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NEWS RELEASE

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Contact: Cathe Bullwinkle

Community Gardens Project Offers New Interactive Map

Picente: "Feature Permits Residents to Join Existing Garden or Develop New Ones"

A multi-phase project which partners the Oneida County Health Department's Lead Primary Prevention Program with the New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH), and designed to transform vacant lots into community gardens and park spaces now offers an interactive website which will allow users to find information about a specific garden and contact information if they wish to join.

"Oneida County continues to strive to improve our residents' access to healthy foods and areas which allow exercise; and this project furthers that goal through the revitalization of existing underutilized land within the City of Utica into green spaces for food production and recreation," Oneida County Executive Anthony J. Picente said.

The project, first announced by the County Executive in the fall of 2012, utilizes funding from a two-year grant awarded the state's Center for Environmental Health by the *Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry*, (ATSDR) and was one of only two awarded nationally in that grant round. Other partners in the project include City of Utica Urban & Economic Development, Mohawk Valley Center for Refugee Resources, Cooperative Extension of Oneida County, Homeownership Center, For the Good. Inc., The Resource Center for Independent Living and Rome Clean & Green. The new interactive map offers a satellite function that allows users to zoom in and explore other vacant lots for possible garden development. ***(To access the interactive map simply log on to the Oneida County website at ocgov.net and click on the "How Do I" tab at the top of the page. Then click on 'Find Community Gardens in Utica.')***

According to Cathe Bullwinkle, Quality Improvement Coordinator for the Oneida County Health Department, many yards in the City of Utica have sufficient lead contamination in the first two feet of soil related to the large number of pre-1950's housing with lead-based paints to make planting vegetables directly into the soil prohibitive. Community gardens permit residents who lack yard space or ideal soil conditions for growing their own fresh vegetables to join a group effort.

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“Increasing access to fresh fruits and vegetables is essential to improving one’s diet and nutritional status and stretching the family food dollar,” Bullwinkle said. She added, “The opportunity for urban residents to access raised bed gardening and green space improves their overall health and promotes neighborhood socialization and stability.”

In addition to the Utica sites, the City of Rome and the Town of Boonville have recently begun community gardens. Models of community gardens vary from family plots to communal plots with shared produce.

The Bureau of Environmental Health and the Oneida County Health Department will present an update on community gardening efforts on **Tuesday, June 18th** beginning at **6:30 pm at the Thomas Lindsay Public Safety Building on James Street in Utica**. Residents who wish to learn more about starting community gardens are urged to attend.