

Julie Peck-Dabling interview

Tell me who you are and the work that you do.

Julie Peck-Dabling: My name is Julie Peck-Dabling and I run the open space and urban farming programs for Salt Lake County.

Tell me about urban farming.

Julie Peck-Dabling: Well we started back in 2009 when an elected official actually read some work of Michael Pollens and got interested in the idea of what urban farming might mean here in Salt Lake County. And so, we looked at some excess land we had that wasn't really being utilized right now and decided to put that out to lease. And had some commercial farmers bid on it and we've had them farming for three years now.

What are those spaces like?

Julie Peck-Dabling: Well we have a large space out in the Draper area. So the southern end of Salt Lake County. But then, we have another one that's right in the heart of the county in a very urban environment. It's about five acres in Holladay, right next to a recreation center.

Talk to me about the three benefits that there are to urban farming. Let's start with economic.

Julie Peck-Dabling: Well there's a number of components to an economic benefit. Number one would be the fact that we have this underutilized land that's a county asset that's sitting there growing weeds. And instead of having park employees coming out and mow those weeds down or spray herbicides on it, we're having farmers utilize that land. And so, it's being better utilized. And it's providing a living for the farmers. It's providing a fresh product, fresh fruits and vegetables, to the community. It saves us economically because that produce is being grown and then delivered to market very close by. So less miles on roads. Less greenhouse gases in the air. And it provides an economic benefit through health to our residents.

Talk about environmental.

Julie Peck-Dabling: Well and again, instead of spraying pesticides on the ground, we're utilizing that land. It's very rich soil. It's beautiful, prime soil for farming. And so, it's being utilized for really its highest use. And then also, the fact that the average vegetable in a grocery store travels 1,400 miles to get there. And here it is being grown in one area and maybe just a few miles away is where it's going to be sold at a roadside stand or a farmer's market.

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What about the social?

Julie Peck-Dabling: The social benefits are amazing. Perhaps that's the most appropriately seen in a setting like this where we've started a community garden program. We actually call it Parks for Produce because it's a county park and we're taking a small, again, underutilized portion of a county park and turning it into a community garden. And what the community gardeners have found here at the Creekside Garden is that the vegetables are almost a secondary benefit and the primary benefit that they've discovered is that they've come to know each other and become closer friends. And you're talking about people in their 70s, people who have retired, and young people in their 20s with tattoos and body piercings to be honest with you. And those two would normally not mix perhaps. Or the elderly folks might be very concerned and apprehensive about the younger crowd based on the way they look. And what happened in this garden is that these folks all got to know each other. Forget about what the outside looks like. And they've got to know each other and become friends. Help each other with gardening, help each other with other issues as well, and watch out for each other. So that's a tremendous social benefit that is better than any kind of traffic watch or watch out for what's going on in your neighborhood but you don't really know each other. And so you're suspicious all the time. It's a great way to I think serve a lot of social ills because it's all really about community.

Talk about nutrition and how the locally produce foods help meet nutritional needs.

Julie Peck-Dabling: Well one component that I really didn't go into much is the community garden program. And what we have discovered is that we did a survey of our gardeners in the last, oh, year and discovered that about 35 percent of the gardeners actually have financial challenges to the point of they're under the federal poverty level. That's the kind of income these folks are making. So they really rely on their community garden for food in the summer to supplement what they're eating. And otherwise, these are people that might be going to food pantries. They might be going to -- they're involved with the local school lunch program if they have children. And now, they're learning about how in a very small space, they can grow food.

Julie Peck-Dabling: Can I share another comment?

Yes, please.

Julie Peck-Dabling: So another interesting component that we've discovered completely by chance is that three of our four community gardens are located in areas where there's really high participation in free and reduced lunch programs in the local schools. In one of our gardens, the local elementary school has as high as 90 percent of the children in that school participating. So these are families that're very stressed about making ends meet. They have very, very low incomes. Kids aren't getting their nutritional needs met. And so, they do get to participate in a free lunch program. And

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now, we have the community gardens as a way to help supplement that and to teach them how to grow their own food.

How did you become involved in this?

