Priorities:  
food security/access, environmental stewardship, urban agriculture & workforce development.

The University of Massachusetts is seeking to create a Center for Urban Sustainability at the site of the former UMass Suburban Experiment Station at 240 Beaver Street in Waltham.

We envision this 58-acre site, 10 miles from downtown Boston, filled with practical application and demonstration of cutting-edge sustainable agriculture and landscape methods, including a ‘green’ 20,000 square foot building which will act as a front door portal for “all-things sustainable.”

Science-based practices will be showcased that benefit the citizenry and economic vitality of the Commonwealth. The vitality of the facility will be brought to life by UMass Amherst and a panoply of private and public organizations and agencies as metropolitan Boston’s “sustainability mall” managed by organizations, offices, conference and learning spaces inside the building complemented by community-supported farming, agricultural incubator enterprises practicing urban farming of the future, applied research and demonstration of best green landscape practices for urban and suburban residents on the surrounding land. Priority objectives include programs related to food security and access, environmental stewardship, urban agriculture and workforce development in urban settings.

Our goal is to create a financially self-sustaining entity. Initial steps include:

1. We seek private and public partners, committed to the long-term responsibility for the environment, the economy and society to strengthen the current draft vision, assist with master site and business plan, and manage the effort.

2. We will work with partners to seek funding through the 2013 Massachusetts Environmental Bond Bill.

3. We will investigate possible cooperative efforts with Mass. DCAM involving the abutting Fernald School property under its management.

4. We will investigate opportunities within the larger UMass System, including the UMass President’s office.

5. We will explore involvement and leadership from UMass Amherst Development to launch a fundraising initiative.

The land, in two parcels divided by Beaver Street, has been used for agricultural research. The north (30-acre) parcel consists of a 16-acre wetland, a meadow and some sloping land. An estimated seven acres are available for use. Buildings
include a farmhouse, three-car garage, two barns and shed. The south (28-acre) parcel historically has had the more intensive use. In addition to flat open fertile fields, it has two administrative buildings, a boiler building and other smaller structures, all in need of replacement. The south parcel is made up of soils suitable for agricultural use and/or building construction. The site is highly accessible: one-and-a-half miles from Waltham Center and an MBTA station. It is ten miles west of Boston, two-and-a-half miles east of I-95, three-and-a-half miles south of Route 2. It is bordered or neighbored by Bentley College, Girl Scouts of Massachusetts, Fernald School and a City of Waltham recreation area.

In the new Center, agriculture and landscape demonstration activities will take place on both sides of Beaver Street and all or most of the current structures on the southern parcel will be removed and replaced with a new 20,000-square-foot LEED-certified, energy-innovative building. One portion of the new building will be used for classrooms and a conference center operated by the university. In it, agricultural and landscape organizations and related groups will provide classes, workshops and presentations, sometimes in collaboration with UMass, sometimes on their own. UMass Amherst leaders and faculty will become familiar with it as a showcase facility and academic satellite in an excellent, accessible central location for eastern Massachusetts meetings and events such as alumni gatherings, industry liaison events and media briefings. We hope that UMass Amherst and the Stockbridge School of Agriculture will use the site to provide a sense of access to the distant campus for prospective students, industry leaders, public officials, K12 students and teachers and the state’s 4-H community.

A second portion of the building will feature office space available for lease to agricultural and landscape trade groups, businesses and public agencies. With full access to the conference and meeting facilities, this space will become a lively ‘sustainability mall’ for a variety of groups with complementary and synergistic foci. A third section of the building, along with accompanying growing space outside the building, is envisioned as an incubator for start-up farms, businesses and organizations involved with agriculture and landscape sustainability.

The site has recently been called an “undervalued jewel” by one leader in the agricultural sector. Interested parties have consistently commented on the excellent location; it is easily accessible from all of metropolitan and suburban Boston and the larger region. The unusual nature of such a large tract of open land within the urban landscape has also been noted. With a unifying theme of agricultural and landscape sustainability, the site will become a destination for learning and training, a nexus of leadership in these areas and fertile ground for new progressive efforts in landscape and agriculture.

Both the north and south parcels are directly accessible to the proposed Waltham Western Greenway and the Mass Central/Wayside Rail Trail. The borders of our site follow the Greenway maps along 60% of the footprint. The trails offer significant educational and recreational opportunities for the citizens of the Metropolitan Boston area.

The new center will have an underlying ethic of partnership and collaboration; as such, it will complement other existing eastern Massachusetts resources in these areas, not compete with them.

The land that comprises this site was left to the then Massachusetts Agricultural College, predecessor of the University of Massachusetts Amherst, in the estate of Cornelia Warren in 1922, for “use in carrying on the work of the College.” By creating an innovative dynamic collaboration with partnering organizations, the University of Massachusetts can bring vitality and a renewed sense of the original purpose of the bequest. As they would have when the site was deeded 90 years ago, the unique characteristics of this “jewel” will be used in the educational interests of the farmers, landscapers, residents, communities and all those who act as stewards of the land in eastern Massachusetts.