



Call photo/Sandy McGee

Standing together after five weeks of research are youth participants of the Community Garden Research Project. The youths spent weeks interviewing, surveying and studying the potential need for and impact that a community garden would have on Woonsocket.

## They're weighing the benefits of a community garden

By SANDY MCGEE

**WOONSOCKET** – Would a community garden benefit the city and residents of Woonsocket? That's what one local group of youths set out to discover five weeks ago.

Nine Woonsocket teenagers, including students from Woonsocket High School and the Beacon Charter High School for the Arts, met for five straight weeks to research the potential interest and impact of a community garden within the city. The program was conducted through the Family Resources Community Action, Northern Rhode Island Youth Career Center.

"It (a community garden) would help Woonsocket a lot," said 16-year-old Amanda Madera. "A lot of people have to choose between rent, food and heating their homes. Nobody should have to make that choice."

The youth presented their findings to a large crowd Friday afternoon at the youth center on Main Street. The group first began the project to answer the following question: Is it possible to create a community garden in Woonsocket?

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"A community garden is a piece of land cultivated by members of a community, especially an urban area," according to the group's final report. "A community garden encourages an urban community's food security, allowing citizens to grow their own food or donate what they have grown."

The group studied the interest, need, type, location and funding required to create a community garden in Woonsocket. They also identified community partners, who would assist in the garden's development.

The young researchers, who range from age 14 to 17, surveyed approximately 97 Woonsocket residents about their interest in a community garden. The surveys were con-

ducted at the Woonsocket Harris Public Library and in the Social Street area near World War II Veterans Memorial State Park.

Out of the 97 surveyed residents, researchers discovered that 67 percent were very concerned about the rise of current food costs; and 52 percent felt that food cost has a big impact on their daily lives.

Researchers also discovered that 58 percent of people polled said they had not sought an alternative way to buy food other than at the supermarket; and 69 percent said that a community garden would benefit the city.

Forty percent of residents polled said they would personally benefit from a community garden.

"We found that in circulat-

ing 97 surveys, a majority of people answered that Woonsocket is in need of a community garden," according to the final report.

The most recent census from Woonsocket City Hall showed that 19.4 percent of people in Woonsocket are living below the poverty line, according to the youth's report. About 9,600 families visit Family Resources' Family Support Center each year in need of food, according to the report.

The teenage researchers also discovered that Franklin Farms in Cumberland donated 8,000 to 10,000 pound of food to the Rhode Island Community Food Bank in Providence this past year.

"It was a shock to know that so many people live in poverty

in Woonsocket," said 15 year old Brihanda Garcia.

"To know that we can do something to change that is really great."

As part of the project, the group also visited Woonsocket City Hall, Franklin Farms in Cumberland and the Providence Farmers Market. They also visited many sites throughout the city, scanning for the ideal location for a community garden.

The group did not pick one particular spot in the city, but said they would prefer to cleanup and utilize one of the city's 150 Brownfield sites for a community garden.

"These are sites that are no longer used," according to the report. "There are over 150 parcels of land in Woonsocket that are polluted and need to be cleaned up."

The group also met with sellers at local farmer markets to obtain information about the type of produce sold. The researchers found that

Woonsocket would benefit most with growing the following produce: beans, squash, cabbage, zucchini, corn, tomatoes, beets, pumpkins, potatoes, onions, peaches, cucumbers, peppers, berries, herbs and other greens.

"We learned a lot in a couple of weeks," Garcia said.

"We learned a lot and it took a lot of hard work and research," said 17 year old Natasha DeLaRosa. "We found out that thousands of people are struggling to feed their families. If (a community garden) will help a lot of people get food."

"It would also help little kids because they would have something to do (after-school)," Madera said. "It would give them a sense of pride."

The youth did not compile a cost estimate for the project, but suggested ways to fund a garden. The group plans to apply for grants through different organizations and corpora-

tions, as well as organize fundraising events.

The group also met with Woonsocket City Planner Catherine Ady, who provided the youth with information about applying for grants through the Department of Environmental Management (DEM).

"This was the blueprint. We now hope to gain interest from someone to take this project on," said 16 year old Alvin Breaux.

"It meant a lot to us."

Youths participating in the program also included Shaqwanna Jones, Nelson Diaz, Staphvon Johnson and Keisha Davis.

"You made an impact on me," said Josie Byrd, an employee of Family Resources. "Now, it is time to bring this to the rest of the community."

"What I saw here today was a group of young kids with a tremendous vision," said Gil Perez of Woonsocket. "These kids are unbelievable."