



NeighborSpace
Community Managed Open Space

Land Use Guidelines for Community Projects on NeighborSpace-protected Land

NeighborSpace, an independent 501 (c) 3 nonprofit organization, plays a very specific and crucial role in the Chicago area's larger movement to preserve and expand green space: it is the only organization in Chicago that acquires land on behalf of committed community groups that have established gardens on what were once vacant parcels. By doing so, NeighborSpace ensures the community project is not displaced by development, and eases the burden of local groups by shouldering the responsibilities of acquisition, ongoing ownership, and providing basic insurance liability coverage. NeighborSpace protects these lands to ensure that these and other types of community managed open spaces continue to positively impact the neighborhood's quality of life for years to come.

Once the land comes under NeighborSpace's protection, a formal partnership is established between the community leader and group responsible for the project and NeighborSpace, as the community's "land trust." The framework for these partnerships provides the roles and responsibilities appropriate to the interests of each partner without endangering the community project and protected land.

NeighborSpace Land Stewardship Responsibilities



NeighborSpace provides basic liability **insurance coverage**. This coverage applies to all properties owned or leased by NeighborSpace.



NeighborSpace signs are posted on all NeighborSpace-protected land, and lets passersby know the role the organization plays and provides contact information. This sign is discreet in size and permanently posted at the entrance to the site.



When NeighborSpace purchases or leases land on behalf of community groups, NeighborSpace installs a **lawn hydrant** for use in maintaining the community-established garden or park. NeighborSpace hires a certified and bonded contractor to install and maintain these

hydrants. This includes testing and turning the hydrants on in the Spring, and winterizing and turning them off in the Fall.



Each year NeighborSpace staff visits all protected land to conduct what is known in land conservation terms as “**land monitoring**.” It’s a kind of surveying activity that includes conversations with community partners for the project, walking the land to assess conditions, and documenting the community project and legal boundaries of the land. The results of these reports are used to defend the land in cases of encroachment, provide an historical record of the community’s efforts, and guides NeighborSpace’s efforts to respond to challenges community partners may be facing.

Community Partners: Community Garden Leader & Community Organization Partner Responsibilities

NeighborSpace’s stewardship of protected land does not displace the equally crucial role local leaders and residents play in the long-term success of these community-established gardens and parks.

NeighborSpace values the diversity of approaches and types of community established and managed gardens and parks that make up this amazing culture in Chicago. In order to effectively support this diversity there are a few requirements and responsibilities that need to be maintained by the Community Garden Leader and Community Organization Partner that have signed the NeighborSpace Partnership Agreements. (NOTE: These agreements provide the framework for how NeighborSpace and Community Garden Leaders and Community Organization Partners work together to ensure that protected community projects continue to be viable community assets. These guidelines reflect the agreement contents.)

Partnership and Feedback



As the leader to this site, the Community Garden Leader and Community Organization Partner will need to act as a **liaison and a strong partner** with NeighborSpace on an ongoing basis. This strong partnership will provide increased opportunities to share information about lessons learned and potential challenges and dangers before they become real threats to the project’s long-term viability in the community. This also means remaining aware of and communicating with NeighborSpace about events, changes in your garden’s leadership, or changes in the area that could have a negative impact on your project.

Land Use

NeighborSpace is a land **conservation-oriented** organization and land protected by NeighborSpace is done so on behalf of agreed-to land uses already in place. The following activities are not allowed as these activities would jeopardize NeighborSpace’s insurance coverage and disqualify NeighborSpace from maintaining ownership and protection of the land:



No part of the community project can be used for dogs or as dog runs. It is advisable to use a “**No Dogs Allowed**” sign on the site to send this message to others who may not have a copy of these guidelines. Try not to use “Curb Your Dog” signs as this is a confusing message and suggests to dog owners that they can use the project as a dog area.



No vehicles of any kind can be parked on the land and paving or laying cement pads on the land for parking spaces is not allowed.



No part of the community project can be used for **organized sports**.



If there are plans to hold **large community gatherings** on the property that may attract over 300 people, the Community Garden Leader or a representative from the Community Organization Partner must notify NeighborSpace and must obtain additional insurance coverage for the event.

Public Access



Public access to the site will need to be a priority. Perimeter treatments such as hedges or fences should encourage public visual and physical access without obstructing the right-of-way. The amount and type of public access appropriate for each site will vary depending on the designated use of the land. For example, projects that mainly function as vegetable gardens may need to limit physical access to keep the produce safe from destruction or theft. If a fence is required, there should be ample room between fence pickets so passersby can have visual access and see through to the garden. Sites that function as “passive” parks with walkways and seating areas may not want to use any fencing at all.

