



Plan demonstration farm to include farm business incubator and educational use

Abstract: A farm plan was created to guide land use decisions for the demonstration farm at the Midwest Center for Entrepreneurial Agriculture in Marshalltown, Iowa.

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Budget:

\$17,850 for year one

Q What would be the best way to develop the land owned by the Marshalltown Community College into a teaching facility to launch farmers into entrepreneurial and diversified businesses?

A This farm plan provides a practical, visible, hands-on example of a working diversified farm so that college administrators, beginning farmers and the community have the opportunity to see and learn all that is possible with small diversified farming in central Iowa. In addition to its role as an example, the farm now serves as an incubator for students and new farmers.



Background

Marshalltown Community College (MCC), part of the Iowa Valley Community College District, initiated the Entrepreneurial and Diversified Agriculture (EDA) program in 2003. This program offers courses leading to a degree as well as non-credit courses in diversified agriculture. The Midwest Center for Entrepreneurial Agriculture (MCEA), part of the larger vision for the diversified agriculture program, is teaching students of all ages how to launch farm businesses that focus on growing food for local consumption. Farmland adjacent to the MCC campus is used as an important teaching site and demonstration farm for the MCEA program. The Leopold Center provided funds to research and plan and uses for the land.

Approach and methods

This planning grant was used to guide thinking about the farmland portion of the MCEA. Besides helping college officials make choices about land use, it also served to inform community stakeholders and potential funding agencies with a basis for appreciating the goals of the demonstration farm.

The investigators began by outlining a vision for the land, looking at its history and characteristics, and setting goals for the land, including planned infrastructure, rental and management strategies. They also considered avenues for community interaction and created a budget for their operations.

Results and discussion

Several points raised with planning stakeholders about the MCEA demonstration farm included:

- It serves as a learning lab for students (new and beginning farmers) to gain experience in the practical application of sustainable agriculture principles and techniques.

- It will demonstrate the self-sustaining nature of a complete farm system centered on soil health.
- It will extend its services to the community and surrounding areas through education and demonstration to local schools and adults.
- It will act as a farm incubator by providing small plots of land and guided management experiences to students and new farmers.
- Immigrant residents with agricultural backgrounds and an interest in farming will benefit from the opportunity to practice on the land and learn about needed business skills.

Conclusions

Three types of plots will be located on the farm: demonstration, community and incubator. The primary intent of the farm is to move individuals from one level of involvement to another: i.e., visitors to consumers to producers or students.

Demonstration plots will be used by EDA students to practice various methods of sustainable and organic production, as well as to exhibit the diversity of crops that can be raised in the Midwest, including biomass, food, and grain crops. Some areas of the farm will be used to showcase conservation practices.

Community plots will be small parcels of land that individuals and families can rent to raise crops for their own consumption. These growers will have access to advice on production and land stewardship as well as shared tools and resources.

Incubator plots will be larger parcels of land that entrepreneurs can rent to start sustainable, organic or specialty production. Once they are established, these farmers will receive assistance in finding and securing larger plots of land and equipment to buy or rent elsewhere. Besides having access to shared tools and resources, the farmers will be mentored on production and business practices.

Facilities for the farm will include site infrastructure (transportation, fencing, water, and electric), a machine shed, a community wash station, a commercial-style packing facility, an education center, and portable animal shelters. Walking paths will be placed around demonstration plots, as well as an access road and parking lot.

Once the Sustainable and Diversified Farm is operational, the Rural Entrepreneurship Incubator will be established as part of the MCEA. This is expected to occur within three to five years. The incubator will provide technical assistance on business management, value-added processing, niche marketing, and distribution. Technical assistance will be provided on site and on-line. The facility will house both business and kitchen incubators.

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