

“Who can argue about a tree?”

Detroit’s “urban farming” scheme: A cover for a corporate land grab

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Last October, Michigan’s Department of Human Services (DHS) announced that an agreement had been reached to sell 1,500 abandoned lots on Detroit’s lower east side to Hantz Farms LLC, a company owned by the Hantz Group of investors, for half a million dollars.

The precedent-setting land grab is the result of years of machinations between Hantz and the city and state governments. This includes the amendment of Detroit’s zoning ordinance to allow for the creation of “urban farms” of uncapped size, specifically including “orchard[s] or tree farm[s]”—the products of which “may or may not be sold for commercial use”—in residential zones.

The deal was facilitated by the Michigan Land Bank, a “public-private partnership” of government and business representatives tasked with selling vacant land, headed by then-Michigan State Treasurer Andy Dillon, a Democrat appointed by Republican Governor Rick Snyder. The Detroit City Council approved the sale on December 11, 2012—when it still had formal control over the city.

The deal has been subsequently approved by Detroit’s Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr and signed by Governor Snyder, both on October 17, 2013. On October 18, City Council member Saunteel Jenkins joined Hantz executives at a celebratory event on the property, where the first of many abandoned structures was ceremonially demolished.

Hantz paid \$520,000, or about 8 cents per square foot, for the 140 acres and has an option to buy 180 more acres within a one-mile radius after four years if the project meets certain benchmarks. The sweetheart deal, facilitated by all levels of government, resembles similar transfers of property to real estate tycoons like

Dan Gilbert, who now owns about 40 buildings in the downtown area and who heads the Detroit Blight Task Force.

Hantz Group is run by John Hantz, a stockbroker and one of Detroit’s wealthiest residents, reportedly worth more than \$100 million. Hantz Group controls over \$1.3 billion in assets. It controls Hantz Financial Inc., a core company providing financial services to high net-worth individuals, as well as dozens of limited liability companies, including several “business service” companies and a number of its own “entrepreneurial” business ventures.

The Group created Hantz Farms LLC in 2009 for the explicit purpose of buying land in Detroit on the cheap. A decades-long process of de-industrialization, compounded by the housing crisis before and after the 2008 crash—which led to 69,000 delinquency and home foreclosure notes in the metro area in 2009—has left the city blighted by many tens of thousands of vacant single-family homes. Buying up the land and demolishing the houses raises property value in the surrounding area. John Hantz happens to live in a 14,500 square foot mansion in the historic, affluent neighborhood of Indian Village, which is adjacent to the Hantz Farms property.

John Hantz told the *Atlantic* in 2010, “[T]here’s no reason to buy real estate in Detroit—every year, it just gets cheaper...We need to create scarcity, because until we get a stabilized market, there’s no reason for entrepreneurs or other people to start buying.”

Revealing the “urban farming” front to be a cynical attempt to cover his rapacious activities, he continued, “I thought--What’s a development that people would want to be associated with? And that’s when I came up

with a farm.”

In fact, the deal is of a piece with the all-sided efforts by the ruling elite to restructure Detroit in line with the current level of social inequality, which is at historic highs. The Hantz Farms Facebook page states, “Before Detroit became an industrial powerhouse, it was part of a great farming region that fed thousands [sic?!]. It’s our aim to renew Detroit by returning to its agrarian roots...creating the world’s largest urban farm, right here within city limits.”

Pseudo-left groups such as Detroit’s Boggs Center, named after Grace Lee Boggs, have supported the drive to return society to its “agrarian roots” for years. They use Orwellian terms like “sustainable activism” to describe their retrograde plans, which are deeply hostile to Detroit workers. In fact, the grandparents and great-grand parents of many current-day Detroit workers escaped impoverished agrarian regions in the US and around the world to strive for a higher standard of living in the Motor City, which once employed hundreds of thousands in the auto industry.

The Boggs Center has written against the Hantz purchase on the grounds that Hantz is not a legitimate “community member” and that the urban farm should not be run by such a transparently elite businessman. Instead, the organization would no doubt prefer the land be handed over to aspiring “urban farming” entrepreneurs and Green capitalists with whom the Boggs Center is associated.

Detroit once had the highest standard of living in the US because of the efficiency of the assembly line and mass production on the one hand, and the militancy of the working class on the other, which fought many bloody battles to wrest rights and concessions from the ruling elite in an earlier period. The idea that urban gardens and farms can provide jobs and food to masses of people is a reactionary pipedream, aimed at blocking any struggle against the banks and corporations, which decimated the city through deindustrialization and are now trying to loot it through the bankruptcy process.

The “world’s largest urban farm” pretense required alteration after neighborhood residents expressed fears about the potential social impact of things like pesticides and rotting produce, since the Hantz-owned lots are non-contiguous and are interspersed with homes. The project was then changed to a hardwood tree farm called Hantz Woodlands (the LLC retains the

Hantz Farms name). John Hantz said at the time, “Who can argue about a tree?”

In fact, the 15,000 trees Hantz now promises to plant will be confined to just 15-acres, or about 10 percent of the land. It is unclear whether the company is planning any further “development” of the rest of the property, or if it just intends to mow the grass and hold onto it.

Mike Score, president of Hantz Farms LLC, told the *Atlantic* in October, “This is designed to be a for-profit enterprise. I can assure you we have a business plan and we don’t have any anxiety about achieving our goals. We’re entrepreneurs...The purpose of the investment is to make the neighborhood more livable and then recover our investment over time, and we’re very confident we can do that.”



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