

Plant2Plate still awaiting University development deadline after three years

By Amanda Yu, Staff Writer

In 2021, the University promised a student-run community garden, Plant2Plate, one more season before development on their new land would begin. Years later, members are still waiting amid concerns over the garden's prospective new location.

Located at 246 Oakland Ave., the Plant2Plate garden provides a rare green space for students and residents alike. The garden, initially created by Pitt students in 2010 as a sustainability project, rests on an 11,600 square foot lot owned by the university.

Inside, student members of the Plant2Plate club grow a large variety of fresh produce to donate to local food insecure populations, primarily through the Pitt Pantry, a Pitt-operated food pantry located in the O'Hara Student Center.

John Ufer, a junior chemical engineering major and co-chair of agriculture for the club, said he believes that without any major supermarkets in the Oakland area, the garden helps students consistently access fresh food.

"Its main purpose is to donate food to insecure communities in the Oakland area, because as you and most people know, Oakland is a food desert. There is not much opportunity for produce, especially fresh food, to enter the community," Ufer said. "Pitt Pantry is mainly shelf-stable produce, which is great for sustenance, but the aspect of having fresh fruits and veggies is a very important and nutritious part of people's meals."

Ufer said Plant2Plate also serves as a green area that helps mitigate feelings of pollution and drag in the dense Oakland area.

Despite the opportunities Ufer believes the garden offers, he said Pitt plans to evict the garden within the next few years. They'll be moved to an area above Upper Campus on Vera Street as part of a relocation plan.

"Our current location in Oakland Avenue is currently under transformation to a dormitory, and the garden will be erased probably in 2-3 years. We're being evicted," Ufer said. "In compensation for that construction, we are being moved to Vera Street, which is in North Oakland, bordering Pitt's campus with the Hill District," Ufer said.

Sustainability students originally received permission to use vacant University land in 2010 on Oakland Avenue. The University agreed to a minimum two-year contract and said it would give the club a minimum one-year notice "prior to University groundbreaking." In 2018, Pitt presented its Institutional Master Plan and Campus Master Plan, which said the garden would "officially be slated for development for sometime in the next 5-10 years."

In the time since then, housing development for the Oakland Avenue lot has been pushed back to a slower time frame. In 2019, Plant2Plate said they were in talks with the Office of Campus Planning to purchase vacant lots in Oakland to turn into gardens, which ultimately became the land on Vera Street.

Club members are still waiting on a clear development deadline from the University. University spokesperson Jared Stonesifer said "there is no near-term planned development activity on the space and thus no timeline for relocating Plant2Plate."



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"The University has confirmed with the Plant2Plate organization that it is extending the use of the Oakland Avenue location through at least the end of 2026," Stonesifer said.

Although the timeline remains unclear, the University has a clear goal for development. Elise Rinke, a senior and student garden manager, said "eventually the plan is for [the Oakland Avenue lot] to be athletic housing."

Neeha Kolli, a junior environmental science major and co-chair of agriculture with Ufer, said she believes the convenience of the current Oakland Avenue garden is part of the appeal.

"Between South Oakland and the actual campus, our garden is right between those two, which makes it really accessible," Kolli said.

Kolli said the garden serves students outside of providing produce and a refreshing green space, which is potentially in jeopardy given the new location.

"Classes will come and meet in the physical garden space, which is a really big thing that we're sad to miss in a couple years when we lose that space. It serves as an outdoor classroom, just a great overall space for people to sit and spend time and hang out," Kolli said.

Kolli said she has concerns about the Vera Street location.

"The main problems are the quality of the land they gave us, the size of the land they gave us in comparison to the [less than] half acre we have now, and the location in comparison to where the student body is actually found," Kolli said. "We did soil testing on it, and there's a lot of salt in the soil, which makes it not ideal growing conditions."

Ufer echoed Kolli's concerns about where Plant2Plate is being moved to, emphasizing its inaccessibility compared to the current garden on Oakland Ave.

"The Vera Street garden was on a greyfield – which is previous construction, there were already buildings there – and they did not do a good job of removing the baseline foundation," Ufer said. "It is not where the brunt of students are populated, and it also has poor soil quality and is on a very large slope."

The Vera Street lot has a history of construction that also poses a roadblock for planting produce, and Ufer said club members have found miscellaneous construction pieces when inspecting the area.

"There are bricks in the soil, there are concrete pieces, you turn up random industrial supplies every single time you try to fish down in the dirt for soil. And the acidity is out of control," Ufer said.

The University noted it was of the club's soil concerns.

"Like many urban garden projects on formerly developed land, including the Oakland Avenue garden, soil quality is always a concern. We are committed to getting the [Vera Street] plot ready for student use, including soil remediation," Stonesifer said.

Kolli said there have been club efforts to negotiate a different relocation.

"Our former president, Abhi, sat in on meetings, had meetings with assistant deans [and] heads of planning, to try to advocate for a better space. It's literally us butting heads with the Pitt Master Plan and all of these administrative blockades," Kolli said.

Ani Nangunoori, a junior computational biology major and Plant2Plate's current president, said the club hopes to expand into other Oakland locations to keep it active in South Oakland.

"There's a group of students on campus who are involved with the Lawn Street Garden in South Oakland, and there's another lot over in South Oakland that's been an abandoned garden space. We're looking to work with the Oakland Planning and Development Corporation to take stewardship of those garden spaces and provide a space for students and Oakland residents to collaborate in garden endeavors," Ani Nangunoori said.

In the meantime, Abhi Nangunoori, a senior economics and biology major, said Plant2Plate has plans to mitigate the effect of losing the Oakland garden within the community.

"We've actually partnered with some other organizations, in both the community and on Pitt's campus, to create what we call pocket gardens. When we do eventually lose [the Oakland Avenue] location, we'll be able to grow things and keep the club active in these smaller gardens," Abhi Nangunoori said.

University spokesperson Stonesifer cited the pocket gardens concept "as a way to expand Plant2Plate's presence on other areas of campus."

Kolli said she is optimistic about also continuing the club's community-building aspect.

"We know how to create community. We were able to do it down here, we'll find a way to do it up there," Kolli said.