

Pay Dirt

A resilient plot of land on the city's south side will soon grow jobs and a whole lot more

BY MAGGIE GINSBERG-SCHUTZ



It is a cool, sunny morning on the south side of Madison, the kind of morning with the promise of later-day heat. Just off the Beltline at Rimrock Road, in a vacant weedy lot next to an abandoned building, thirty or forty people are hanging out near a pile of dirt. At the head of the crowd stands a man, ordinary save for his exceptional height, a good foot taller than everybody else. Cars whiz past bullet-like on the Beltline, their drivers oblivious to the scene below.

The man to whom all those gathered—neighborhood citizens, teachers, students, civic leaders, board members, business owners and professors—are paying rapt attention is six-foot-seven, sixty-one-year-old **Will Allen**, MacArthur Genius Grant recipient, one of *Time* magazine's 100 Most Influential People, Bill Clinton pal and founder of internationally renowned, Milwaukee-based Growing Power. That dirt is not just dirt—it's Allen's powerful worm-nurtured soil, three years in the making and, to many, a kind of gritty black gold. This is not merely an abandoned school on a vacant lot—it's the beginning of the Resilience Research Center, a bold new project its proponents claim will swiftly grow into a national model.



The project, spearheaded by the Center for Resilient Cities, Growing Power, Madison Gas and Electric and the immediate neighborhoods, will include a community center, a project-based middle school, a five-thousand-square-foot mixed-use development with neighborhood-focused businesses such as a restaurant and coffee shop, an MG&E Energy Services Center and several acres of intensive, year-round urban agriculture.

"This is really about a new industry," says the surprisingly soft-spoken Allen, his Maryland-bred accent light and loose. "I predict within the next five years there'll be hundreds or thousands of projects just like this around the country."

Allen puts his head down, slides his shovel into the hot, rich dirt

and quietly gets to work.

Take This Job and Shovel It

“Green-collar” jobs—essentially blue-collar opportunities with an environmental bent—are the hot new thing. In an economy where national unemployment rates teeter around ten percent, the promise of a burgeoning new industry is an attractive one. Obama banked on it, pledging to spend \$150 billion over ten years to create five million green-collar jobs. Nearly 3,500 people attended the third annual Good Jobs, Green Jobs National Conference in Washington, D.C., in May, where House Speaker Nancy Pelosi headlined. The idea is green jobs are good for local economies, they’re good for the globe and they add a bit of cachet to a movement long associated with passion rather than riches.

“We treat our forty-plus employees very well,” says Allen, who reportedly makes \$80,000 a year as CEO of his Growing Power of Milwaukee. “It’s one thing to get folks all hyped up, but we have to be able to create these jobs, real living wage green jobs. That’s one of our principles at Growing Power, and we want to be an example because it can happen.”

Allen, a former NBA player and the son of sharecroppers, started farming in the city of Milwaukee in 1993 and by 1995 founded a nonprofit urban ag growing and training center, later called Growing Power. Allen’s goal is to grow safe, healthy, affordable food in urban areas, creating community as a by-product—and somewhere along the way he became famous for his methods. Michelle Obama, Bill Clinton, Oprah, the *New York Times*, and *Time* magazine have all lauded Allen’s efforts, and to list his speaking engagements, awards and recognitions here would take a full magazine page—literally—but if you ask Allen, the real stars here are the worms.



“They’re my most valuable employees,” he says.

It’s Allen’s red worms infiltrating his composted soil that allow him to create the rich black worm tea that can be thrown down anywhere—atop asphalt or weedy grass—to grow edible plants without space issues or worry of ground contaminants rampant in most city soil. And not only are these urban gardens organic, they’re highly productive.

“We grow about five dollars per square foot, which equates to about \$200,000 an acre,” says Allen. “So this is different from Grandfather’s row crop type farming, which yielded about five hundred dollars per acre. It’s an expensive proposition up front, but on the back end it’s really gonna yield a lot of production.”

And jobs. On Madison’s Resilience Research Center site, thirty to fifty green jobs will come from the initial construction alone, and hundreds more could follow in staffing the restaurant and café, expertly maintaining the gardens and greenhouses, or any number of other ventures on campus. The project will likely attract worldwide attention, just as Growing Power has in Milwaukee, recent host of three national conferences thanks to Allen. The possibilities, it would seem, are endless.

