

Minutes

MA Food Policy Council Annual Meeting: in-person & remote

Thurs, Dec 7, 2023, Room 428, Massachusetts State House, Boston

10 AM – 12 Noon, MA Grown & Fresher networking 12 Noon – 1 PM

In attendance:

Senator Jo Comerford

Anne Gobi, Director of Rural Development, EOHEd

Kerry Shea, Office of Representative Kane

Rob Leshin, ESE

Mackenzie May, Direct to Consumer

Commissioner Jeffrey McCue, MDTA

Commissioner Ashley Randle, MDAR

Commissioner Bonnie Heiple, MassDEP

Jessica del Rosario, MA DPH

Caro Roszell, Soils Specialist

Danah Tench, MassDEP

Ayn Yeagle, Community Health

John Waite, Food Processing

Phoebe Walker, Public Health

Not in attendance: Representative Donahue, Senator Fattman, Torry Stamm Katsiroubas, Amanda Kinchla

The meeting was **called to order** at 10:05 AM by Council chair and Commissioner Ashley Randle. She welcomed legislators and their staff, who introduced themselves. She thanked Rachel Klein for her assistance with this event and access to State House Room 428 for the Council's annual meeting.

MA Legislative Food System Caucus Senator Comerford shared that all priority bills have had public hearings. She thanked all legislative staff for their assistance, and Ag Committee Chair, Representative Paul Schmidt. Senator Comerford is the chair on the senate side. She thanked MDAR for their role in moving the Farmland Action Plan forward and noted the importance of the 21 Ag Special Commission on Agriculture in the Commonwealth, which can help identify the intersection of natural disasters and farming. These documents provide much to build on when the Economic Bond bill comes out.

MA Food System Collaborative Becca Miller reported that the Collaborative has hired a new executive director, Kristina Pechulis. The Collaborative's Forum is tomorrow and will include a plenary session on natural disasters from this growing season, food literacy, seafood, and the New England Feeding New England (NEFNE) organization. NEFNE presented to the MA Legislative Food System Caucus last month. The recording is available on the Collaborative's YouTube channel. There is wide enthusiasm for DESE and their \$1M food literacy budget, the Farmland Action Plan, and working on how the activities are intertwined and connected.

Commissioner Randle asked Council members to introduce themselves. Commissioner McCue thanked the legislature for including \$6M in funds to support food for refugees who typically don't have access to these programs and services, and an additional \$1M for clients who may have had benefits fraudulently stolen. SNAP benefits have grown almost 50%, bringing important resources to the state.

Local Food Policy Council grant awardee reports:

Southcoast Food Policy Council, Elizabeth Wiley, Executive Director, Marion Institute. The Institute is an umbrella organization for many partners. At the end of 2019, the Southcoast Food Policy Council was organized, now with over 400 members including 30 partner organizations. In 2022, a strategic plan identified 27 priorities in four buckets, with the top being food access to increase local food availability. They began work with AD Makepeace for gleaned and converted land from a previously an abandoned cranberry bog into a farm. MDAR funds were used to focus on education and public awareness communication of the local food system to all individuals. Their work showed that, based on a survey, few people in the area know about the local food system. They organized a campaign including different ways people could become engaged. One of the most impactful strategies was a local food challenge, with over 200 people registered to eat and support local. A social media campaign helped build awareness. This funding is very important to educate the public and to work to keep state land in agriculture by building awareness and purchases of local food.

Cape Cod Cooperative Extension, Kim Concra, Nutrition & Food Safety Specialist. The presenters thanked the legislature for the LFPC grant program. Their work supported the MA Local Food Action Plan with a focus on stakeholder input and technology through facilitated on-line forums and email surveys, engaging food pantries and meal sites, suppliers including farmers and fishers, grocers, restaurants, wholesale, and other food chain supply businesses. This work could extend beyond the Cape. A food equity project focused on the functionality of a virtual food hub. Labor and the lack of a regulatory pathway to donate seafood were identified as challenges. Food distributors were interested in more local food sources. Food pantry donations are mostly produced, with some coming from the greater Boston food bank. The food pantries need to purchase many items and are having trouble meeting demand. Potential virtual food hub drafts were piloted and are being fine-tuned based on stakeholder input and the type of functionality that each party needs.

Hampshire County Food Policy Council, JuPong Lin and Kia Aoki, Community Coordinator

LFPC grant funds were used to develop a governance structure to empower local residents to be involved in food system planning and work, with working circles (or committees) composed of both food system workers and residents. Sociocracy is a process to make decisions together while valuing everyone's voice and time. Funds were used to implement this training. Groups can operate independently without regular staff in attendance. Digital tools were introduced, a challenge for some participants, but once implemented, powerful in running meetings. Community members without prior experience learned that they have an important voice in the food system. The aim is deeper social justice. Training materials honor diverse ways of learning. The circle structures help to share power.

