



Candidate Questionnaire Responses from: John Avalos

Questions from the San Francisco Urban Agriculture Alliance

Access to Land

One of the largest barriers to expanding urban agriculture in San Francisco is access to land. There are numerous potential locations including vacant lots, underutilized public land, and barren rooftops. How will you facilitate the linking of passionate gardeners and organizations with usable sites? And will you prioritize helping the SFUAA reach its goal of 12 new gardens by the end of 2012?

For the past three years, my office has been working with various community stakeholders to transform a municipally-owned parcel Balboa Park BART Station into a public housing project. Part of that vision includes a rooftop garden that would not only provide locally grown, health food, but job training opportunity for building residents. I would encourage the conversion of vacant lots by exploring incentives that can be offered to private landowners in exchange for allowing their vacant lots to be used for urban agriculture on an interim basis. I would also coordinate with the Public Utilities Commission to further their efforts to identify and activate PUC land to appropriate for urban agriculture, and seek to convert underutilized space into urban gardens. I have been a longstanding supporter of the City's Pavement to Parks program, and would seek to expand this program further.

City Support

What role do you see the city government playing in supporting urban agriculture and the growing community of city gardeners and farmers? How will you work to create a more fluid and efficient system for the creation and maintenance of urban gardens and farms in SF?

Urban Agriculture is an important part of my vision for a healthy, livable San Francisco. I have been a supporter of Alemany Farm for many years, and I want to continue building upon other recent successes like Hayes Valley Farm and Free Farm, as well as the dozens of smaller efforts, including Little City Gardens in my district, that have taken many forms across the city. Whether in support of a large-scale urban farm or a backyard vegetable bed, city government should be engaged in coordinating resources and providing leadership for growing healthy food in San Francisco.

Access to Resources

The will and manpower to create beautiful and effective urban agriculture projects is amply present as evidenced by the extensive community involvement in the work of SFUAA members (<http://www.sfuaa.org/membership.html>). However, a lack of resources such as tools, compost, mulch and money has continued to be a difficult obstacle to overcome. If you become mayor, what will you do to help increase the availability and distribution of resources for urban gardeners and farmers? And will you commit to ensuring that every supervisorial district is equipped with an urban agriculture resource center by 2012?

I would look into creating a Mayor's Office of Urban Agriculture, which would, among other things, coordinate resources for urban gardeners, farmers, and architects. I would work with districts to gather and augment existing resources. I would look into reopening the Tool Lending Library in San Francisco, and ensuring that residents are able to borrow not just shovels and picks, but larger equipment as well.

San Francisco as a National Leader

Since San Francisco prides itself on being a trailblazer for progressive causes, how will you make San Francisco a national leader in building a healthy and sustainable food system?

I would look into implementing a fruit tree-grafting program with appropriate mapping and harvest coordination, which could serve as model for a broader coordination of food harvesting and distribution throughout the City. San Franciscans are already obviously interested in this, with existing residents advertising their excess food, and as Mayor I will encourage doing this on city property, as well as plant fruit-bearing trees and edible plants in our parks. This will go far in making San Francisco a leader in the progressive issue of urban agriculture, as well as contributing to my vision of a healthier and more livable San Francisco.

Gardening and Agricultural Experience

Do you currently grow, or have you ever grown, food in the city? We are curious to hear about anything from a small pot of herbs in a window sill to a full blown vegetable garden.

I have always had a garden with fennel and various herbs. Earlier this year, my mother in law helped me hack away the weeds and plant nasturtium, whose orange flowers are edible!

Questions from the San Francisco Green Schoolyard Alliance

Outdoor Classrooms

SFGSA's experience shows that green schoolyards serving as outdoor classrooms help close the achievement gap and attract families to our public schools. How would you encourage this trend?

I would strive for healthy food to be grown at every school, and provide the necessary leadership to guarantee this goal.

Schools as Green Hubs

SFGSA is launching into our next phase of work to insure that SFUSD schools are green hubs for each community. For example, we are helping schools develop gardens and natural play areas, installing cisterns for rainwater harvesting to better understand the value of our watersheds, solar panels to understand renewable energy sources, and composting lunch room waste to help increase waste diversion above 75%. How would you support this momentum in our public schools?

I've seen the benefit of greening our public schools through SF Community School, where my wife Karen teaches. They have a wonderful garden; not just planter beds, but an actual garden, and I have been a firsthand witness to the fact integrating these gardens into children's education increases their learning and awareness. As Mayor I would partner schools with urban farms to increase awareness, as well as figure out how to make resources more available to schools. The Department of Environment could provide compost, the DPW could help to build planter beds or provide tools and equipment to schools that want to convert the concrete around their building into green space, or the City could waive the permit fee the school would require in order to make those changes. Additionally, I'd be very interested in creating more green spaces in the yards of libraries; I believe it would be a very natural partnership, and would like to collaborate with community and neighborhood groups to bring these libraries to life and promote further awareness and learning.