Vision, dollars and direction

Imagine a self-contained, highly productive, culturally rich food and community utopia. Four acres, every square inch of it in sustainable use, right here in the city. Hoop houses arched protectively over beds of vegetables throughout the winter, edible perennials shaded by nut trees all summer long, ponds filled with farm fish whose waste is anything but, feeding the floating beds of plants above. Imagine a middle school where students, rather than sitting through six, fifty-minute classes, spend the day putting their hands on projects that integrate all subjects. Imagine a community center and a business where food is grown, harvested, marketed, sold and consumed. Imagine dozens or even hundreds of green-collar jobs, from construction to gardening to teaching to business management. Imagine the money recycled back into the neighborhood. Imagine food

scraps recycled into compost and raked throughout, best practices spread through the neighborhood and harvested again, a cycle churning in perpetuity like a blade through soil.



“It’s happening, and it’s actually moving very quickly,” says **Tom Dunbar**, a landscape architect and executive director of the Center for Resilient Cities. “The concept is five years, and at seven or eight months we’re already this far along. It’s a very aggressive schedule, but it also responds to integrated project delivery, where you really focus and bring all partners in and do things slightly differently than you would do in a normal public bid situation.”

For Dunbar, green jobs are anything but new.

“You could say I’ve had a green job since 1969,” says Dunbar. “I designed my first rain garden in 1972. My entire professional career has been oriented to the combination of land and people.”

The Center for Resilient Cities is a Madison- and Milwaukee-based nonprofit whose mission is to help urban citizens and governments create healthy, economically attractive environments. They’re the ones working on Madison’s land transfer for the proposed Central Park, and a driving force behind revitalizing Troy Gardens as we know it today.

Last July, members of the Madison Community Land Trust and the Community Action Coalition approached Dunbar about the four-acre parcel at Badger and Rimrock roads, then owned by Dane County. The county was looking to sell, and the CRC had to make a quick decision. Dunbar says it was an easy one, because so many of the partners fit so well together. Community Groundworks, the organization that runs Troy Gardens, and Sustain Dane came on board. Proponents of the Badger Rock Charter School entered the picture, seeing a perfect fit for the project-based charter school proposal they’d been working on for two years. The CRC already had a long-standing relationship with Growing Power, which was looking for a more permanent Madison location to supplement the work farmer **Robert Pierce** is doing at Avant Gardens of McFarland. It all felt right.

By January 2010, the CRC, through community contributions and a \$20,000 donation from MG&E, had raised \$220,000 beyond the necessary \$500,000 to purchase the land. The final project calls for an additional \$8 to \$14 million for completion, but it will be built in modules—beginning this fall with the deconstruction of Badger School, recycle and reuse of at least eighty percent of the old structure’s materials. The CRC is working with Hoffman and Associates of Appleton, the design group responsible for the new Holy Wisdom Monastery in Middleton, which received the most U.S. Green Building Council LEED points of any project in the country. For Dunbar, however, sustainability is about so much more than green building—it’s about a society’s ability to adapt to change, and there’s no predicting what the next big green trend will be—what remains is people, and their ability to evolve well together.

“The notion of green jobs is legitimate but we’re doing resilient jobs,” says Dunbar. “Talking about sustainability is good, but if we don’t look at how we foster the ability of neighborhoods and cities to adapt to change in a positive way, sustainability won’t mean much.”

Learning to Grow

If all continues to go well with the approval process, Badger Rock Charter Middle School could be the first tenant in the fall 2010 construction, prepping to welcome its first forty to eighty students by the fall of 2011. The school would be project-based, and proponents say it will be an “interdisciplinary program focusing on environmental sustainability with culturally relevant teaching,” a “hands-on exploration and study of food growth and science, energy and water use, and community cooperation.”

Eventually they'd like to have 120 students, at least fifty percent of whom will come from the immediate neighborhood, a neighborhood in which seventy-six percent of students currently qualify for free and reduced lunch. The need for a school is real—as it stands now, local kids are bused away to Allis Elementary on Buckeye Road, Sennett Middle School and LaFollette High School, both on Pflaum Road.

Sara Alvarado, small business owner and south side community member, was one of the founding members of Madison's Spanish immersion charter school, *Nuestro Mundo*. In 2008, she connected with a couple of people who'd been involved with a lapsed idea for a green design school, and together they started talking about a potential charter school with an environmental focus—but it wasn't until the Center for Resilient Cities procured the land that plans for the school took off.

“This wouldn't have happened if we hadn't partnered with the CRC,” says Alvarado. “Financially, we know what [the Madison school district] is going through and they don't have any money. If we want to create something it has to be budget-neutral.”

As of May, school planners had applied for a \$250,000 Department of Public Instruction grant, and they are in the process of getting their detailed proposal approved by the Madison Metropolitan School District. Though Alvarado acknowledges the road ahead is long, she's more than optimistic.

