

Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust

Goals: Creating Urban Gardens and Pocket Parks

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Alina Bokde, the executive director for LANLT, discusses the critical need for parks and community gardens in underserved communities in Los Angeles.

*South L.A. suffers challenges presented by severe limitations in fresh food and open space. The Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust is taking a proactive approach to the problem, funding the construction and operation of joint-use open space in underserved neighborhoods. In the following **TPR** interview, LANLT Executive Director **Alina Bokde** details her mission, exemplified by the Fremont High School Wellness Community Clinic Garden Project.*

Three years ago, TPR interviewed Glen Duke, the former chair of the Board of Directors for the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust (LANLT). Please bring our readers up to date on LANLT's pioneering urban park projects.

The Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust is a non-profit organization established in 2002. We started doing projects in 2004. Since that time we've completed eight projects, seven of which we continue to operate and maintain. Our mission is to create gardens and pocket parks, or small neighborhood parks, in low-income neighborhoods throughout Los Angeles. The reason that we exist is a study that was published back in 2000 that showed that there was a huge park disparity in low-income neighborhoods versus affluent neighborhoods. Low-income communities in Los Angeles are ranked as the worst in the country in net park acreage for residents. The Land Trust grew out of an effort to address this park disparity in low-income communities.

Our work is about bringing resources and creating viable neighborhood parks and community gardens where community members can work with the Land Trust to provide programs and engage in what we call "stewardship activities" to help maintain the site. We do clean-up days, we do big volunteer days to rehab the park, and we also engage the community in developing the leadership capacity to address quality of life issues within the community.

From 2004 until about 2009, we opened eight parks and gardens, one of which is a skate park. We continue to work with community organizations, community members, elected offices, and public agencies to identify sites. We have a number of projects that are on the docket that will open to the community next year. Two of those, both community gardens, will open in the South Los Angeles area. Another is a neighborhood pocket park in Pacoima. We have a number of other park and garden projects that are slated to open up in 2012 as well.

You mentioned LANLT’s programming and pocket park stewardship. Give our readers a few examples of projects to date. Where does the funding come from?

The programs that we offer are based on determining community need. Our community organizers work with what we call our park and garden management groups to identify activities that community members want. Those range anywhere from aerobics classes, dance classes, and martial arts classes, all the way to leadership development, what we call “connective capacity building” classes. The Land Trust manages all of the programs at its different projects; we try to identify a local instructor that is certified and able to teach the class from within the community. If we can’t do that, then we partner with other non-profit organizations to provide those direct services for our facilities.

We’ve received funding in the past from Kaiser to help support some of our programs, but a lot of foundations are now moving toward more policy work. Our programs are funded through the generous donations of our private donors, which we mostly raise at our annual fundraiser, the Garden Party.

Please elaborate on LANLT’s new and ambitious Fremont High School Wellness Community Garden Project.

We’re excited about the Fremont High School Community Clinic Garden Project. Fremont High School is a really great fit for the Land Trust because, number one, it will be a community garden in an area that is very park-poor. It is also an area that has what we call a food desert. There’s very limited access to healthy, edible foods. This garden and its programming will not only provide opportunities for community members and students to learn how to grow edible, healthy foods for the community but will also help educate the community, providing nutrition classes so people can learn how to use these foods to create healthy meals.

We’re addressing a significant issue that is impacting a number of the communities we work in, which is obesity. LAUSD conducted a study where they looked at health disparity issues and came up with indicators such as obesity, diabetes, health, pregnancy rates, and STDs—and came up with 12 hot spots within the school district. Out of those, six are within South L.A. Fremont High School is one of those six hot spots within South Los Angeles. By bringing this partnership between the community clinic provider University Muslim Medical Association (UMMA), the Land Trust, and the high school, we’re hoping to not only provide a significant and important resource to the community but also we hope to help address some of the obesity issues impacting the community.

This project is innovative because of the partnership between the three entities that have never worked together in looking at the types of programs we would offer: the school district, UMMA, and the Land Trust. We’re going to look at programs that integrate curriculum—the youth education component—and how we use both the clinic and the garden to provide activities, education, and programs that range from looking at health from an individual perspective of treatment, which is what the clinic will do, to also looking at prevention, which is what our partnership is committed to doing.

