

Urban Soil Survey Project is Planned for the City of Pittsburgh

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(Left to right) NRCS staff Randy Riddle, Senior Soil Scientist for Urban Soil Survey, Denise Coleman, State Conservationist for Pennsylvania, and NRCS Chief Terry Cosby, review Technical Soil Services data and discuss how conservation planners can use the data to help urban producers manage the soil in a high tunnel at Hilltop Urban Farm in Pittsburgh.

The Soil and Plant Science Division (SPSD) announced plans for an Urban Soil Survey of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, during NRCS Chief Terry Cosby's visit to the city the week of October 16, 2023. The Allegheny County Conservation District (ACCD) hosted Chief Cosby, Soil and Plant Science Division staff, NRCS Pennsylvania staff, and conservation partners to a roundtable discussion and field tour to highlight urban agriculture in Pittsburgh.

After ACCD Executive Director Heather Manzo welcomed the group, Chief Cosby expressed his excitement about urban agriculture in Pittsburgh and thanked the NRCS staff and conservation partners who work to serve our producers, particularly those in underserved urban communities. Chief Cosby said, "Urban agriculture changes

communities — neighbors meeting for the first time and coming together to help one another. It changes the city, and it changes lives!”

Meet Kent Bey, President and CEO of Project Love Coalition



Kent Bey, a veteran and urban farmer, points out three of the 85 raised beds at the Peace and Friendship Farm and Gardens. The farm also includes two high tunnels.

One of the field stops during Chief Cosby’s visit was at the Peace and Friendship Farm and Gardens, a veteran-led urban farm managed by Project Love Coalition. Kent Bey said the farm provides veterans an opportunity to learn how to operate and manage a working urban farm as entrepreneurs. Bey said, “We grow local and sell local.” The farm also helps veterans learn new job skills, such as growing healthy food using sustainable technology.

Field Tour at Hilltop Urban Farm

The Chief’s visit also included a tour of Hilltop Urban Farm, a nonprofit, community-centered farm in Pittsburgh’s Hilltop community. The farm contains 107 acres, with 23 acres dedicated to farming. The farm’s core mission is to be “a neighborhood resource that grows food, grows farmers, and grows community in the Hilltop neighborhoods.” Central to the farm’s mission are two core programs: youth-centered education and a workforce training program for new adult urban farmers.



John Bixler, Executive Director of Hilltop Urban Farm, provides an overview of the farm. The farm had its first harvest of the season and provided over 4,000 pounds of fresh produce to local food banks.



SPSD Soil Scientist Alan Moore (left) explains how he used ground penetrating radar to locate depth to bedrock and several large underground objects at Hilltop Urban Farm.

Pittsburgh Urban Soil Survey — A Locally-Led Partnership

With assistance from the Allegheny County Conservation District (ACCD) and the University of Pittsburgh, the Urban Soil Survey of Pittsburgh will help NRCS staff help producers like Kent Bey and John Bixler.

NRCS Pennsylvania State Soil Scientist Yuri Plowden said the Pittsburgh soil survey project directly resulted from local conservation partners asking for more soil data.

During the roundtable discussion, Riley Kinney, ACCD Agriculture Program Manager, said, “Pittsburgh, like a lot of other cities, has a lot of vacant lots and marginal land. Our urban communities want to know how to build that land. In order to do that, they must understand what’s in the soil and also how best to rebuild the land to maintain soil health.”



Soil Scientists Debby Cunningham (center) and Dan Benyei (right) map and describe a soil in a community garden plot at Hilltop Urban Farm as John Bixler (left) looks on and expresses his gratitude to have the soil science information.

Denise Coleman, NRCS Pennsylvania State Conservationist, said, “Soil survey and soil mapping are so important. People want to know how safe their soils are. The soil scientists map the soil, and people on my staff, like District Conservationist Andy Graver, use the soil survey data to help producers manage their soil and keep it healthy.”

Urban Soil Survey aims to equip conservation partners and planners with cutting-edge soil information to create the most up-to-date planning product for urban and historically underserved citizens interested in agriculture, infrastructure, and outdoor recreation.

Visit NRCS’ [Urban Soils web page](#) to learn more about soil science and Urban Soil Survey.