

Madison Community Garden Municipal Fee Reimbursement System

Background

In recent years, fixed-cost municipal fees including water base rates, urban forestry, and stormwater fees have taken up a substantial portion of community gardens' budgets – of 20 gardens surveyed, these fixed costs take up 40% of garden plot fees, the primary and often sole source of income. Moreover, the fees charged vary considerably from garden to garden, and fall more heavily on gardens with more low-income gardeners and smaller sized gardens. In 2021, 4 Madison gardens had fixed costs that exceeded collected plot fees. Additionally, use rates at gardens with hydrant-fed water systems increased substantially starting in 2019, to \$10.32/1000 gallons, compared to \$4.89/1000 gallons at other gardens. These two issues threatened the financial viability of an increasing number of community gardens.

Starting in 2020, increasing fixed municipal costs were mitigated by a pilot program from the City of Madison, and distributed through Rooted, the non-profit partner in the Gardens Network. The city provided \$3,500, which was distributed to 10 community gardens to ensure all gardens had a minimum budget of \$12 per plot after collecting plot fees and paying all fixed municipal costs. Gardens with hydrant-based water systems were also compensated for part of their water use costs so that their effective use rate matched that of the rest of the community gardens.

In 2021 the budget for this system expanded to include not just funds from the City of Madison, but also a 10% plot fee contribution from 19 Madison-based community gardens. With this money, 15 gardens are provided assistance, with a total budget of around \$7500 (exact amount will depend on the consumption bills of gardens with hydrant-based water systems)

Program Results

In the two years this program has been in place, we have seen a positive but varied effect on community gardens. Many gardens that were nearing or past bankruptcy have been able to break even. Without the funds from this program, many gardeners told us they would have to change their operations, shutting off water systems or eliminating sliding scale plot fees. The sliding scale fee system, based on gardener household's income, is a feature of many Madison community gardens and is essential for supporting equity in Madison gardening. At some gardens, organizers had enough flexibility to purchase compost, new tools and equipment, and other important garden infrastructure for the first time in years.

Overall, the system allows each garden to accumulate a small savings to prepare for any large future infrastructure costs. It has also contributed to overall gardens network stability and equity, partially addressing the municipal fees, which can vary drastically from garden to garden and from year to year. By matching the 10% plot fee contributions from community gardens with an annual \$3000 contribution from the city, we will be able to continue to support the stability of community gardens in the future.

Select Reports from Individual Gardens

“This reimbursement is critical for us – water usage was really high this year, with all the heat and no rain during the early growing months. It would be unsustainable for us to maintain operations paying \$10/1000 gallons.”

Dan Grupe, Bridge-Lakepoint-Waunona Community Garden, 2021

“We were able to buy compost for the first time in several years, which was very helpful for the garden. We also had the funds to buy a small shed for our tools, which was also good for the garden.”

Amelia Paulino, (translated from Spanish), Hammersley Park Community Garden 2021

“Our garden’s budget has been significantly affected by the increased municipal fees. The municipal fees went into effect about the same time that we lost access to free compost which has meant more than half our budget now goes towards those two items. For the past 4 years, we have always been over our income by about \$100 (and this is even after cutting back most of our expenses. We now ask for donations of food for events, tools, and even gas for mowing, when possible). We have been covering our expenses by dipping into our savings account. This has been ok for the short term, but we know that is not a long-term solution. The reimbursement from the city will mean that we should come close to breaking even for the first time in about 4 years.”

Sarah Kirk, Prairie Hills Community Garden, 2020

“The extra compensation was very much appreciated. We pay more than \$100 each month (on our municipal bill) for non-water related charges year-round. Water is our biggest expense.”

Percy Mathers, Marlborough Park Community Garden, 2021

“We’d be bankrupt without the help. Historically we use 50 thousand gallons a year and we could not pay the water bill without help. We would have had to turn off the water supply, which is essential to growing our crops. Knowing that we had the support with the budget meant we could focus on running the garden – not much changed this year, but we would have had to make more drastic changes, either switching the water off or changing our fee structure, if we didn’t have that support. Because the garden was near bankruptcy before this system, we didn’t go crazy with spending money. Because high water use still left the garden losing money, we will have to raise plot fees slightly next year, but we are in a better situation than we would have been.”

Rachael Newman, Leopold Park Community Garden, 2020

“We...see an inherent unfairness in how our water fees are assessed as compared to non-hydrant gardens. It is not like we had a choice of what type of water system to have – we used what was available and at the time we did not know that this would lead to paying for water at more than twice the rate of other gardens.”

Chris Brockel, Elvehjem Park Community Garden, 2020

For the past several years, the Meadowood Park Community Garden has been bankrupt due to plot fees consistently less than the municipal bill. Because of this, Community Groundworks, now Rooted, took over the finances of the garden and made payments for municipal bills but not little else, which left organizers with no budget. With the funds from plot fees, as well as a grant from the Madison Area Master Gardener’s Association, the garden was able to purchase new tools for the garden, do necessary maintenance on the lawn mower, and still have some money left over for new projects.

Meadowood Community Garden 2021