SMALL-SCALE URBAN FARMING could soon experience a growth spurt in California. The Urban Agriculture Incentive Zones Act, which takes effect in January, allows cities and counties with populations of at least 250,000 to designate areas where landowners can lower their tax assessments by promising to use their land for five years of crop production.

Small city parcels (of up to three acres) would be assessed on the agricultural value of the land, rather than at market rate. For owners, that means potentially significantly lower tax bills, at least for a period of time. For farmers, the law could open up more available land for growing food—both commercially and as a noncommercial enterprise such as a community garden.

“This law is targeted to do two things: incentivize the use of private land for urban agriculture and provide urban agriculture projects more security,” says Eli Zigas, food systems and urban agriculture program manager for SPUR, a San Francisco nonprofit that promotes good planning and good government. He points out that unpredictable land tenure makes investments in things like irrigation systems or fruit trees, which take years to establish, risky for urban agriculture projects.

Still, he notes that the incentives zones program aims to encourage temporary urban farm uses. “The law is not trying to be an agricultural land preservation tool,” he says.

It’s hard to say what the impacts of the law will be, and no cities have yet adopted it. Its effects in San Francisco could be quite different than elsewhere, but Zigas notes that it’s in places like the Bay Area—where land is at a premium—that it shows the most promise.

As an example, he points to the lot that is home to the 18th and Rhode Island Garden. At 0.11 acres, its value is about $570,000, and its current property tax assessment is about $6,700 per year (at a 1.188 percent tax rate). If the property were put under contract, then the land would be assessed as irrigated farmland with a per-acre value of $12,000. (To streamline the law’s administration in places that adopt it, the land value is already fixed, based on the most recent U.S. Department of Agriculture average value of irrigated cropland statewide.)
So, the 0.11 acre parcel would have a value of $1,320. Applying the same tax rate, the new assessment would be about $16 per year, plus administrative fees.

The law could get tested first in San Francisco, which updated its zoning in 2011 so that small-scale farming no longer requires a conditional use permit, and other places, like San Jose (its urban ag regulations are pending) and Los Angeles, which just launched an urban agriculture policy initiative. But some cities, like Oakland, might have some real barriers to implementation, says Heather Wooten, senior planner and program director at ChangeLab Solutions, an Oakland-based organization that works nationally on using law and policy to improve health.

"In Oakland most urban agriculture is on vacant property, but it is subject to an excessive conditional use process. Many [farms] are technically illegal," Wooten says. "If the city wanted to tap into this incentive they'd want to first get the zoning in line," she adds.

—Meghan Stromberg

Colorado County Rejects Carbon Tax

LOCATED IN COLORADO'S SAN JUAN MOUNTAINS, the one-time mining town of Telluride has scenery that leaves first-time visitors slack-jawed. Its carbon footprint is also impressive. Now a resort, busy with both winter skiers and summer hikers, Telluride has seen per-capita emissions of greenhouse gas emissions climb to a level 13 percent above the U.S. average, which itself is 14th in the world.

Buildings are a large part of the problem. Nationally, they consume nearly 50 percent of all energy, but in San Miguel County (pop. 7,580), home to Telluride, it's 63 percent. "We have a lot of buildings but not many people," says Joan May, a county commissioner.

Telluride and an adjoining town, Mountain Village, are aiming for 100 percent carbon-free electrical sources for municipal operations by 2020. They've had success through energy efficiency and renewable energy. But retrofitting privately owned buildings has enjoyed less success even when the economic payoff is high.

But, in November, voters roundly rejected a one percent tax on all energy utility bills on residential buildings. Commercial utility use is already taxed by the local jurisdictions. The $150,000 to $175,000 in new revenues would have been allocated in unspecified ways for greenhouse gas reduction. "I feel like this is pretty close to a carbon tax, which is pretty exciting to me," said May in an interview before the November 5 vote.

No jurisdiction in the U.S. enacts a true carbon tax. The closest is Boulder, Colorado. That city in 2008 levied a tax on electrical bills, exempting consumers who had specifically purchased wind power or renewable energy fed into the grid by consumers. Former mayor Will Toor, who helped draft the legislation, points out that the tax does not apply to transportation fuels or to the natural gas used for heating buildings. The money, about $2 million per year, is used to fund the city's Climate Action Plan. Toor also notes that the tax is not high enough to steer marketplace decisions.

California may be the closest to setting a price for carbon through its twin programs, the cap-and-trade marketplace and the low-carbon fuel standard. Other jurisdictions have tried. In Maryland, Montgomery County's effort to tax major carbon emitters was blocked by a court, which ruled the county lacked the legal authority to do so.

Charles Komanoff, an economist with the Carbon Tax Center in New York City, says the best argument for a carbon tax in the U.S. comes from British Columbia, Canada, which adopted a carbon tax in 2008. In a 2011 appraisal, The Economist found that the tax was too low to provoke major changes but has clearly not slowed economic growth.

—Allen Best

Best is a freelance writer based in metropolitan Denver and the publisher of the e-zine Mountain Town News.

In October, the governors of California, Oregon, and Washington, as well as a proxy for the premier of British Columbia—representing an area with a combined population of 53 million—signed the Pacific Coast Action Plan on Climate and Energy. The pact promises state-level action including streamlining permits for renewable energy projects, supporting high-speed rail, and better integrating the electric power grid.

An old idea is new again: A group in Baltimore is revisiting the idea of a maglev train—first floated in the early 2000s—according to the Baltimore Sun. The Northeast Maglev could take passengers from Baltimore to Washington in 15 minutes and on to New York in another 60, claim supporters who say they have backing from a Japanese bank.

Some 50 years after his death, a Frank Lloyd Wright house was recently completed on the campus of Florida Southern college in Lakeland. Built using blueprints left behind by the architect (but never realized, thanks to the Depression and World War II), the new structure serves as a tourism and education center.