

MA Food Policy Council virtual meeting  
Draft minutes  
Friday, July 15, 2022, 9:30 – 11:30 am

In attendance:

*Senator Comerford*

*Jessica del Rosario, DPH (late)*

*Representative Kane*

*Amanda Kinchla, Food Safety*

*Rob Leshin, ESE*

*Mackenzie May, Direct to Consumer*

*Caro Roszell, Healthy Soils*

*Danah Tench, MassDEP*

*Ayn Yeagle, Community Health*

*John Waite, Food Processing*

*Phoebe Walker, Local Boards of Health*

*Lorraine Ward, DTA designee*

**Welcome and call to order:** Vice Chair Mackenzie May called the meeting to order at 9:33 AM. She served as chair since Commission Lebeaux was unable to attend. She thanked Secretary Danah Tench for the remote hosting of this meeting.

**A motion to accept the minutes** was made by Representative Kane, seconded by Danah Tench, and passed by voice vote: Senator Comerford, Representative Kane, Amanda Kinchla, Rob Leshin, Mackenzie May, Caro Roszell, Danah Tench, Ayn Yeagle, John Waite, Phoebe Walker, Lorraine Ward.

**MA Legislature's Food Caucus update:** Senator Jo Comerford and Representative Hannah Kane

Priorities have been set including \$25M for FSIG program. There is a critical awareness of food system issues for both food access and production agriculture. The Food System Caucus chairs including Representative Schmid spoke to EEA leadership to reiterate the importance of FSIG. The meeting included discussion of FSIG grant adjustments and improvements, for example, for recipients to be able to continue into another year to complete projects. Short and long-range goals were discussed.

**Rob Leshin provided an update on school meals.** The newly signed “Keep Kids Fed Act” of 2022, allows waivers for summer meal sites across the state. Guidance has been provided to schools about summer meals, grab n go, and reimbursement. There are 1,500 sites across the state, with more expected. Reimbursement is important for school meals considering how inflation and supply chain issues are increasing costs. DESE is waiting to hear about continued free school meals which is expected to pass. Upcoming grants to note: the USDA Local Food for Schools, a sister grant to MDAR’s program includes \$3.5 M that will flow to schools working with MDAR, MA Farm to School and food hubs for aggregation and distribution. There is an additional \$1M earmark in legislation through ARPA funds to be administered during the school year. Summer pandemic EBT has been approved. Most districts have submitted data which shows that hundreds of thousands of households have received reimbursement.

Q: Is there a list of the districts that didn’t get it in? A: There are a few but DESE has been working diligently to get them involved. Payments will be retroactive. Q: What is the definition for socially disadvantaged farmers for the MDAR grant? A: The definition is the same and is described in the RFA.

Q: Has there been any geographic mapping to look at any gaps? Besides food hubs, there are other nascent initiatives across the state that could be engaged. A: Funds are not restricted to food hubs.

### **Officer Reports**

Secretary Danah Tench: The advisory committee to the MA Food Policy Council has met three times so far, and the group is getting to know each other and working together well. As we are moving along, additional assistance from an additional Council member would be welcome. Please share your interest.

### **MA Food System Collaborative update on the MA Farmland Action Plan: Winton Pitcoff**

The Farmland Action Plan is in process. There has been a deadline extension. This is the first presentation of this Plan and feedback is welcome. The Plan was first proposed in 2015 in the MA Local Food Action Plan. In 2020, the Baker administration included funds for this work in the capital budget. MDAR issued an RFR and contracted with the UMASS Donahue Institute, American Farmland Trust (AFT) and the Collaborative. There have been many listening sessions, interviews, and engagement to reach BIPOC and young farmers. Past plans were reviewed to build upon.