Increasing Community Support

All of our efforts to make our schools better only work with intensive community support. San Francisco has the highest percentage of families who have decided not to send their children to public schools. How would you change this?

As the father of two children in the San Francisco public school system and the husband of an elementary school teacher, a quality education has always been close to my heart. I believe we must maintain equitable schools within the public school system. I believe education is a pillar in creating a more healthy and safe city and county, and recognize that education is key to keeping our families in San Francisco. As Mayor I plan to increase funding for our school district, and as Supervisor I have sought to maximize cash vs. in-kind support for our schools from the Prop H fund, and as a Mayor with a public schools perspective, I will continue to maximize every available Prop H dollar as well as advocate for the maximum use of Rainy Day Reserve dollars to protect our schools against draconian cuts and unnecessary layoffs.

Green Schoolyard Tours

SFGSA has found that our green schoolyard tours can change the way potential SFUSD families view our public schools. Have you toured any SFUSD green schoolyards lately?

At June-Jordan, where they give their excess food to families who need it, I have taken site tours (and got to keep a jar of raw honey!), and I always look forward to visiting more schools in other districts in San Francisco.

Next Generation of Students

Our public schools are in crisis. Our environment is in crisis. What sort of environmental knowledge would you like the next generation of SFUSD students to graduate with, and how will you help them attain it?

As you may know, I championed the passing of a landmark Local-Hire ordinance last year, which puts San Franciscans in the building trades back to work and is the strongest local hiring law in the nation. As Mayor, I would seek to expand this ordinance into all sectors as well as coordinate with SF State and City College to create a direct pipeline from school to the jobs of tomorrow, including green tech.

Questions from the Bay Area Water Stewards

Potential New Water Sources

San Francisco imports virtually all of its water from outside the City primarily from the wild and scenic Tuolumne River (85% of SF's water supply). SFPUC is currently evaluating several potential new sources of local water supply, including greywater, recycled water, groundwater and a desalination plant on SF Bay. All of the options under consideration have generated controversy over cost (most are more expensive than our current water supply) and environmental impacts. As mayor, how would you decide which, if any of these alternatives to pursue, and how would you address the controversies surrounding your decision?

As I have done as Supervisor, before making any decision, I would consult with environmental groups, community leaders, and City departments to gain a full understanding of the environmental impacts of a new source of local water supply.

Stormwater Runoff and Green Spaces

The city has a combined sewer/stormwater system, which means that we spend money and energy to treat all of our stormwater as sewage. An increase in urban agriculture and greening, along with an emphasis on low-impact development, can save time, water, and money. Given the City receives an average of 20 inches of rainfall each year (the equivalent of half of our annual consumption) how would your office support these strategies?

I would engage City departments, community groups, and neighborhood clubs and programs in order to collaborate on shared sustainability goals, such as rainwater catchment and waste reduction.

Smart Water Usage

The City has the lowest per-capita water usage of any large City in California, because of climate, small lot size, and the fact that much of the land area is covered in impervious surfaces (buildings, streets and sidewalks). Greening the City without increasing our water usage will require smarter use of existing supplies (including stormwater, gray water and recycled water) Will you as Mayor direct the SFPUC to invest in alternative (non-system) water supplies for community garden and urban farms?

Yes.

Long-term Stormwater Capture

SF's sewer system is designed to allow 10-12 combined sewer overflows annually. As sea levels continue to rise, this practice will become less and less feasible. Long-term investments in stormwater capture through green infrastructure can reduce these overflows, but cannot be accomplished by the PUC alone. What will you as Mayor do to integrate needed actions (such as design requirements, enforcement of impervious bans and new maintenance needs) into all City Departments' work plans and budgets?

I sponsored a grant for Cayuga Parks through their pilot project to convert more space into green space, and to recapture more of their runoff. It's cost-prohibitive to change our sewer system, and therefore we must do everything we can to prevent the runoff from reaching the ocean at all. As Supervisor I have put money in the budget for neighborhood parks and greening projects to increase green space in my district, and many of these projects have included rainwater collection systems. I'm very supportive of Little City gardens, the urban farms in my district, and I'd like to figure out how we can get them to stay despite the problems they've had. The residents love them; they've transformed a swampy abandoned lot into a garden.

Commission Nominee Attributes

The SF PUC sets water policy for the City. As Mayor, what attributes would you look for in candidates you nominate to serve on the commission?

The SFPUC is a key commission that weighs in on millions in contracts and projects not only in San Francisco but also throughout the state. I would want a Commissioner who understands and shares my priorities in sustainability, accountability, and environmental priorities. I would only appoint people who are qualified for their positions. I wish that went without saying, but I have seen too many unqualified individuals appointed for political reasons over the years. I would appoint those who are longstanding leaders in their communities who have a solid understanding of water policy in San Francisco. I would look to longstanding community and advocacy organizations to recommend nominations and help vet any potential candidates.