

# Needham farm looks to grow capacity through education

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Community Farm board member Joe Leghorn and the farm's director, Theresa Strachila, during a tour of the growing operation on Feb. 24, 2020. [Wicked Local Staff Photo/Trevor Ballantyne]

Greenhouse under construction. Through a partnership with the Dedham Institution for Savings Foundation and the Needham Rotary Club, a greenhouse will help increase growing capacity and educational opportunities at Needham Community Farm. [Wicked Local Staff Photo/Trevor Ballantyne]

By Trevor Ballantyne

Staff writer

The Needham Community Farm consists of a little more than three acres set on a section of property where a U.S. military installation operated during the Cold War.

Surrounded by more than 200 acres of Ridge Hill Reservation, it is difficult to imagine the serene section of Needham as the future site of a hockey rink, but at a public hearing held by the Needham Select Board earlier this month, representatives of the town's youth hockey program suggested that as a future use for the undeveloped area.

With an unseasonably warm sun overhead on Monday, Community Farm board member Joe Leghorn looked out over the site and reflected on the meeting.

“It’s not that we are opposed to a hockey rink,” he said, speaking on behalf of the farm. “But the hockey rink here is just incongruous with what surrounds it.”

“This is what it is,” Leghorn added. “Now let’s make the best of it to feed people, educate people, and give people an opportunity to come out on a day like this.”

The farming operation at the Cold War-era missile site on Pine Street began in 2012. Today, it has a \$100,000 annual budget - mostly from donations. Revenue streams also come from gardening classes and selling produce, Strachila explained. The farm recently introduced a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program where people pay \$30 a week for a box of fresh produce from the farm during the harvest season.

About a third of the total farm area is in production, Strachila said. A partially constructed greenhouse structure, called a high tunnel, is funded by the Dedham Institution for Savings Bank, the Foundation for Metrowest, and the Needham Rotary Club, and will offer warmth to extend the farm’s production by a couple of months when it is finished. The farm is also working to address drainage issues and move away from a raised-bed grow model as a way to increase growing space.

Strachila, who grew up on a 400-acre dairy farm and worked in sustainable farming before taking up leadership duties in Needham, gets help from three part-time employees. Volunteers - some filling community service hours - also help during the growing season, but capacity building and financial goals are only part of the farm’s mission.

In addition to growing beds designated for educational purposes, the farm sets aside part of its yield to supply the Needham Community Council food pantry. Other local partnerships support farm tours and healthy cooking classes. A local bee-keeper also raises European honey bees onsite and one farm program sees educational opportunities for adults with mental disabilities.

“This land could be a financially sustainable, for-profit farm, but in order to do that, we would have to cut out a lot of our food-access and food-justice programs,” Strachila said. “More and more organic farms are successful and a big part of being successful is educating your customers about what it takes to grow food and what it takes to grow food thoughtfully and sustainably.”