a nursery bed in the gardens, cut and removed some dead plum trees, removed buckthorn and cleaned along the fences.

Instead of a harvest dinner for gardeners we established a new activity we called "Sip and Stroll". Visitors could come have a beverage and some snacks and then walk through the gardens to see the various techniques used by different gardeners. We also began a "swap day" in 2024. Gardeners with garden items they no longer needed could leave them at a designated location in the gardens and other gardeners could take any of them that they could use. This went well and we plan to continue it next year.

After careful deliberation the Steering Committee had decided to raise the rental fee from \$30 to \$40 in 2024. All plots were rented and there were more applicants than plots. It is the garden steering committee's desire that the plot rentals pay the operating costs, with any donations made to the community gardens being available for improvement activities. In 2024 plot rentals covered all the operating costs.

We are currently planning how to restore a green buffer between the gardens and the railroad in the coming years as funds permit. Our general goal is to plant native fruiting trees and bushes that will provide habitat for birds and pollinators. We will be applying for grants to get funds to have the necessary work done. We hope to begin planting part of the area in 2025.

### **2024 Prairie Heritage Garden**

In 2024 we had hoped to continue working with Landbridge, a local ecological landscape business (Vandalia and University) to maintain and improve the Prairie Heritage Garden located at the west end of the property near the intersection of Robbins with Cromwell. That portion of the property is not suitable for vegetable gardens and has been planted with native grasses and flowers that were present in St. Anthony Park at the time of European settlement. Unfortunately, Landbridge raised their price to such a great extent that it would be impossible for us to hire them. This year not much was done on the Prairie Heritage Garden other than cutting out sumac. We will be searching for another landscape business to help maintain the Prairie Heritage Garden in 2025.