We're trying to expose people to different ways of creating healthier choices around food and physical activity, and so we really hope and believe that this kind of partnership between the school district, the clinic, and the Land Trust will help facilitate that.

Part of what the project envisions is a 1500-square-foot greenhouse, along with raised beds, and we're also going to have an herbal, traditional garden. With the herbal garden in particular, we want to develop programs and curriculum that help highlight traditional approaches to healing. We have Western approaches to healing from the clinic, but we also envision that the herbal garden will help provide an alternative for dealing with and improving health.

The greenhouse will provide a wonderful resource for students to learn how to grow food and to look at how we use the greenhouse as a way to use some of the food that's growing in the garden to create what we call "value-added products. There's a lot of opportunity, once the students and the community get involved, to use the raw products from the garden to create different kinds of products that the community could use, whether it's for healing or for learning different ways of growing particular types of food that only a greenhouse could support. We're excited about the programs that will come out of the greenhouse.

If this is a first-of-its-kind collaboration between those three agencies in Los Angeles, what's your model for this partnership? Are there other cities or other agencies in the county or around the state or in other parts of the country that are doing similar programs?

We haven't found the type of program that we're envisioning for this partnership in other areas, so really what we are doing is taking best practices from our respective fields. There will be best practices around from the school district. There will be best practices from the Land Trust, with respect to looking at managing gardens and urban agriculture and nutrition. And there will be best practices from the clinic to develop a program that represents and respects the philosophy and approaches of the three partners.

We're bringing our levels of expertise forward to figure out how these partnerships will help us move forward in a different or an expanded way to deal with public health issues at the school and within the community.

We have yet to find this kind of partnership, particularly in a low-income neighborhood. What we have found, are other gardens that maybe focus very strongly in a partnership with an acupuncturist, for example, where they grow medicinal types of herbs and have a non-traditional healer, or an acupuncturist partner, to provide programs. There are certain kinds of models that we can look at that take one aspect of the garden and the clinic, but this kind of partnership is not something that we've seen at this scale or within a low-income neighborhood.

Lastly, the city of Los Angeles made the news recently with a footnote to the city's General Plan, effectively placing a moratorium on fast food construction in parts of South L.A. Could you share with our readers LANLT's model and approach to park space and local gardening as a future tool for enhancing quality of life in Los Angeles?

There's more and more research coming out showing that the built environment has a very direct relationship to public health outcomes. If you live in a community or neighborhood that doesn't have fresh foods, groceries, or community gardens, doesn't have parks, and doesn't have walkable streets and trees, you're more likely to live in a community with higher rates of obesity, higher rates of diabetes, and higher rates of mental depression. There is a direct correlation that we see with the built environment and public health.

The work of the Land Trust is to go into the most park-poor, garden-poor communities in the Los Angeles area and help bring a very needed resource in terms of either park space or community gardens to help improve quality of life. We improve quality of life by providing a green space where people can recreate, gather with their neighbors, and raise their own levels of awareness around the different programming that we provide. If we provide programs about physical health, then hopefully by being involved in our programs, people will make healthier choices not only for themselves but also for their children. If it's a community garden, we're providing a space where people can grow their own food and giving them the tools to make healthier choices around food to supplement their daily eating routines.

The results for using tools like parks and gardens as a way to address the food desert, food disparity, and health disparity issues in the community are proven through academic studies. Having more parks and gardens where people can walk and have access to improves quality of life. From a non-academic approach, we also hear that from our residents. You can talk to any one of our members that are involved in our gardens or parks and they will tell you about how much pride they have in the park and how much difference the park or the garden has made in their community. In many of the neighborhoods that we work in, the park and the garden actually become a focal point, a gathering point for community residents. They prove to quickly become a strong resource within the community. We get many requests every day for people wanting to work with us to bring more parks and gardens into their neighborhoods because they know what an incredible community resource it is.

In looking at parks and gardens in communities, we struggle with how to build capacity within the community for the long-term programming and long-term stewardship of these sites. It's not just about creating. The thing about the Land Trust that excites me in leading this organization is that we continue to be involved in the community after these parks are created, working with the community to make sure that these parks and gardens are valued resources in the community. Because public agencies have diminished resources, looking at partnerships, like working with non-profits and other organizations to help make sure that these resources are well maintained, is going to be critical. These kinds of partnerships are really important.