Julie Peck-Dabling: Well it's interesting. Back in 2009, I had started as the Salt Lake County Open Space Program Manager. And one of the applicants that we had for funding to preserve a piece of ground was a farmer. And he wanted to place a conservation easement on his land to protect his land for future generations so that it could be farmed. But he was competing against some really appealing parcels for trail and recreation use. And he lost out because we only had so much money. But it really got me thinking about agriculture as a component of Open Space and the value it provides to a community. You have visual vistas. You have visual relief from high density and building. (00:09:16) You have local produce being grown. There're a lot of benefits. So that really had me thinking at the same time that this elected official read an article by Michael Pollens and he started thinking about it as well. We all started talking about how we might be able to engage on a county level in an urban farming program. And so, I have the best job in local government and it just happened that way. A little serendipity on my part. So I've expanded now to not just running Open Space, but Open Space and urban farming.

Let's talk about development and what we can do to preserve farm land.

Julie Peck-Dabling: Well those farmers absolutely have a right to decide what they want to do with their land including develop that. But some farmers don't want to do that. Some farmers would like to preserve that land.

Can you say that again but lead in with something about the farmer's retirement?

Julie Peck-Dabling: So a lot of farmers see that land as a source of their retirement funding and perhaps even for -- to address medical needs and kids' college education. And they have the right to determine what they want to do with their land, including sell it for development. And we respect that. Some farmers however would like to preserve their land. They would like to sacrifice that development and protect their land and perpetuity. And so, a way to do that is to provide a conservation easement on the land. And what we do is we basically pay the farmer for the right to develop. And they in turn promise not to develop and that goes on the title. And it is then protect in perpetuity as farm land. Then that farmer, he can sell it to a future farmer when he's done farming, and the next guy can farm it. And when he's done, he can sell that land for the purpose of farming to the next individual or family that wants to farm.

Is that something that Salt Lake County's involved in?

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Julie Peck-Dabling: We have not been involved in it to date and the reason is funding. We don't have any funding. The state has not provided funding at this time. We hope that they will again through the Lee Ray McAllister Fund. But right now, there's a lot more need I know four farm families that would be willing to preserve their land in the Salt Lake County area. And they have the right to be compensated just as a farmer does that wants to be -- to put in a development.

Are there any other things we can do to help the farmers?

Julie Peck-Dabling: I think what we can do is to continue to buy locally. Buy local produce. Be interested in local farming. And to share with your local elected officials, both city and county officials as well as state legislators and the governor, how much this means to you and why it's important to you. And that's when we can start to turn people's opinion around and perhaps get a little funding for conservation easements.

Talk to me about where the food in a national chain grocery store comes from.

Julie Peck-Dabling: Well I think the perennial example favorite is the tomato. And if ...

Julie Peck-Dabling: Local food.

Versus what's found in the grocery store.

Julie Peck-Dabling: So if you think about the food that you buy in the grocery store versus the food that you would buy at a local farm stand, or roadside stand, or farmer's market, I think the perennial favorite example would be the tomato. So especially let's say in the fall and early winter, you're buying tomatoes from Florida that've been grown with tremendous amount of pesticides and fertilizers and have been picked so green they're harder than a tennis ball. They can actually drop from a car and not break on an asphalt road going about 50 miles per hour. And they bring those into warehouses. They gas them to make them turn red. And then, they ship them off to the local grocery store. Conversely, you're picking food at your local farmer's market that been harvested at the height of freshness. The nutrients are much better. They have antioxidants, and vitamins, and minerals at just the height of the peak of the value within that vegetable. And plus it just tastes better. It's visually beautiful. Its taste is superior. There's a sweetness or a tartness depending on what you're getting. And there really is no comparison.

Let's talk about the commercial farming program. Tell me how the program works.

