

## COMMUNITY GROWING SPACES REQUIRE COMMUNITY INPUT AND SUPPORT



*Goya, an emerging grower, prepares the soil for planting on this plot at the Blue Earth County Farm.*

### YOU CAN HELP MAKE THIS VISION A REALITY

LEC cannot create a true community growing space in a vacuum. It takes an investment from the community as well. To that end, we are looking to form new partnerships with cities, counties, businesses, nonprofits, and individuals to work together to bring this vision to fruition.

**Land Partnership-** we are seeking locations around the City/County as possible future sites of both urban growing spaces and the LEC Campus. Are there spaces that individuals, organizations or governments are interested in selling, leasing or donating in partnership? Are there possibilities of long-term low-payment land leases, etc.?

**Financial Partnership-** LEC believes these issues are region-wide challenges which require collaboration on all fronts. As a small nonprofit, we are seeking financial support from community partners. From corporate sponsorships to individual donations, it will truly take a village to create the inclusive, sustainable, and equitable future we all envision.

**Inclusion in Sustainability Planning-** Community agriculture will become a primary factor when looking at whole systems approaches to sustainability. We hope to be included in ideas, cross-pollination, and solution-building. LEC will be hosting a Community-Wide Listening Session in May 2023 to hear from community members what issues they would like to see addressed.

### Questions, Comments, Interested in Becoming a Partner?

Contact LEC Executive Director:  
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### LIVING EARTH CENTER CURRENT PARTNERSHIPS

- School Sisters of Notre Dame
- Otto Bremer Trust
- Blue Earth County
- Region 9
- Mankato Area Foundation
- Consolidated Communications Community Fund
- Feeding Our Community Partners
- Mankato MyPlace
- MVAC Head Start
- Minnesota State University
  - College of Allied Health and Nursing
  - MNSU Environmental Committee
- Southern Minnesota Center for Agricultural Excellence
- MRCI
- MAC-V
- CADA House
- YMCA Voyagers Camp
- Roots Shoots and Boots
- Southern MN Food Recovery
- ECHO Food Shelf
- Children's Museum of Southern Minnesota
- Mankato Diversity Council



## LIVING EARTH CENTER LONG TERM VISION

### CONTINUING THE LEGACY

Living Earth Center (LEC) was founded as The Center for Earth Spirituality and Rural Ministry (CESRM) by the School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSND) in 1996. For 20+ years, under the sole support of SSND, our primary focus was based on the School Sisters' belief in education and environmental and social justice. During those years, we ran the Community Garden, offered workshops and classes on sustainability, and operated an advocacy network focused on local, grassroots efforts.

As the Sisters aged and their numbers began to decline, they asked CESRM to become an independent 501c3 to continue their legacy. We changed our name to Living Earth Center in 2017, when we became an independent nonprofit. While we continue to carry out and honor the School Sisters' legacy, we are not a religiously-affiliated nonprofit.



We directly connect people to the land and, in doing so, are combatting not only food insecurity but strengthening the bonds that bind our community together. Our mission is to bring people of all traditions together to cultivate common ground and seek justice through education, encounter and community agriculture.

The School Sisters are in the process of selling the longtime home of Living Earth Center, and we find ourselves an excellent opportunity to grow into our next phase and address the community's needs as they are today. We see some of the most significant issues facing Southern Minnesota as food insecurity and sovereignty, environmental health, land access, and community resilience building. These all require us to collaborate with other partners to approach these issues creatively and compassionately.



While continuing the focus on education and environmental and social justice, our efforts have also shifted to creating Community Growing Spaces in both the literal and figurative sense. We are dedicated to growing healthy communities by cultivating food and relationships through sharing common ground. We expanded this capability in 2021 when we took over management of the Blue Earth County Farm.

This partnership with the County has allowed us to expand our Produce Donation Program, where we grow food to be donated to local partners like ECHO Foodshelf and Feeding Our Community Partners. It has also provided space to begin our Emerging Growers Program, where we partner with community members who have expressed concern that they are unable to access culturally significant foods and/or want to grow larger amounts of produce but do not have access to land.



# CREATING COMMON GROUND: A VISION FOR A VIBRANT, EQUITABLE, COMMUNITY-DRIVEN FUTURE

Living Earth Center's vision is to address food insecurity, land access, and community building through a semi-urban and rural approach. Finding new in-town locations for our Community Garden will ensure ease of access for our gardeners. Finding a larger rural space to be home for our Living Earth Center Campus affords the acreage to grow both the Emerging Growers and Partner Plot Donation programs. As we begin to grow something new, we have the ability to work with community partners to envision and build a space that fits specific needs and fills gaps that exist for our local community. By partnering with other organizations to collaborate and cross pollinate this dualist approach allows for us to strengthen our Partnership Plots Program and the Youth Gardening Initiative while also expanding the concept of "community growing space" as a community-driven solution to the challenges facing our local community.

By bringing this vision to reality, LEC will fill food insecurity gaps, create economic opportunity, build a diverse and healthy community, and promote sustainable environmental and social practices that bolster long-term health in the region. LEC is also dedicated to land conservation and would like our future home to have a space for prairie restoration or similar project.

## NEW COMMUNITY GARDEN LOCATIONS

Living Earth Center will manage 2-3 smaller (1 acre or less) community garden spaces spread throughout the city. These gardens would replace LEC's single Community Garden currently in operation on Good Counsel Hill.

The new gardens will provide community members access to small parcels of land to grow food for themselves and their families. Until the LEC Campus property is identified and operational, these gardens would also be home to our Community Garden Partnership Programs, hosting groups like MNSU's College of Health and Nursing's dementia-friendly EngAGE-ment garden, and to our Youth Gardening Initiative, which runs weekly classes with youth from MY Place (formerly Boys and Girls Club). Once the Campus property is ready we envision moving these programs to our central location.

## LIVING EARTH CENTER RURAL CAMPUS

This location will be a larger (10+ acres) incubator agriculture space. It will include aspects of community supported agriculture, Produce Donation Program, education and community building. Following an incubator model, it will provide emerging or small growers exclusive and affordable access to parcels of land, training and support with the goal of introducing them or providing access points to the local food economy.

Additionally, the space will encompass aspects of community art, music, educational workshops, and interactive events. The Campus will be a community-wide engaging space, open to other nonprofits and organizations to utilize.

Below are listed ideas for this new space. Ideas were generated by staff, gardeners, Board Members, donors, and the general community. It does not represent a finalized plan for the Campus. Once there is a physical space located, more concrete plans will be formulated.

- Accessible garden beds
- Toolshed/ barn
- Produce washing station
- Designated kid's garden with interactive natural play space
- Greenhouse/seed starting area
- Orchard /Free Food Forest
- Sculpture Garden /Art Walk
- Structure for outdoor gatherings (open shelter)
- Outdoor kitchen (pizza oven/grill) for outdoor gatherings
- Parking
- Access to water
- Semi permanent space for farm equipment
- Large building/facility/barn to host:
  - Office space
  - Lending library
  - Events (50-100 attendees)
  - Kitchen (possible commercial kitchen)
- Potential boarding space for retreats.
- Vegetable Storage Cooler



*Possible imagining of Living Earth Center Campus. LEC envisions a space for both growing food and connections. Along with acreage to grow produce, the space would include a gazebo-centered community gathering area, play space for children, and a market stand for emerging growers.*



These community growing spaces would allow people to come together to connect in addition to cultivating healthy food for individuals and families. Target areas could be unused lots or spaces in "high impact" areas with lower incomes and more food security needs.