“Trying to get *Nuestro Mundo* going was negative and difficult and I became so jaded by the red tape,” she says. “This has been a completely different experience. It's green lights, it's positive, it's collaboration with MMSD, it's night and day.”

Brenda Baker of the Madison Children's Museum is on the school planning team and was one of the people Alvarado connected with a couple years back.

“The fortuitous thing was that we worked for about a year talking about it, knowing the school's budget situation was so dire,” says Baker. “All of a sudden we've got this great partner. We were in the right place at the right time. There's a lot of synergy right now.”

Though Baker was originally working on a green school before she met Alvarado, the two shy away from that terminology now.

“It will be green, yes, but it's so much more than that,” says Baker. “It's a community school. It's sense-of-place education. It's not just about the materials, it's about the culture and the people.”

The educational opportunities will spread far beyond the middle school, according to **Joe Sensenbrenner**, president of the board of the Center for Resilient Cities. He envisions people from the neighborhood walking to their jobs on the farm or in the restaurant, interns studying exothermic research or aquaponics, kids shadowing professional gardeners or restaurant managers, conducting science experiments with wind power or photovoltaic energy using MG&E's on-site equipment. He sees people of all ages and cultures trading ideas and conversation, values and histories, breaking locally harvested bread together every day. And though he predicts cities across the country will emulate what is going on in Madison, above all it's about one local neighborhood nurturing, harvesting and feeding itself in myriad ways.

“We're very interested in the neighborhood impact,” says Sensenbrenner. “How does this affect people's attitudes and practices toward individual diet? Toward obesity or adult-onset diabetes? How do young people view homegrown and naturally grown foods versus other kinds of food? How do they view recipes of other ethnic and national backgrounds? Does this help people get to know each other better?”

Sensenbrenner points to the involvement of researchers such as UW–Madison professor emeritus Jerry Kaufman of the Department of Urban and Regional Planning, who retired from teaching in 2003 to serve as board president of Growing

Power, or world-renowned

neuroscience professor Richard Davidson, who's interested in how focus and attention impact learning. The CRC could use that knowledge to enrich its programming. The CRC is also working with UW sociology professor Michael Bell to understand the impact this project will have on practices in the neighborhood, and there are plans to study ways to apply water retention pond techniques to farming methods in Wisconsin's Kickapoo Valley, so prone to flooding.

"We have opportunities here to reinforce some fundamental research," says Sensenbrenner. "This is a learning and production laboratory that will benefit the neighborhood, the entire school system and other cities."

A Farmer's Full Circle



Robert Pierce remembers when Badger School was alive and well, because he attended kindergarten through fifth grade in the very building he now leans against eating his lunch.

"Actually, they kicked me out of kindergarten because I could already read and write," he laughs, a free and easy belly guffaw familiar to the smiling volunteers wheelbarrowing past him. Pierce has always been ahead of the game, and deeply committed to his neighborhood. He started Half the 40 Acres organic farm back in 1983 to alleviate the food allergies he'd picked up in Vietnam, and started managing the South Madison Farmers' Market about ten years ago.

"I decided I couldn't force people to grow food without poisons for me, so I decided to grow it myself," he says.

For years he'd heard about a man in Milwaukee who was doing very similar things, but he didn't actually meet Will Allen until about ten years ago. The two men connected immediately, and years later when Allen was interested in developing Growing Power in Madison, he knew just who to call.

"Three years ago Will said, 'Robert, I have a vision.' He said, 'You're going to be Madison's Growing Power,'" says Pierce. "I laughed and said, 'I'll just be here doing what I'm doing.'" Pierce started a Growing Power farm at Avant Gardens of McFarland but continued searching for a more permanent plot to sow. The informal partnership between Pierce and Allen turned formal when the CRC purchased the land at Badger and Rimrock, and the fit was evident to all parties involved. Growing Power dug in.

"It just gets bigger and bigger," says Pierce, who also runs a youth group and plans to have participants tend the farms two days each week. "We've got a good place with good people who understand what we're doing here, you know?"

It's obvious what's happening here today is about so much more than growing food. Gardening as community building is something Pierce and Allen have long called a profession, but today few of the people working here are professional gardeners. UW environmental ed students have given up their Saturday morning to haul dirt with grandmothers and retired teachers. A young dad watches his baby scoop the rich soil with a toy shovel. School proponents connect to pencil in the next planning session. Allen stands watching it all, smiling.

"Growing Power could have done this ourselves today," says Allen. "We could have waited to bring you people in, but that's not what this is about. We want the community involved from the very start. It's the passion that we're able to grow. You can throw a lot of money at something like this but if you don't have the passion, it will go away very quickly. That's what we're doing here today. This is just the beginning."

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