

Practical Visionaries Workshop

Spring 2013

Penn Loh, November 13, 2012

Launched in spring 2011, the Practical Visionaries Workshop (PVW) brings together Tufts Department of Urban & Environmental Policy and Planning (UEP) and community partners in Greater Boston to share, learn and develop strategies for “just and sustainable” cities. PVW is founded on three core beliefs: (1) sustainability and justice are inextricably intertwined and must be pursued together; (2) theory and practice must go hand-in-hand if we are to make significant progress towards sustainability; (3) systemically marginalized communities have the knowledge and experience that, with the support and partnership of university resources, can develop innovations towards more just and sustainable cities. PVW is guided by a Steering Committee with representatives from 5 community partners¹.

PVW has 3 components. First is an intensive 8-session spring workshop that brings up to 10 students and 10 emerging community leaders (Practical Visionary Fellows) to learn and reflect together. Second, we conduct community-driven research. Each spring a team of UEP Field Project² students complete a major project. We are developing the resources to continue research into the summer and throughout the academic year with graduate research assistants as well as action research conducted by community partners. Finally, PVW holds a quarterly Forum to share its learning with broader community and university audiences.

In 2011, PVW completed two projects: a Community Green Water Stormwater Management Guide and Community Control Over Development in Boston. In 2012, PVW’s theme was Community Strategies for Building New and Localized Economies in Greater Boston, and Field Project students produced a report examining alternatives to Walmart. (For more, see <http://pennloh.wordpress.com/practical-visionaries-workshop/>.)

Spring 2013 Workshop: *Popular Education for Building a New Community Economy*

This year’s spring workshop will be focused not just on exploring new economy visions, but also on spreading the dialogue and bringing the visioning process into partner group communities. We will be building on the first two years of the PVW, where we started to envision a new community economy that can meet basic human needs, generate shared wealth and ownership, and sustain the health of people and planet. In 2012, the PVW partners explored alternatives to Walmart, which had proposed to bring its urban grocery into both Somerville and Roxbury. Though both proposals are currently dormant, Walmart is not going away and has set its sights on urban markets as its next growth area. Walmart recently pledged to open up to 300 stores hiring 40,000 associates in federally-defined food deserts.³ They have begun to fund community and food efforts locally and across the

¹ Steering committee groups include Alternatives for Community & Environment, Boston Workers Alliance, Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, and Somerville Community Corporation.

² Field Projects is a required core course for UEP masters students, in which teams complete an intensive semester-long practicum for community partners.

³ <http://news.walmart.com/news-archive/2011/07/20/walmart-to-open-up-to-300-stores-serving-usda-food-deserts-by-2016-more-than-40000-associates-will-work-in-these-stores>

country (for example a \$1 million grant to Growing Power in Milwaukee).⁴ The PVW partners believe that Walmart is not the answer to justainable development and want a different development path for their communities.

Unfortunately, even our best community development efforts still fall short in meeting the needs of economically marginalized neighborhoods. High un- and underemployment persist. Many families lack access to affordable and healthy food. And waste and pollution still overburden these same communities. We believe more holistic strategies based on a regional systems approach are needed. Instead of depending solely on outside investment, we want to build on local assets and human capital to root enterprises that localize ownership and production. Rather than externalizing environmental and health costs, this new community economy will turn wastes into resources and reduce reliance on fossil fuels.

Over the past two years, we investigated and were inspired by promising models, such as the Evergreen Cooperatives in Cleveland. Since 2008, Evergreen has launched three worker-owned enterprises serving the city's hospitals and universities, including a commercial green laundry, solar installation company and a lettuce-growing greenhouse. Evergreen plans to build a network of 10 cooperatives with 500 worker-owners, based on the Mondragon model in Spain.

Over the next year, we will work with our community partners to engage their constituencies to develop strategies and tools for cultivating the community economy in Boston and Somerville, starting with the food sector. Our partners are already sowing the seeds of this economy. ACE youth have been converting vacant lots into community gardens. DSNI's community greenhouse is producing food for market and home and serving as a "real food hub". BWA operates a microenterprise that is turning waste grease into biofuel. SCC is exploring the feasibility for a food cooperative at the site of a former supermarket.

The details and specific requirements for the Spring Workshop include:

- Eight 3-hour sessions from mid-January through April, with locations alternating between campus and community partner locations.⁵
- Sessions will include mix of discussion, guest presenters, interactive exercises, relationship building, and report-back to community partner groups.
- Shorter readings and short written journals will be assigned (average of 1-2 hours prep per session).
- Community partner organizations are expected to support their leaders to participate (such as giving paid employees time off to participate).
- Practical Visionary Fellows are expected to bring the learning from the Workshop to a broader group within their organizations at least once during the Workshop period.
- UEP students may participate in two ways. First year students may choose to do PVW as their Field Project, in which case they will meet the requirements for that course as well as complete the PVW spring workshops. Or UEP students may participate in the workshops through a Directed Study credit, where they will do support work for PVW partners in their popular education process and write a reflective paper.

⁴ <http://www.motherjones.com/tom-philpott/2011/09/walmart-drops-1-million-urban-ag-pioneer>

⁵ In 2012, we met from 9-noon on Tuesdays. For 2013, there is not yet a set day/time, and we will work with participants to set a mutually agreeable day/time.

2013 Research Project: *Community Tools and Data for Building a New Food Economy*

The overarching question for our research this next year is: *What is the potential for Boston area base-building groups to drive development of a new community economy in the food sector?* This initiative will generate tools and data for the community partners to develop strategies for building a new food economy. This research will support several levels of work: planning and visioning, leadership development and organizing, policy development and advocacy, and community economic enterprises. In 2013, the emphasis will be on tools for the partners to engage their own communities, developing the broader picture of the regional food economy, and supporting the ongoing food system initiatives of the partners.

Specific research questions include:

- What productive capacities and assets already exist among Boston area's low income communities of color to meet the region's food and waste needs? These include existing businesses (formal and informal), human capital (skills), social capital (groups and networks), and financing and technical support allies (CDCs, CDFIs⁶).
- What is the aggregate demand for food and waste services in our neighborhoods, as well as among the region's anchor institutions (universities and hospitals)?
- What are the challenges and barriers to growing a new community economy (such as training/skills, certification, financing, public policy)?
- What are policy strategies for supporting community economy that can be pursued by base-building community groups and their allies?

Specific research components may include:

- Pilot community assessments of production and consumption in the local food economy. This might include a survey and focus groups.
- Inventory and map of existing food economy assets in the region.
- Assessment of potential of cooperative strategies (purchasing, marketing) for small, independently owned groceries, corner stores and bodegas.
- Assessment of potential market demand for food from key anchor institutions (universities and hospitals).
- Popular education curriculum for a more localized food economy.
- Exploration of possible community food economy initiatives (e.g. food cooperative, food preservation business, organics recycling cooperative).

⁶ Community development finance institutions.