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# CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

## Community Development Department

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To: Louis A. DePasquale, City Manager

From: Iram Farooq, Assistant City Manager for Community Development;  
Owen O’Riordan, Commissioner, Public Works Department;  
Derrick Neal, Chief Public Health Officer, Cambridge Public Health Department

Date: March 30, 2022

Re: Policy Order #9 dated September 13, 2021, regarding addressing food insecurity by installing raised garden beds throughout Cambridge and providing free, fresh, locally grown food for residents in need

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### Introduction

The City of Cambridge is committed to building equitable access to fresh, locally grown food and to providing opportunities for growing food. The City currently operates two successful programs – the community garden program and the SNAP Match incentive program – that are being evaluated for opportunities to increase access to free, locally grown food, as described below:

### Community Garden Program

The Cambridge Conservation Commission operates a Community Garden Program, supporting 14 community gardens. Plots have historically been assigned to Cambridge households on a rotating, lottery-based system, with preference for residents who do not have land on which to garden. Given the desire to expand and diversify access to community agriculture in Cambridge and to prioritize food insecure families, City staff are working on a public engagement process with garden coordinators to rewrite the garden [policy](#) (last revised in 2015) to address operations, maintenance, and plot turnover.

During a focus group session held in October 2021, a set of stakeholders, including garden coordinators, Green Cambridge, Cambridge City Growers, Poets in the Garden, and Cambridge Plant and Garden Club, identified the following strategies, among others, to reduce barriers and increase access to community agriculture:

- Constructing temporary raised beds on parking lots and land waiting for development.
- More strongly enforcing a 5-year term limit for garden plots.
- Sharing single garden plots among neighbors.
- Expanding community agriculture outreach and communication.

This focus group also supported the establishment of new food growing spaces based on the community farm model. Distinct from the conventional community garden model, within which members are assigned and tend one garden plot, the community farm model has no limitations to membership and thereby can facilitate access to gardening and fresh food by more people. This model includes staff oversight and is an optimal setting to provide training and support for residents new to gardening. As the City looks at options for expanding the community farm model in Cambridge, it will be important to prioritize neighborhoods with the greatest need.

It is also recognized that as part of this effort the Inspectional Services Department (ISD) and the Department of Public Works (DPW) will need to work closely with the garden coordinators and those others involved in operating these spaces to ensure that they are adequately resourced to ensure waste is properly dealt with and that they don't give rise to an increased level of rodent activity in the surrounding neighborhoods. The ISD Department works seasonally to inspect the gardens with DPW staff for rodents and rodent activity. DPW has overseen the installation and maintenance of bait boxes as well as deploying carbon monoxide treatment. This collaboration will continue annually.

Two examples of the community farm model in Cambridge are sites managed by Green Cambridge, a nonprofit organization: the Hurley Street Neighborhood Farm and a farm at Riverside Press Park. Both sites invite collective participation in growing food, run mostly through volunteer efforts of neighbors and partner organizations. The Hurley Street farm is also supported by a part-time farm manager. Green Cambridge is actively working in partnership with the City and developers to expand this model to additional sites. Cambridge City Growers, a group of residents that formed in 2020, has also worked to establish garden beds across the city.

### **Nutritional Incentive Programs**

Cambridge has limited land on which to grow food, especially considering competing land uses and open space needs. Nutritional incentive programs like SNAP Match, however, provide broad, consistent access to healthy food for a wide range of people. These programs don't typically require people to engage in agricultural activities as a precondition to accessing the benefit, and access is not constrained by the growing season. Additionally, these programs can more easily be scaled up, by expanding the locations and partners that administer the benefit or by increasing the incentive amount. Increasing the SNAP Match benefit available to SNAP-eligible shoppers would be quick and easy to implement and a straightforward way to expand access to healthy food.

The Cambridge SNAP Match program doubles the buying power of SNAP-eligible shoppers at the Central Square Farmers Market, Harvard University Farmers Market, and the Cambridge Community Center Winter Farmers Market, and the Central Square Winter Farmers Market. Each SNAP shopper is eligible for up to \$15 per visit in matching

benefits at the participating markets, offering \$30 in purchases while using only \$15 of their SNAP benefits. Since its inception in 2012, the SNAP Match program has issued \$181,977 dollars in matching funds to SNAP shoppers.

The Central Square Farmers Market, which issues the most in SNAP matching funds of all participating markets, saw 487 unique SNAP shoppers at the market throughout the 2021 season, an increase from 303 unique SNAP shoppers in 2020. 2021 has seen a significant increase in SNAP match usage, with an increase of over 43% in the amount of SNAP match issued compared to 2020. This increase resulted in the highest amount of match issued in one year to date – \$34,049 – which now exceeds the amount of annual funding made available to the program.

Another nutritional incentive program that Cambridge could consider is the Double Up Food Bucks program, which provides additional funds to SNAP shoppers when purchasing fresh fruits or vegetables from a food retailer. Funding for this program is available through the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP), and additional funding is required to be contributed by, or on behalf of, an applicant to the program. Eligible applicants are local governments and non-profit organizations, while eligible retailers include corner stores, neighborhood markets, grocery stores, mobile markets, and farmers markets. Double Up Food Bucks is currently available in Cambridge at The Daily Table, a non-profit organization which applied for this program independently. Another store, Pemberton Farms, has reached out to the Cambridge Public Health Department with interest in participating in this program. Double Up Food Bucks is currently available at nine food retail locations in Boston, and the City of Boston is actively looking to expand this program to more food retailers. This approach is an option for Cambridge to consider if required additional funding was available to enable an application to this program.

## **Conclusion**

The City will continue to work on expanding its Community Garden and nutritional assistance programs. Of significance, the City will introduce the community farm model to new areas of Cambridge to expand and diversify access to community agriculture, and the City will work to identify additional funding for the SNAP Match program to keep pace with increased demand for affordable, healthy food.