



## LOCAL SELF-RELIANCE

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**For the past several years, the good folks at the Institute for Local Self-Reliance in Washington, D.C. have worked to help urban residents gain greater control over their lives through the use of low-technology, decentralist tools and concepts. We strongly believe that more people (city dwellers and country folk alike) should be exposed to the Institute's efforts . . . which is why we're now making this "what's happening where" report by ILSR staffers one of MOTHER's regular features.**

A few years ago—long before President Carter made his now-historic visit to the area—two veteran community workers named Irma Fleck and Jack Flanagan decided that what New York's South Bronx needed more than anything else was [1] local economic development, and [2] some kind of program for the reclamation of vacant land.

Not knowing how to solve the former problem, Fleck and Flanagan turned their attention first to the problem of land reclamation . . . the problem of how to put almost 500 rubble-strewn acres of vacant South Bronx land to good use.

Some lots—the community workers reasoned—could be made into parks. (In the South Bronx, as in many cities, recreational space is scarce.) Other pieces of property might be turned into community gardens, thus allowing local residents to cut their food costs and improve their diets. Unfortunately, there was just one hang-up: Neither grass (for parks) nor tomatoes (and other crops) can thrive on backfilled brick and broken glass. Before the vacant South Bronx land could be "greened", it would have to be made fertile and free of lead (and other hazards).

The usual way of changing infertile land to fertile is by having topsoil trucked in and applied thickly. To spread the necessary eight inches of such soil on the South Bronx's empty lots, however, would have cost more than \$13,000 an acre . . . a price that the city was unwilling (and community groups unable) to pay.

Ultimately, Irma Fleck and Jack Flanagan were able to come up with a better idea: Cover the lots not with topsoil, but with *compost made from local wastes*. To carry out this idea, Jack and Irma—in mid-1976—formed the Bronx Frontier Development Corporation, which is now on its way to becoming one of the largest composting firms in the U.S.

Raw materials for the compost project were not hard to find. As luck would have it, the South Bronx is blessed with the Hunts Point Produce Market, a huge fruit-and-vegetable emporium that generates as much as 75 cubic yards of organic wastes each day. Before Fleck and Flanagan came along, these wastes were being carted from the market to a Queens landfill at a cost of \$3.50 per cubic yard. Bronx Frontier now plans to use the Hunts Point Produce Market's garbage as the main ingredient of a special compost mixture that will eventually be produced at the rate of 1,200 cubic yards a month. (This will be enough compost to cover 17 acres of land six inches deep each and every year.)

Bronx Frontier's compost will consist of vegetable and fruit wastes from the Hunts Point Produce Market, leaves from suburban New Rochelle, and—if necessary—gypsum wastes and horse manure, all mixed together by a gigantic, \$50,000 compost-turning machine. The initial batch of the enriching mixture should be ready for distribution by the time this comes out in print.

Fleck and Flanagan say that all of the first year's compost will be donated to community groups for the development of gardens and recreational land in the South Bronx. Last summer, there were 40 Cornell University Extension Service-supported community vegetable gardens in the area. These gardens (each acre can provide all the vegetables consumed annually by between 40 and 68 people) will be among the first to benefit.

In the second year, 50% of Bronx Frontier's compost will be marketed to sod farmers, greenhouse owners, and home horticulturists for use as a fertilizer/soil conditioner and the other 50% will go to community groups.

Every year thereafter, a percentage of Bronx Frontier's production will be set aside for use by community groups, and the rest will be sold to generate revenue for the business (which will be one of the largest commercial composting operations in the country). In today's world of skyrocketing fertilizer prices, Bronx Frontier's compost—at \$12 per ton—should be in great demand.

The Fleck-Flanagan compost-production project was not a simple one to pull together. Conceptualization and planning have taken two years. Negotiations with city, state, and federal governments and with local Hunts Point businesses were complex. Initial start-up funding had to come from a variety of sources and each piece of the package was difficult to put into operation. (Before they could get funding, Fleck and Flanagan had to show their sponsors that composting could be an economically viable enterprise.) Last but not least, Bronx Frontier had to obtain technical assistance for the composting process itself. (Here, the corporation received help from the Institute for Local Self-Reliance and other groups and individuals.)

Now—two years later—all the pieces are starting to fall into place. Bronx Frontier Development Corporation is in business, and Irma Fleck and Jack Flanagan have begun (at last) to make major progress toward their twofold goal of economic development and land reclamation in the South Bronx. At the same time, Irma and Jack have spawned a project that may well serve as both a model and an inspiration to people in other decaying inner cities. Because, as Jack says, "If it can be done in the South Bronx . . . it can be done anywhere!"

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