

08-02-04 CSA Farms in the Suburbs?

The vast majority of the farms that grow vegetables for CSAs in NYC are located in Upstate New York, up to a four hour drive to the city. As farmers making weekly deliveries and CSA groups planning yearly farm visits know, this distance can be daunting. Could there ever be a CSA farm nearer to the city, located in a suburban housing development, just an easy train ride from downtown? The idea may not be as far-fetched as it first appears. Prairie Crossing, a subdivision with two commuter rail stops 45 minutes north of Chicago features an organic CSA farm as its centerpiece, as well as other ecological restoration efforts and green building techniques seldom seen in suburbia. One of the development's 10 guiding principles is Economic & Racial Diversity, another goal usually not associated with suburban housing developments.

The 677 acres that comprise Prairie Crossing were purchased in 1989 by ten local landowners who sought to block the development of 2400 homes in the area. Rather than a cookie-cutter development the landowners pushed a design that, when complete, will boast 470 acres of preserved open space, representing nearly 70 percent of the entire site. The development's 362 single family houses are designed to minimize their ecological footprints and will occupy only 135 acres. A 22-acre lake, named for Aldo Leopold, the pioneering wildlife ecologist and author of A Sand County Almanac, catches runoff that is first filtered through restored wetlands. Throughout the development, in front yards as well as common areas, landscaping features native plants, and use of pesticides is discouraged.

Prairie Crossing's farm features 15 acres that have long been certified organic, 60 acres that very recently received certification, 25 acres of pasture for the community's cooperative stable, and 2.5 acres devoted to educational use by Prairie Crossing's two schools. Produce from the farm is sold at Chicago-area farmers' markets and to the 70 members that currently belong to the Prairie Crossing CSA. The farm's location allows its CSA members access to the farm that may make NYC CSA members jealous. Rather than a single visit during the CSA season that requires extra planning, and possibly bus rental, residents of Prairie Crossing get to walk past their CSA farm each day, and their farmers are their neighbors.

If Prairie Crossing can be successful in suburban Chicago, what's to say a similar project couldn't make a go of it in the New York region? Who knows, perhaps one day urban NYC CSA members will need only board a train to visit their farm. Perhaps one day more housing developments will work to support local sustainable agriculture, rather than competing with small scale growers for precious acres.

For more information about Prairie Crossing see <http://www.prairiecrossing.com>, or <http://www.newfarm.org/features/0704/prairie-crossing/index.shtml>.