Julie Peck-Dabling: We went through our inventory of county-owned property because that's really all we can work with is what we own and what we have control over. So we went through county-owned property and identified several parcels that were not going to be developed for several years. And then, we went out with folks from Utah State

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University and took a look at those parcels. And looked at the health of the soil and really the sunlight and if there were trees in the way. If there was adequate water supplies. And we got a list of parcels out of that that really kind of narrowed down from maybe 30 to about a dozen to seven. And so, we picked our top seven and we decided to go ahead and put those out in an RFP, a request for a proposal basically. And we invited the farmers, local farmers, to place a bid and basically when we had interviewed farmers as well, they said, "Look. We are really busy. So what we're willing to do is give us a fill-in-the-blank application because we just need to get to farming." And my timing wasn't very good. I actually started doing that RFP in like August, which is an extremely busy time for farmers. And so, they -- we did a one-page application basically but they had to attach some additional information for us. Like they did have to basically do an essay about their vision for the parcel, what they're interested in, and then, they would also tell us what the proposed lease fee would be. And then, we looked at all of those proposals and determined which farmers we were willing to lease to.

How long has the program been running? What's the success of the program?

Julie Peck-Dabling: So the program's been running really since 2010. We did get those contracts in earlier, but they hadn't had an opportunity to actually farm that first year. And so, they've been farming -- this was their third year of actually growing. And we asked them for totals. We need to measure. In government, we love benchmarks, and how to measure and evaluate things. So we have a farmer that sells at a roadside stand. Another one that sells at the farmer's market. Another one that sells through CSAs mainly. And it's really interesting because it's a diverse way to distribute their products. And they're selling -- they're producing and harvesting over 100,000 pounds of food on like a five-acre parcel, and a four-acre parcel, and another six-acre parcel. I mean, it's a really tremendous amount of production on small acreage in an urban setting.

That's remarkable.

Julie Peck-Dabling: Yeah. And so, our two farmers which are out on a regional -- what will be a regional park called Wheedon Farm, used to be farmed for many generations. Then, went fallow for several years. County acquired the land. We put farmers on it, but it was always intended to be a regional park. So what we've come up with is this creative idea of keeping this a natural -- kind of a more of a natural park. It's not really a park that -- or a site that we want to put a lot of Kentucky bluegrass on, per se. And so, we're going to have trail systems and some native plants and grasses, et cetera. And then, we'll keep our farmers there and see if there is a way we can integrate in as an educational model local commercial farming.

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If the land is meant to be developed some day, is this just a Band-Aid to a bigger problem?

Julie Peck-Dabling: In some ways, yeah. You're right. If you think about the fact that these parcels were always intended for some other use. And yeah, it's kind of a Band-Aid use. "Okay, hey great. Let's do urban farming for now. But when it's time for other development, then, it's time to give it the heave-ho." We're hoping that over time we can find a way to integrate in both models with parks, and open space, and urban farming. Not every site is really conducive to having a community garden in a park. Some areas where you've got large single-family homes on larger lots, they don't need to go to a local park to garden. They can do that in their own backyard. And in that case, do we have a model or can we create one where we can carve out a small portion of the park and put a commercial farmer on it? And he can sell his produce right there and have a beneficial use to the whole community. So we're working on that.

There's a lot that we need to do to preserve the different resources.

Julie Peck-Dabling: All the components to make urban farming successful. Well, one of the reasons why urban farming works well, our commercial model works well right now is because the county owns water shares at these parks, at these locations that the farmers are able to utilize for us. And in county parks, we could put in drip irrigation systems. So that really is an efficient way of using water, too. But you do need to have -- you need to have great soil. You can't just put a commercial farming component down anywhere in the valley. And you need to have water accessibility. And so, where those things can come together, it's kismet. And the challenge being that more and more of our canal systems that this whole valley was laid out to have are going into disuse and being shut down. So it's really a challenge.

What do you feel I haven't touched on that you want to talk about?

Julie Peck-Dabling: No, I don't know. We talked a little bit about our refugee farming program, but I don't know a ton about it. I know a little bit. Challenge we have with farmer's markets is more and more of them are popping up we're -- communities, small communities want a farmer's market. And there's only so many of the -- the big farmers can only go to a few of those. They can't hit every single one. And so, now we have a market and we need to get more small farmers, maybe even acre, sub-acre parcels where people could be doing that as really maybe a second job. They've got their full-time job, and then, they're doing this as an avocation work/hobby. And then, they could sell at those small markets. The VA wants to start one and they're desperately looking for farmers. Yeah.

[END TAPE]