

Pitt student group could lose community garden by April

By Sarah Berg, Staff Writer

10 to 25 members of the student group Plant 2 Plate gather every Sunday on Oakland Avenue to tend to their urban garden, a plot the size of two homes hosting flower beds and produce like beets, kale, raspberries and strawberries. But after University officials told them plans to build a dorm on their garden space are likely beginning earlier than originally planned, members are uncertain about the future of their garden.

The Plant 2 Plate club, which primarily donates the produce they grow to the Pitt Pantry, has met at their plot of land across from Bouquet Gardens once a week nearly every year since its establishment a decade ago by students in the Honors College. Several plots within the garden are rented out to South Oakland residents and the weekly gardening sessions are open to all, not just Pitt students. Members had known the University Institutional Master Plan, which includes a student housing development on the site of the garden as well as adjacent properties, would displace them and have been working with the University since October to find a new location.

Joseph Jaros, president of Plant 2 Plate, said they were originally told by Pitt that the club would have until the end of 2020 to vacate the space. But at a meeting on Jan. 10 with Aurora Sharrard, Pitt's sustainability director, Nick Goodfellow, sustainability coordinator for auxiliary services, and Mary Beth McGrew, the associate vice chancellor for planning, design and real estate, Plant 2 Plate was notified that Pitt may begin construction of the new dorm as soon as this semester if the Institutional Master Plan is approved in March following community feedback.

"The schedule for the construction of the new dorm in the current garden space is being accelerated," Jaros wrote in an email. "This came as a big surprise to us, as we were originally told we would have until the end of 2020 in the current space. This means we will not be able to plant anything in the coming season unless we have a new space."

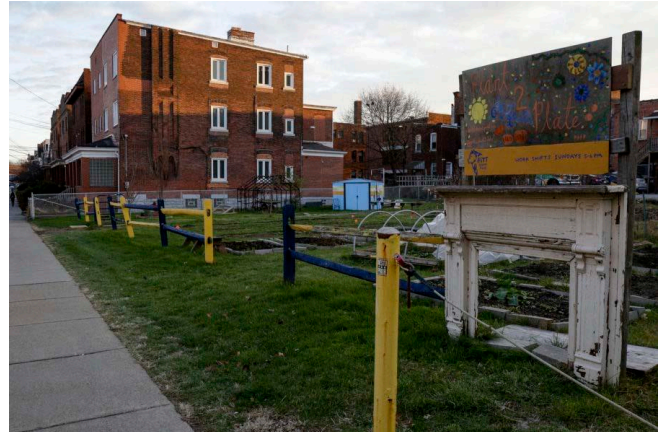
Members of Plant 2 Plate said they've felt they have been left out of the loop regarding Pitt's proposal to build on their property, having found out their garden would be demolished only after the draft of the campus master plan was released last February. John Jursca, Plant 2 Plate's vice president, said discovering the impact the proposed housing plans for South Campus would have on the club this way was an issue for him.

"We felt like we were kind of left out of that conversation. And then, we started reaching out, making contacts with Pitt admin and people who were involved in that plan, and now we've had meetings and we're scheduling more meetings in the future, but we had to seek that out," Jursca said.

Jaros said insufficient communication between the University and the club could be attributed to a broader lack of engagement between the University and all students.

"What was strange to me was that there were already meetings going on beforehand about this space that weren't including us ... I think in general as a student body we're not made aware of these institutional meetings," Jaros, a senior linguistics and biology major, said.

University spokesperson Kevin Zwick said Pitt has been cooperating and communicating with Plant 2 Plate.



Thomas Yang | Assistant Visual Editor

The Plant2Plate garden, which has been used for more than a decade, will be paved over and relocated as soon as the end of this semester due to campus changes outlined in the Institutional Master Plan.

"The University is committed to finding a new location for the garden, as the campus master plan includes redevelopment of this area to support additional campus housing needs," Zwick wrote in an email. "We are currently exploring options in collaboration with the student group who manages it, in expectation of finding placement solutions to support this campus need."

Jaros and Jursca said Plant 2 Plate's main priority now is finding a permanent place to move into so they can continue gardening when the time comes to leave the current space. Jursca said pausing the club could be detrimental to its future, with probable loss of interest and membership.

"It's not good to us if they start construction on our [current] plot and they say, 'In two or three years when we start this construction you guys will have another space over here,'" Jursca said.

According to the members, Pitt has asked Plant 2 Plate to suggest new locations to go over in meetings together. Jaros said new location options were discussed at the Friday meeting.

"We are now considering two new spaces on upper campus that we would be able to relocate to (ideally this semester). I should know more about this in a few weeks, but there is nothing promised yet," Jaros wrote. "I am optimistic that one of these [new locations] will work out, and either space would be larger than the one we have now, and could provide good opportunities to engage more with the Hill District communities."

Moving out of a location surrounded by dense student populations and bars could also help avoid vandalism that Jursca said the garden has experienced, such as knocked down fences, stolen flowers and ripped up beds.

If the club and Pitt are not able to arrange a successful relocation to a permanent location soon, Jursca said moving into a temporary location, such as using planter boxes near Hillman Library, may be necessary.

"I think there's definitely potential for improvement, but that would have to have a strong commitment from the administration and we'd have to work that out before we get rid of our current space," Jursca said.

Jaros hopes that the University's focus on sustainability will include supporting the garden.

"This could be a really good opportunity for the University to take charge and ... show that they're into these sustainability initiatives that the students have been pushing, so they could really make a change," he said. "On the other hand, I am worried that we're going to just keep going through this chain of events and meetings and at the end of the day if we don't have something, we have no control over the situation."