MA Food Policy Council member reports

Jessica del Rosario and Kim Etingoff, DPH: Root Cause Solutions Exchange. The exchange will be a resource hub and network of people and communities building capacity to improve the conditions that affect health. Addressing the reasons that people experience health and health inequities is the focus.

The Exchange will help address underlying vulnerabilities and build resilient communities. Partners include municipal governments, regional structures, community-based organizations, and resident groups. Website resources, coaches, technical assistance, networking opportunities and seed funding will be among the offerings.

Denise Courtney and Maggie Nowak, ESE: Impact of Funding on Farm to School. Rob Leshin introduced his team and partners and noted that this is an exciting moment. DESE’s Commissioner has a new educational vision for the Commonwealth including whole child wellness - to support the whole student and foster joyful, healthy, and supportive learning environments so that all students feel valued and connected. Massachusetts is one of eight states in the U.S. with Universal Free Meals. This administration has been very supportive. Universal Free Meals was an achievement of their first 100 days. Project Bread has been a critical partner in advocacy for this achievement. Some 80,000 more students are participating in school meals - almost 7 of 10 students every day across the Commonwealth. Universal Free Meals eliminates the stigma and stress of poverty in the lunch line. There is an economic development benefit through the farm to school program with some \$20M in funds going back to farms. The ROI for these funds goes way beyond a meal. With so much state, federal, and local funds available, DESE has hired a full-time coordinator, Maggie Nowak. She described how 234 school districts in the state will receive funds of over \$3.5 M. Senator Comerford commented that that would be helpful to have information aggregated for all school programs to understand how they are affecting the state’s food system. She suggested that Caucus members could be food system ambassadors in the state house to get legislators more engaged in outcomes, for example implementing a Terrific Trays program. These programs have led to menu changes, with very positive results. Comment: Mapping could show who is not benefitting from these programs, with follow-up strategies for engagement.

Danah Tench, DEP: Gap Energy Grant awards. The \$8.1M in funds were awarded to 62 applicants, including nine to food system recipients including food pantries (Cambridge Community Center, Catholic Charities Worcester County, Stratford Street United Church, Townsend Ecumenical Outreach), small businesses (Elliott Farm, Farmer Dave’s, We Grow Microgreens), and non-profit farms (The Farm School, and Natick Organic Community Farm). Natick Community Organic Farm shared information about their farm and their gratitude for being a DEP GAP Energy Grant recipient, with grant funds used to add solar panels to a newly rebuilt barn after a 2021 fire destroyed their old barn. The Farm will provide classes about the efficiency of renewable energy including solar panels. Comment: It was exciting to see renewable energy included in the rebuild of the barn.

Council administration tasks

Acceptance of minutes Comments from two Council members were incorporated to update the minutes. A vote to accept the minutes was made by Phoebe Walker, seconded by Commissioner Heiple and passed unanimously by voice vote: Senator Comerford, Anne Gobi, Kerry Shea, Rob Leshin, Mackenzie May, Commissioner Ashley Randle, Jessica del Rosario, Caro Roszell, Commissioner Heiple, Ayn Yeagle, John Waite, Phoebe Walker.

Nominating Committee A slate to fill the open Advisory Committee positions was provided by Mackenzie May.

Candidate	Credentials	Prospective Seat
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Alisa Klein	Grow Food North Hampton, North Hampton	An organization engaged in farmland protection and conservation
Casey Burns	Greater Worcester Community Health Improvement Plan, Worcester	Representing citizens in need of transitional assistance
Marcos Beleche	Four Corners Main Street, Dorchester	An organization engaged in developing new farm businesses, urban & community supported ag, community gardening, immigrant/refugee farming/youth education through agriculture
Meg Gennings	UMass Agriculture Animal Science & Mass Farm Bureau, Amherst	Active farmers or one who shall represent farmer associations

Ayn Yeagle, chair of the Advisory Committee, introduced committee member Jorge Marcuza and his wife, and thanked him for his contributions.

A slate of Bylaw Committee candidates included Danah Tench, Phoebe Walker, and Senator Comerford.

A vote to accept all committee candidate recommendations was made by Rob Leshin, seconded by Ayn Yeagle, and passed unanimously by voice vote: Senator Comerford, Anne Gobi, Kerry Shea, Rob Leshin, Mackenzie May, Commissioner Ashley Randle, Jessica del Rosario, Caro Roszell, Commissioner Heiple, Ayn Yeagle, John Waite, Phoebe Walker.

Announcements

Be sure to attend the MA Food System Collaborative’s Forum tomorrow.
January 12, 9:30 – 11:30, MA Food Policy Council meeting, virtual.

Adjournment A vote to accept the minutes was made at 12:24 by Senator Comerford, seconded by Anne Gobi and passed by voice vote: Senator Comerford, Anne Gobi, Kerry Shea, Rob Leshin, Mackenzie May, Commissioner Ashley Randle, Jessica del Rosario, Caro Roszell, Commissioner Heiple, Ayn Yeagle, John Waite, Phoebe Walker.

MA Grown & Fresher Networking included refreshments after the meeting.