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In showdown with community gardeners, Canine to Five clears first hurdle to business expansion

Liz Blondy opened [Canine to Five](#) in Midtown six years ago, at a time when few were investing south of Mack.

She was at the forefront of a crop of indie business owners, creative entrepreneurs working outside the mainstream to open shop against the odds, in a city that has lost too many businesses in the past decades. With Claire Nelson, owner of the [Bureau of Urban Living](#), also in Midtown, Blondy (a longtime Detroit resident) started [Open City](#), one of the city's best resources for business owners and entrepreneurs.

Her dog daycare, the only business of its kind in the city, has done well. The first day it opened, Canine to Five had seven dogs. Now, Blondy averages 60 dogs a day. The grooming arm of the business sees 100 to 150 dogs a week. She grossed \$490,000 in 2010, a 20 percent increase from 2009, and is on track for a 15 percent to 20 percent increase in 2011.

So when Blondy says she needs to expand, it's not a hard sell.

Now, Detroit has a lot of vacant land. But Blondy's business, on Cass Avenue at Peterboro, is bordered to the south by the [Birdtown community garden](#).

Blondy needs to add 4,000 square feet onto her building. A lot currently serving as an outdoor play lot, she says, must become a gated parking lot — a must to attract employees to a neighborhood many still think of as the Cass Corridor. Canine to Five boards dogs, you see, and is staffed 24 hours, and Blondy says she's had five car thefts in the last 18 months.

So she has just one option: buy the city-owned lot south of Canine to Five. Which means relocating the community garden.

Blondy's supporters and detractors testified before the Detroit City Council's Planning and Economic Development Committee today.

(I'll cut to the chase here for those of you on the edge of your seats — the committee approved Blondy's purchase, which means it now goes before the full Detroit City Council on June 14.)

Blondy's case was simple: she pays taxes, employs 12 full-time and three part-time workers, and is adding value to the neighborhood. The expansion will create five to 10 new jobs. Any land she owns will be in productive use, and return to the city's tax rolls. She plans to invest \$400,000 in the expansion. Blondy says she'll help relocate the garden, but if Canine to Five is to grow, there's only one direction to go.

Representatives of the garden, many from the Brightmoor gardening community, say Birdtown beautified a vacant lot when no one else was up for the job, and continues to benefit the neighborhood in non-commercial ways, and asked the council to postpone the sale of the lot to give Blondy and the gardeners time to reach a compromise, though it's unclear what such a compromise would entail.

It's a difficult question. I drive past the garden every day and can tell you first-hand that it's a beautiful spot. Serene, a quiet oasis – everything you'd hope a community garden would be.

But I just don't see how a city with the deflated tax rolls of Detroit can deny a growing, thriving business the opportunity to expand.

As City Council member Ken Cockrel Jr. said at the committee meeting, "When you get right down to it, the reality is that anyone that gardens on property they don't own is proceeding at their own risk... I'm a huge supporter of urban gardening and urban farming, but the other hat I wear is chair of the council's budget, audit and finance committee, and it should not be a news flash to anyone that this city is broke."

As a city-owned lot, the parcel generates no revenue. That would change if Blondy bought the lot, not to mention the payroll taxes that would come along with five to 10 new employees.

"It would be irresponsible for us to turn down revenue," said Detroit City Council member Saunteel Jenkins, chair of the planning committee. "The reality is this city cannot rebound unless we find a way to generate taxes, and small businesses are what helps the city thrive."

The city's Law Department noted that Birdtown's permit includes a warning that they'd have to vacate the property should the city decide to sell the parcel.

Ultimately, Blondy carried the day, as her purchase moves to the full council for a decision. But the committee's approval also carried a recommendation for the planning department to work with the Birdtown gardeners to find a new, city-owned lot. Which sounds like a compromise to me.

It would be easy for a business owner like Blondy to be bitter or seem hassled about the experience. But she's a pretty upbeat person, and a relentless Detroit booster.

"People need to stop saying it's impossible to do business with the city, because it's not true, and it's demoralizing to city that's working very hard to turn things around," she told me after the committee meeting. "I have only been a businessperson who deals with city for six years, but city government today, planning, Buildings Safety & Engineering, is easier to work with today, 100 times easier to work with today, than when I bought (the dog play yard lot) lot four years ago. They've been nothing but helpful."

Today's decision by the planning committee is good news for business in Detroit, but the full council's decision is even more important.

If Blondy gets her lot, then the message will truly be that Detroit, a city where "profit" has often been a dirty word, is really open for business. If not, the takeaway is pretty clear: forget about balance - community gardens trump businesses, even in the face of overwhelming financial need.

And there could be long-term negative ramifications for gardens, too - if a community garden is able to successfully stifle business growth, then the city might be hesitant about letting gardeners beautify other vacant lots in the city.

I'll know I'll be glued to Tuesday's council meeting. How about you?

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