The industry is worth about \$10B in economic output. AFT projects that as much as a fifth of MA agricultural land could be lost in the next 18 years, underscoring the need for this plan. Comprehensive statewide land planning that includes agriculture is lacking. MA land is valued at \$13,700 per acre, the third highest value in the country. The MA farmer population is aging with over half over age 60, many without succession plans. There has been systemic discrimination resulting in the presence in MA of few BIPOC farmers. Challenges include lack of funding, incentives for conversion, and staff. There needs to be broader communications about farmland protection and opportunities, considering that there is a subset of farmers that are awarded frequently. Farms are getting smaller with some less than five acres. APRs don't usually include housing, a federal requirement but not a state priority. Participation in policy setting discussions is difficult for BIPOC, immigrant and aspiring farmers. Public support hasn't translated into meaningful consumer support. There is a lack of understanding of the costs of food production. Protection, access, and viability themes need to be expanded upon. The Plan aims to protect 250,000 acres of farmland by permanent deed restrictions including public and private, to protect the whole farm, including tillable acreage, woodland, and production acres. A no-net loss approach is a priority. The land licensing program could be expanded to increase access. Opportunities to reclaim farmland are important. Support for succession and transition plans are critical to make sure the land stays in production. There needs to be more public support for farm incubators. To enhance access, broad communications about available land needs to include BIPOC farmers. Urban farmers need long term support to be sure they can make land improvements. Agriculture should be at the table in all public discussions/processes. Payment to farmers for eco-system services, water retention, water filtration, and the public good provided would help with business sustainability. Education is important with a more diverse network of service providers including job readiness for people of color who want to be farmers or work in the farming industry. Expectations are that the plan will be out in late August and shared with transition team and the new policy team.

Q: Will the plan have tiered recommendations? A: There are many action items towards larger goals. There will be a phase II to recommend priorities. Some actions are short term and can be sorted out.

A: What about dual use solar siting? It's a threat to farmland especially in western MA. A: There is mention of this topic and on-going studies are noted, though it wasn't firmly in the project scope. Other opportunities need to be available, so farmers can turn down this option.

Q: Was there BIPOC participation? How can people of color weigh in on the draft Plan? A: People of color were hired to engage these communities. An advisory group is overseeing the process including people of color, who will be able to do another review. There are always opportunities to do more.

There was further discussion around the engagement of the BIPOC communities for the Farmland Action Plan outreach component and Council members and the public weighed in on their concern around the level of outreach to BIPOC communities and opportunities for their participation. Conversations by members of the public continued in the meeting and in the digital chat and included statements that the Farmland Action Plan team was cognizant of conducting robust and intentional outreach from the beginning of the process and has strived to include all parties in the engagement process to ultimately publish a comprehensive, equitable, and meaningful plan to guide future farmland preservation and access work in the Commonwealth.

Comment: One of the reasons that this Council was formed was to take these issues forward. Hopefully, the Council can accept the Farmland Action Plan at a future meeting.

Q: How will the information be shared out to the community? It is the most capacity constrained and underserved populations that don't get to hear what is going on. A: An extensive communication plan is being developed to include targeted presentations to community members and stakeholders, agricultural commodity groups, real estate agencies. and attorneys. The Plan will be a snapshot in time with opportunities to adopt recommendations to changing needs, with roles for many stakeholders.

#### **MA Food Policy Council Advisory Committee update: Ayn Yeagle**

Ayn Yeagle shared that Council member Caro Roszell presented soil health and climate change topics at the meeting. A discussion followed as the committee continues to explore priority areas. The Open Meeting Law was explained. MDAR legal is checking to see if stipends could be allowed, per the statute. An additional Council member is welcome to work with and support this committee.

