



AGRI-PARK EARLY LEARNING
COMMUNITY
CONVERSATIONS



Opportunity

The City of Fishers has established a new area that will be utilized as an Agri-Park. The area presents a unique opportunity to offer our younger children experiences that they may otherwise not have.

Process

The Early Learning Alliance Network convened three groups of early learning leaders representing public, private, faith-based, licensed, and non-licensed education and care providers. The focus of each group was to brainstorm ways to use the Agri-Park and needs of the community in equitably accessing the Agri-Park. Conversations were annotated and summarized by emergent theme.

Findings

The following provides an overview of notes and highlights from each conversation. Findings are categorized though the reader will see some natural overlap in these areas. Generally, the early learning community is excited about the opportunity to utilize an Agri-Park space in the greater Fishers area. They do not want to see the space replicate things that we already have. Rather they want this to be a working farm where our children can learn and grow.

“How can we create a space that pulls our community in and keeps them coming back?”

Physical Space

The physical space and how it was designed to meet the needs of kids as active learners were critical to all the discussions. The following provides a summary of comments on physical space design.

- Could there be an actual farmhouse?
- Walking paths (trails not concrete) should be long enough for a ten to twenty-minute walk.
- Could paths have signs with explanations (note Jody’s work with the New York Botanical Gardens and their use of “explainers”)
- Could paths have rope barriers and could those rope or the wooden poles be different colors to signify the age range for the trail and/or activity?



- Can there be a tractor for kids to play in?
- There needs to be bathrooms and water source available for use during field trips.
- Could there be picnic tables under shelters?
- Could there be a treehouse (smaller than Connor Prairie but larger than Flat Fork Creek that could encourage lookout tower views of the fields?)
- Could there be a year-round farm stand (indoors)?
- Parking has to be expanded if field trips are going to be there. Participants were unsure if a bus could turn around in the current lot and if parking would be accessible enough to meet the demands of individual parent drivers.
- Could there be a Monarch Way Station?
- Could there be a little library like at Brooks School Park and others?
- Could there be a viewing area that would allow bird watching?
- Could there be a silent nature walk area?
- Could there be a compost area?
- How could this function as a means to develop recycling in our greater Fishers community?
- How could this be an area that helps promote landscaping and other activities (wood chips, wildflowers, etc.)?

Conversations noted that physical space needs to be inviting and include enough upfront engaging materials that kids are naturally drawn into the space. The importance of this space maintaining an agricultural feel is important to everyone.

“Make it real”

Community Needs

The space is a place that is unique for our state. That said, each group of participants saw the vision for the Agri-Park **not** as a replication of current options for our schools, classrooms, families, and children. Instead, they saw opportunity to do what is not already being done. Specific to what this space should be for our community, participants noted the following.

- No pumpkin patch or strawberry patch. We have access to those it would be better to do something different.
- Could we have a place for canning and/or jarring of fruit or vegetables?
- Could we offer an indoor herb garden and urban garden barn where kids could pick ingredients to make pizza year-round?

- The community could benefit from this space giving our kids opportunities that they might otherwise not have (can we give them the chance to can vegetables, pick herbs, watch things being canned and processed, etc.)
- Could we have an actual combine for kids to learn about or ride on?
- Can we create a space that uses all-natural materials?
- Can there be a natural play hill for play and developing the vestibular sense?

“Let’s give our kids something they need, but can’t always access in a suburban home”

In five-years our community would like to look at this space and think of it as a space for city kids to learn, a space where kids love spending time just being, and a space that is rich in partnerships and active community participation.

Partnerships and Ownership

When thinking about the running of the Agri-Park and the opportunities that exist within the space, each conversation naturally focused on partnerships and how we can inspire engagement by our children, young adults, and general citizens. The following are examples of ideas and comments shared by participants.

“How can we really let kids own this work?”

- Can the 4H kids own and run this land?
- Could there be a natural partnership with FFA that would replicate other agri-parks where students with an agricultural interest can practice, learn, teach, model, and thrive?
- Can this be a model for agricultural innovation? (can we help farmers learn about new applications, can we make it possible for small gardeners who want to expand to do so without the overhead, can we model urban/indoor farming in part of the location)
- How can we staff this space so that there are groups of experts that are on-site consistently?
- Can we use a “meet the explainers” type wall so that the general public knows who is on-site to ask about certain elements?



- Could FFA and 4H kids use this as space to house their animals (goats, pigs, chickens, llamas, etc.)?
- Could there be classes in canning made available to adults?

The partnerships piece of the Agri-Park was very important to everyone, they want to see this as a space that is truly owned and operated by our community. However, this has to be built into structures and organizations that are stable so that the park can thrive and be around for a while.

Space for Our Kids

The opportunity that the Agri-Park could offer our kids is unique and needs to be kept authentic to this type of space. The following are ideas that participants noted as “goal level activities for this space.”

- Can there be partnerships with local master gardening clubs, FFA groups, after school programs, etc. so that each day has a schedule of learning opportunities (that are simple to set up, rotate, and keep families coming back to learn)
- Could there be sets of rain boots and rain suits available for use?
- Could there be smocks?
- Could there be a senses area (feel, smell, touch, taste)?
- Could there be a mud kitchen?
- Could there be a snow kitchen?
- Could there be salt licks and deer feeders?



- Could there be a certified outdoor classroom model space?
- Can the logs and natural elements (ice buckets, sticks, etc.) be kept in a space for our kids to just play and create with?
- Could there be wind and nature-based instruments?
- Can there be a building area?
- Could there be a natural art area?
- Can there be seasonal sections

(snow shovels, igloo kits, carrots and coal for snowperson building; scarecrows, pumpkins and gourds, etc.)

- Can there be simple tip cards (laminated and placed in flyer boxes or wooden boxes that can provide provocations, guided inquiry, treasure hunts, etc.)?
- Could there be places for growing flowers, or recycling/replanting plants from city decorations (i.e., when mums were pulled were those just trashed or if they were reused or replanted?)
- Could there be activity spaces that are in zones (growing, digging, adventuring, creating, designing, farming, with signs that draw the kids in)?
- Could there be a few horses?
- Could there be a party barn that could be rented for kid birthday parties or other small events?
- How could we integrate some of the best 4H activities and programs into this space?

“What are the best uses of that space for our kids? Let’s just give them space and see what they can do.”

Overall, groups of participants wanted to see this as a well-equipped space that allowed kids access to dirt piles, mud, examples of real-world agriculture, small scale growing, urban farming, a small farm store, a trained outdoor learning specialist, continually rotating activities, and an area that is well equipped to allow for easy use by large or small groups of children. They do not want it to be a replication of other family farms in Hamilton County, but rather a learning and play farm that leads to natural play, play-based learning, community engagement in agricultural activities that are not otherwise available, and curiosity that is inspired by experiences these kids would otherwise not have.

“Let’s make sure that the facility meets the needs of our greater community and make sure we structurally develop that space so that is easy for all of our community members to access.”
