

# Columbia's Agriculture Park



Missouri Foundation for Health

This case study is part of a larger evaluation of the Missouri Foundation for Health's (MFH) Opportunity Fund to better understand the effect of funding in communities where investments have been made. ORS Impact and staff at MFH identified eleven projects that represented the types of approaches, partnerships, and topics that MFH hopes to support through the Opportunity Fund. Of those eleven projects, four that showed sufficient progress in implementation were selected to participate in the case studies.

This case study examines Columbia's Agriculture Park. To learn about its genesis, implementation, and impact, we interviewed staff at three organizations that were closely involved in this project. We conducted five interviews: three with staff from Columbia Center for Urban Agriculture, one with staff at Columbia Farmers Market, and one with staff from Columbia Parks and Recreation.



## Fit with Opportunity Fund

Columbia's Agriculture Park is a private-public partnership between four organizations: Columbia Center for Urban Agriculture (CCUA), Columbia Farmers Market, Sustainable Farms & Communities, and Columbia Parks and Recreation. Built on a 10-acre parcel owned by the city of Columbia, Missouri, the project includes a covered farmers market building, a garden and urban farm that will grow food for a food pantry and provide hands-on educational opportunities, an indoor community kitchen, a resource center, walking trails, and a playground.

This project, the first to be funded under the Opportunity Fund (OF), simultaneously addresses two critical community health issues: the community's inadequate access to and consumption of healthy food, and the lack of outdoor green space for recreational/physical activities. Columbia's Agriculture Park will provide fresh fruit and vegetables to the community and educate residents about where and how food grows, the importance of good nutrition, and the health benefits of physical activity. It will also address economic instability among rural farmers by providing a year-round location to sell their produce with shelter from the weather. The hope is that these interventions will collectively result in improved health outcomes.

According to MFH staff, the private-public partnership's vision for training, skill building, and food production made it a good fit for the OF. The project was also attractive as an *"opportunity for transformative impact."* Although much of the groundwork for the project was in place prior to MFH's involvement (partnerships were in place, memorandums and agreements between partners were signed, community engagement and support was strong), the project needed a boost to get off the ground. The support from MFH provided that boost and made it easier to bring in other resources to bring the project to fruition.



## Idea Development

The idea for the project stemmed from conversations between the four partner organizations. Each partner, while working to address seemingly disparate community problems, recognized the role an agriculture park could play in increasing the effectiveness of their work. CCUA was working to address the problem of inadequate access to healthy food in the community, which resulted in above average rates of obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. They were also outgrowing their office space and needed more land security to fully invest, improve, and expand their programs. Columbia Parks and Recreation wanted to

improve physical activity by providing more recreational opportunities through a community park equipped with walking/hiking trails and a playground. Columbia Farmers Market was seeking to improve the economic stability of struggling and aging farmers and knew that a permanent building that could hold more vendors and attract more customers would allow them to sell their produce year-round. It was out of these cumulative needs that conversations about building an agriculture park developed. *“Coming together we were able to put all of our heads together and design this beautiful 10-acre park, which we decided to call Columbia’s Agriculture Park.”*

Complementary to this effort, Sustainable Farms & Communities administers the SNAP matching program, which encourages low-income families to purchase fresh and healthy local foods from a farmers’ market and get a match that essentially *“doubles the value”* of their purchases. *“That’s a way to help make food more accessible and affordable to people in our community who may not have been able to afford it earlier...and hopefully reduce healthcare costs in the future.”*

As a previous recipient of MFH funding, CCUA had a strong relationship with their program officer who suggested the OF as a potential funding source. The program officer provided guidance to the CCUA throughout the idea development and application phase: *“...staff was great to work with.”*

*“The Missouri Foundation for Health came in at a really critical time early in the campaign and saw that this was kind of a tipping point for our organizations and saw this as a strategic investment in the partnership... in all the agencies working together.*

*— Partner*



## Implementation

The implementation of Columbia’s Agriculture Park is going well. Partners have been able to leverage the MFH investment, successfully raising money for the entire first phase of the project (\$4 million), mostly from private donors (76%), which indicates the level of interest among community members to partner and support the project. Fundraising for the second and final phase is already underway. Securing a 50% tax credit for the rest of the capital campaign will help sustain the momentum.

The private-public partnership has been a success. Each partner organization has leveraged its expertise to ensure successful implementation. The city owns the land, managed the construction project, got bids, and negotiated contracts. CCUA managed the fundraising and promoted the park within Columbia. *“It really is the best of both worlds.”* The biggest challenges to date have been construction delays, mostly due to bad weather.

*“ We have so much community support... So, the thing that's going the best is our strategic partnerships that we have in the community, whether it's with the university or extension or any other foundation or nonprofit.*

— Grantee



## Progress & Impact

The first phase of Columbia’s Agriculture Park, which included planning and constructing most of the farmers market pavilion, is nearly complete. The farmers market opened in July 2019 and has experienced a large spike in customer attendance, which in turn has boosted the livelihood of farmers. The next phase includes constructing an event center/kitchen and completing the market pavilion. The final phase will be the programming that goes with the facility.

Although the project is in its early days, hopes are high for the future. CCUA staff and partners hope this agriculture park will: 1) decrease food insecurity, 2) improve the economic health of local farmers and the community at large, 3) increase the consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables, 4) promote physical activity and the benefits of growing food, 6) be a model that can be replicated in other communities locally and across the nation, and 7) highlight how to do private-public partnerships well.

*“ Our normal customer attendance was around 2,000 to 2,500 people on a given day. A really, really, really good day would jump above 3,000 and that would happen maybe once or twice a year. And now we're seeing ... 4,000 to 6,000 customers every Saturday. Our vendors have at a minimum like a 50% increase. A lot of them are seeing a 100% increase in sales.*

— Partner





## Influencing Thinking and Practice

To date, Columbia's Agriculture Park has solidified partners' thinking about the connection between food access, physical activity, and community health. It has also *"changed our thinking in terms of what we can offer to our citizens in Columbia."*

Partners also reported learning how to be good partners. This project has demonstrated the value of careful planning and community engagement and has taught partners that solving problems takes a lot of thought, research, and planning. One partner emphasized how encouraged they were by the willingness of other organizations and institutions to engage with them, making it relatively easy to collaborate.

“Farmers markets are typically seen as white places for white people.... this is a new [model], not just a farmers market but also a city park. And city parks are some of the most inclusive places that I've seen in our town. So, we have an opportunity here to be very intentional about making sure that...all members of our community feel like they belong at this park.”

— Grantee



## Long-Term Sustainability

The long-term financial sustainability of Columbia's Agriculture Park is unknown, but to date, fundraising has exceeded expectations: *"people like this idea and they like to see successful things."* The greatest hope is the model itself will be sustainable and that it will be replicated around the state and nationally. CCUA staff also hope that the park will be a model for the value of private-public partnerships in a community. One partner also expressed a desire that the park would encourage more people to engage in farming and support local farmers by buying local produce.

For other communities contemplating a similar project, CCUA staff and partners advised that it is important to have key partners in place, adequate capacity for fundraising and project implementation, and the community's support.