#### **Program: Universal free school meals – the future of school meals**

Sarah Coughlin, [Director of School Nutrition Braintree](#)

Nadine Doucette, School Nutrition Director Whitman-Hanson RSD

The national School Nutrition Program is advocating for universal school meals and hoping that the budget will be passed. Speakers gave a general overview of the school lunch program included reimbursements, pandemic related waivers, and summer rates (which are higher than the national rates). Waivers ended on June 30. The school nutrition program has had an important impact on the state. Free universal meals are inclusive for children whose parents can't or don't complete the forms, even though they're eligible. Food costs have dramatically increased as have on-going supply chain issues and product shortages, sometimes requiring menu changes. Models include grab n go and food in the classroom which require higher levels of staffing. A tiered payment program is complicated and can lead to fewer participants and lower reimbursement which can lead to increase in student meal debt, which schools need to cover from their general funds. Increased energy costs come back to the budget of the school. There have been fewer bids, and minimum delivery drops which is concerning for smaller

schools, who don't have storage for large quantities. If replacement equipment is ordered, it's hard to know when it will arrive. At the same time, increased wages are required to retain staff and recruit new staff. The MA School Nutrition Association is advocating with Project Bread for an extension of the "Keep Kids' Fed Act."

Q: The towns of Braintree, Whitman, and Hanson are more resourced compared to some other school districts. Where do inequities lie? A: Whitman has about 30% participation. Braintree has more resources and is less diverse than some districts, however there are families that fall through the cracks because they miss the cut off. There are economically disadvantaged people everywhere. At times they are more overlooked in these types of districts. Whitman has more free and reduced meals compared to Braintree, however since eligibility is only on income, it can be difficult for the working poor. It's best for all students to have universal free meals. Well-fed children learn better.

Comment: The Hilltown communities are mostly white, with a high level of hunger. A larger voice at the federal level would be helpful to address application barriers. In Springfield, applications are in English in a population that is mainly Spanish speaking. DESE's voice is important in these conversations.

Response: DTA is working with school districts to apply to SNAP which has slightly higher cutoffs and direct certification. DTA is working with schools to prepare for the tiered system. SNAP applications can be done over the phone at this time. Efforts are in place to simplify enrollment in school meals.

Comment: There are many school heroes in MA, including Nadine Doucett and Sara Coughlin working in the school districts, and Lorraine Ward and Brittany Margini working at DTA. MA is distinguished to be one of the early states that engaged with CEP and continues with outreach. In the event that the earmark doesn't go through, there are over 25,000 students who could continue with universal free meals.

### **MA Food Policy Council member updates**

Danah Tench shared links that have data on reduced organic waste including progress with food waste in the state: <https://www.mass.gov/doc/presentation-massdep/download> and <https://www.mass.gov/doc/presentation-recyclingworks-in-massachusetts-0/download>

John Waite shared an update on the FCCDC's USDA Ag Innovation Center (AIC) grant. They are close to hiring a director to work with farmers to help add value to their products. A wide range of partners are involved in the AIC and the interviews.

Caro Roszell suggested that the Council discuss PFAS issues at a future meeting, since smaller farms use higher levels of compost. Considering the cost of testing, the state could consider emergency funding for testing. Maine has a good model. Comment: MassDEP's office of Research and Standards is looking at this topic. Comment: Central MA has gained attention due to the compost site located there with high levels of PFAS. Farmers are worried. A farmer contingent could be organized if needed.

### **Announcements:**

August 2, Advisory Committee to the MA Food Policy Council, 1:30 – 3:30

September 9, MA Food Policy Council, 9:30 – 11:30

November, MA annual meeting of the MA Food Policy Council, 9:30 – 11:30 (tba)

### **Public Comment**

**Adjournment:** At 11:15 AM, a motion to adjourn was made by Danah Tench and seconded by Jessica del Rosario. (Participants left the zoom platform before there was a vote to adjourn however a quorum had been in attendance. including: *Jessica Del Rosario, Amanda Kinchla, Rob Leshin, Mackenzie May, Caro Roszell, Danah Tench, Ayn Yeagle, John Waite, Phoebe Walker, Lorraine Ward.*)

*On March 10, 2020, Governor Baker, acting pursuant to the power provided by Chapter 639 of the Acts of 1950 and Section 2A of Chapter 17 of the Massachusetts General Laws, declared a State of Emergency due to the outbreak of the 2019 coronavirus ("COVID-19"). In accordance with the State of Emergency, the Massachusetts Food Policy Council ("MFPC") meetings are being conducted through virtual means to allow real-time public access.*