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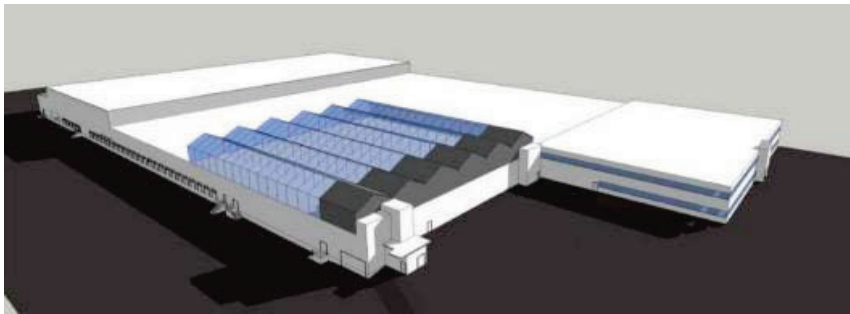
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Needham company is banking on veggies in the sky



City hopes to get rooftop garden



A rendering by Needham-based Sky Vegetables of the hydroponic rooftop farm planned in Brockton above the former Maxwell Shoe factory on Oak Street. (Sky Vegetables)

By Michele Morgan Bolton
Globe Correspondent / December 6, 2009

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Once known as Shoe City USA, Brockton is looking to reinvent itself as a sustainable-growth leader: The city of 93,000 recently became the first in the state to allow and promote sky farming, an emerging industry that promises to offer fresh and affordable food to residents, one rooftop at a time.

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Sky Vegetables, which has just gained approval for the state's first urban hydroponic rooftop farm, plans to build a greenhouse above the former Maxwell Shoe factory on Oak Street. The Needham-based

company will provide up to 100 types of leafy organic edibles, promised its president, Robert Fireman.

He said the 440,000-square-foot facility will yield 300 to 400 tons of food per year once it gets going. Of that, 40 percent will be sold to area markets, another 40 percent to school, hospital, and university food services, and the rest to food banks and farmers markets.

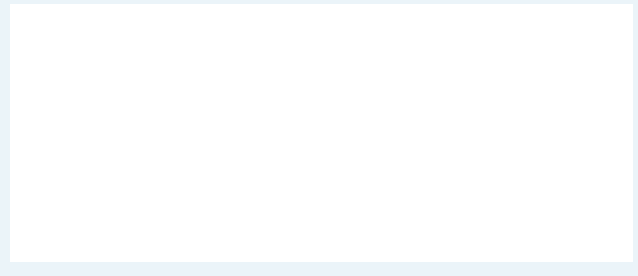
"We saw the need in a community without fresh food," said Fireman. "We're all about local, fresh, and affordable."

After the local zoning board approved its application, Brockton officials said Sky Vegetables will help the city to remake itself, at a time when it most often makes the news for negative happenings, such as violent crime.

There is much more to Brockton, they said.

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“We want green enterprises to know that Brockton is open for business and embraces their ideas, innovation, and technologies,” said Mayor James E. Harrington, who leaves office at the end of the year.

City Councilor Linda Balzotti, the incoming mayor, agreed. “This signature project is exactly what Brockton has been looking for,” she said.

Sky Vegetables, which has a 20-year lease with the building’s owners, plans to invest up to \$5 million to transform the rooftop of the 560 Oak St. factory by mid-2010, as long as it finds “green” state and federal grants and private financing, said Fireman.

Describing the project as the largest urban rooftop garden in the world, he said he is also eyeing another four or five Brockton sites, as well as potential locations in Boston, Chelsea, Washington, D.C., Northern California, and Detroit, among other urban areas.

“Most food travels between 1,500 and 3,000 miles, and we have no idea where it has come from,” he said. “Here, a roof that is useless becomes a food center for the population.”

Sky Vegetables will use rain water for irrigation and hopes to tap into the building’s waste energy from refrigeration and heating, using expended carbon dioxide for the crops, Fireman said.

Because the growing system uses no soil, the farm will generate between five and 15 times the yield of a conventional growing operation using less than 5 percent of the water, he said.

Once Sky Vegetables is operational, it will provide 20 full-time jobs and about 10 part-time positions. An outreach effort is already underway to include interested area schools and universities in a green job partnership.

Locally, that includes GardenWorks, a potential project being floated by the YouthWorks/University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute. It would provide disadvantaged Brockton-area youths, ages 16 to 24, with job skills training and paid work experience in the urban horticulture field.

Mary Waldron, director of the Brockton 21st Century Corp., a nonprofit economic development agency, said the agency’s Career Center has filed a grant application to the Brockton Workforce Investment Board for federal funding to launch the program.

“I can’t even describe how exciting this all is,” Waldron said. “We’ve been working with owners to try to bring attention to buildings in Brockton, once we get past people’s perception of it.”

Although the city is known for its relatively high crime rate and the bullets that sometimes fly in some of its neighborhoods, Brockton for many is a desirable place to live and work and its image can be changed, she said.

“You’ve heard it takes a village?” she mused. “It’s also going to take us not giving up. . . One way or another, our army of residents, businesses, and government will change the image of Brockton. In this case, through urban gardening.”

Keith Agoada, a 2008 graduate of the University of Wisconsin, founded Sky Vegetables, based on the concept of creating commercial hydroponic gardens on supermarket rooftops. After winning a business school competition, Agoada used his \$10,000 prize to launch the company.



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Brockton Ward 7 City Councilor Christopher MacMillan, whose district includes the lagging Westgate Mall and adjoining Oak Street, where the factory is located, said he is thrilled Sky Vegetables is coming.

"I am so happy to see someone thinking outside the box," he said. "It's a top-of-the-line project, and it's going to happen."

MacMillan said the city will offer Sky Vegetables economic incentives as it begins the process of renovating the rooftop, providing access to it and making other adjustments to suit its needs.

Seeing city officials scramble to pave the company's way to Brockton shows how serious they are about turning the tide there, Waldron added.

"Sometimes we do have the stars aligned for us," she said. "We are a business-friendly community that also protects its residents. That's what we stand for."

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