

Hoop house is a growing trend

Urban farming system demonstrates how communities can grow healthy, affordable food

By Tom Buckham NEWS STAFF REPORTER
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Will Allen, founder of Growing Power in Milwaukee, teaches volunteers at the Community Action Organization of Erie County on Harvard Place, how to build an aquaponic hoop house. The project was funded through a grant from the state.

Harrv Scull Jr./Buffalo News

On a patch of grass behind 70 Harvard Place, a dozen volunteers hammered studs into place inside a framework of 13 semicircular steel ribs Sunday, creating the first “aquaponic” hoop house in Buffalo funded by the federal economic stimulus program.

Nearby, another group of children and adults directed by Will Allen, founder of the Milwaukee-based nonprofit organization Growing Power, loaded wheelbarrows with nutrient-rich compost that will fuel the year-round growth of vegetables, flowers and fish — yes, fish — inside the Quonset-like structure.

It was a scene that L. Nathan Hare, executive director of the Community Action Organization of Erie County, expects to see repeated in up to 10 other locations over the next year and in many more places in years to come.

“We want to do at least seven in Buffalo, one

in Lackawanna, one in Angola and possibly one in East Aurora,” Hare said.

The idea is to show communities how to grow their own healthy, safe and affordable food, and teach “what real food is” as opposed to the abundance of fat-, sugar-and preservative-laden items found on store shelves, he said.

The CAO, headquartered at the Harvard Place address, was already planning to adopt Allen’s urban farming system with community service block grant money when the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act came along.

The stimulus package, which provided billions of dollars to prime the nation’s economic pump, “was like a miracle for us,” Hare said.

The CAO quickly applied to the New York Department of State, and was awarded \$3.1 million to launch the aquaponic program. Hare believes it is the only one up and running in the state so far.

Hare said each hoop house will have a hatchery capable of producing 200 to 300 fish and enough produce to feed five or six families for a year. He calculates that by Aug. 31 next year, when the federal money must be used up, enough revenue will be flowing in to expand the network without any further outside funding.

In addition to greenhouses, which will be tended by block clubs, garden clubs and church groups and heated by compost to a consistent 85 to 90 degrees, the federal grant will work as a jobs program. A platoon of 40

“community groundskeepers” will be hired to maintain lawns in warm weather and remove snow during the winter for homeowners willing to pay a small fee.

The CAO brought in Allen, an urban farming pioneer and winner of a 2008 MacArthur Foundation “genius grant,” to show how a sustainable, healthy local food supply chain can be developed in an urban setting.

Robert Robinson of the Halsey Street Green Solutions Group is the CAO’s local consultant on the project.

Hare has a good-natured message for those who think the federal stimulus program is a waste of taxpayer dollars: “This is your stimulus money in action. I’m doing green initiatives with it, and if you don’t like it you can just stay mad.” tbuckham@buffnews.com