Here are some public access options to consider based on how the land is used:

- Entirely accessible sites are encouraged for community projects that are mostly intended to beautify the area without much, if any, vegetable garden areas. This means that there are no fences or gates in place. However, this is not the best approach in all circumstances.
- For projects that have some passive/beautification areas as well as vegetable gardens, partially fenced sites can be a great option as the vegetable growing area could be fenced and the rest of the land unfenced to ensure that part of the land remains protected for growing vegetables and part remains open to the public.
- Entirely fenced sites with locked gates are less viable as open spaces but in some cases may be called for. In these cases, the Community Garden Leader or a representative from the Community Organization Partner must have the site open to the public during posted days and times but can keep the gates locked at other days and times as necessary.

Structural Elements



No permanent buildings or structures such as homes or garages should be in place on the land. Such structures would jeopardize NeighborSpace's insurance coverage and disqualify NeighborSpace from maintaining ownership and protection of the land.



No traditional playground equipment should be in place on the land. In addition, any sculptures or non-traditional playground equipment must meet current safety standards established by the Chicago Park District and the National Parks and Recreation Association, and needs to be reviewed by NeighborSpace prior to construction. Such structures would jeopardize NeighborSpace's insurance coverage and disqualify NeighborSpace from maintaining ownership and protection of the land.



Water features such as ponds or fountains are also not allowed due to the enormous safety risks they represent. In addition, these features would jeopardize NeighborSpace's insurance coverage and disqualify NeighborSpace from maintaining ownership and protection of the land.

SPECIAL NOTE FOR ADDED EMPHASIS: It is important to obtain written permission from NeighborSpace before making any substantial structural changes, improvements or alterations to the land or project, or before the addition of any domesticated animals. Such changes could jeopardize NeighborSpace's insurance coverage and disqualify NeighborSpace from maintaining ownership and protection of the land.

Maintenance



Hardscape Maintenance is very important. You will need to keep seating areas, walls and fences in safe and attractive conditions at all times. Not doing so sends a message to others that the project and land are unvalued and not cared for which can at times, lead to illegal use of the land and general disrespect of the project.



Softscape Maintenance is also a high priority and the Community Garden Leader and Community Organization Partner must have or continue to gain knowledge of general plant and project care. For example, it is important to keep small trees on the property and in the parkway watered in the heat of the season and especially during a drought. It is also important to provide reasonable lawn and flower watering and maintenance, including lawn mowing, weeding, pruning, removal of overgrown vegetation and proper composting if possible.



Often times either the weather or neighbors and passersby discard any number of things on the street, sidewalk and neighboring land. **Litter and debris** is something can be managed as long as removing garbage from the project and parkway is a constant activity. Not doing so results in much more garbage on site and sends a message to others that the project and land are unvalued and not cared for which can at times, lead to other illegal uses of the land and general disrespect for the community project. You can contact your Alderman's office to explore getting a City garbage receptacle for the site and to list the site for garbage collection.



Use of Water is important for a sustainable site. NeighborSpace sites must have an identified source of water. If your site does not have a lawn hydrant installed you may try other potential water sources which include:

- Request use of a hydrant for water by contacting the City of Chicago, or
- Get permission from a nearby property owner to use their water source.



Community Garden Leader and Community Organization Partners must be responsible for the **parkways and sidewalks** that border the project. Specific to parkways, they should be watered if necessary, especially if trees were newly planted, and routinely cleared of garbage. Specific to sidewalks, bushes, trees and hedges should not interfere with the sidewalk and should be kept cut back and thinned out enough to provide transparency and avoid providing hiding places. The sidewalks should also be kept clear of snow, ice and debris.



It is important to consider the **aesthetics** of your community project. For example, perimeter treatments such as fences, small walls, berms and landscaping can be an artistic element and a positive feature of the neighborhood. As such, all project hardscape and softscape elements should be designed and built to blend in, compliment and/or accentuate other features of the surrounding neighborhood without blocking views into the garden.

Signage



Additional signage may be developed by the Community Garden Leader and Community Organization Partner and can provide for great opportunities to let others know about the garden. However, these signs should not be too large as to overly dominate the project or distract from the aesthetics. Be sure to include other organizations on such signage if they are contributing to your efforts. This can be a terrific relationship-building tool.



Promotional advertisements or **religious signs** should not be posted on NeighborSpace-protected lands.

Other Resources

In addition to the above requirements there are other crucial things to consider that other community gardeners have found useful in their work regarding such issues as land use, community involvement, plant selection, and overall garden design.

There are a myriad of “green” organizations in Chicago that have a good deal of expertise in these areas. Please consult GreenNet’s “Green Pages” for a listing of these organizations and agencies. Their involvement in your efforts will lend much to the success of your community-managed open space. You can contact GreenNet for more information at: 773-251-7515, www.greennetchicago.org