

MA Food Policy Council meeting

Minutes

Friday, May 13, 2022, 9:30 – 11:30 am

In attendance:

Douglas Botelho, Representative Donahue
Sophia Flionis, Office of Representative Kane
Senator Comerford
Bill Fredericks, Office of Senator Fattman
Torry Stamm Katsiroubas, Distribution
Commissioner Lebeaux, DAR
Rob Leshin, ESE
Bobby Mallin, HED
Brittany Mangini, DTA
Mackenzie May, Direct to Consumer
Jessica del Rosario, DPH
Caro Roszell, Healthy Soils
Danah Tench, MassDEP
Ayn Yeagle, Community Health
John Waite, Food Processing
Phoebe Walker, Local Boards of Health

The meeting was called to order by MDAR Commissioner and Chair John Lebeaux at 9:35. A motion was made to accept the minutes by Phoebe Walker, seconded by Senator Comerford and passed by voice vote: Douglas Botelho, Sophia Flionis, Senator Comerford, Bill Fredericks, Torry Stamm Katsiroubas, Commissioner Lebeaux, Rob Leshin, Brittany Mangini, Mackenzie May, Jessica del Rosario, Caro Roszell, Danah Tench, Ayn Yeagle, John Waite, Phoebe Walker.

Thanks were noted to Danah Tench, DEP, for the remote hosting of this meeting.

- **MA Legislature's Food Caucus update:** Senator Jo Comerford, Representative Daniel Donahue

Senator Comerford met with Representative Kane in advance to review topics to share. She congratulated the House for robust support for several food system priorities including funding for HIP, Buy Locals, Project Bread Hotline, Project Bread Child Nutrition Outreach, MA Food Trust, MA Farm to School, MEFAP, Farm Shares, and MA in Motion. Full funding for UMASS Extension wasn't successful, however an amendment will be filed for this and a number for food, farm and equity strengthening topics. Increased MDAR staffing didn't move forward.

Comment: The Food System Caucus was thanked for their strong leadership and support/investment in the Massachusetts food system.

Q: Can the Farm to School budget be increased which would make it easier to buy local? A: Its level funded at least however there will be advocacy to strengthen the budget.

- **Officers Reports**

Commissioner Lebeaux: MDAR recently applied to USDA for the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA) to access up to \$7.5M in funding. The initial request was for \$4.5M. If no tribal nations have applied to the program by May 6th, MDAR will receive the full \$7.5M to allocate through a competitive RFR process.

Through the LFPA grant program, MDAR will purchase and distribute locally grown, produced, and processed food from socially disadvantaged farmers, producers, and businesses in order to address injustices inherent in the current food system.

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of a strong, resilient local food system, and the need to meet individuals where they are to ensure there is equitable access to food.

Through a collaborative regional model, MDAR will 1.) Contract with Massachusetts farmers, fisheries, producers, and distributors through a competitive bid process 2.) Develop and disseminate locally sourced and produced food to underserved communities; and 3.) Collect data to identify, develop, and maintain a comprehensive database of socially disadvantaged farmers, producers, and members of the Massachusetts food system to conduct outreach and more effectively engage with the state's agricultural community.

Target audiences for the project to include farmers, with special consideration to Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), Environmental Justice communities, and socially disadvantaged populations.

MDAR will partner with and leverage the knowledge and expertise of service providers in the state and regional network, including regional Buy Local organizations, community kitchens, food banks and pantries, food hubs, and emergency food organizations.

MDAR will look to onboard a contractor in the next few months to oversee the program's deliverables and reporting and will be posting the RFR once our application is approved by USDA.

Q: How is the timing of this in terms of the growing season? A: This is a two-year grant, so MDAR anticipates being able to focus on next year to plan for growing, including a webinar to provide background. Comment: It's an important opportunity but it will take some time to scale up. It would be helpful to know how this can be a sustainable model moving forward. Opportunities for regional collaboration and microgrants for smaller farmers would be appreciated, as well as this to be long-term program.

Comment: World Farmers did a similar program during the pandemic. It's important to link in SNAP and HIP and move consumers up from emergency food assistance with early DTA engagement. Comment: MDAR is working with DESE and DTA to be able to reach the intended populations in an intentional way.

Comment: DESE is applying to a similar cooperative grant Local Food for Schools up to \$3.5M. The application deadline is July for the 18-month grant. DESE is working with MDAR and the Farm to School program along with a collection of regional food hubs. Funds would flow through the regional food

hubs. Mapping this all out including districts and food drop offs is in process. DESE will request a deferred start to ensure there is enough supply to meet the demand.

Q: Will there be MDAR staff be dedicated to technical assistance, and will the RFR be accessible in multiple languages? A: Major languages will be included. MDAR staff will be available in addition to a lead independent contractor. MDAR received USDA feedback that the proposal looks strong and there were no additional questions. MDAR expects to be awarded the full amount.

Massachusetts Farmland Action Plan Update: MDAR has begun the process of developing a Massachusetts Farmland Action Plan to address the farmland needs and goals of the Commonwealth.

To preserve the resilience of our agricultural economy and food system in a changing climate, there is a pressing need to expand the number of farms and farmland acres that are protected throughout the Commonwealth, not only through the state programs but also by municipalities, non-profits, and federal agencies. It is also critically important to ensure that farm businesses operating on protected farmland are viable and are provided with the greatest chance of success at producing food both in difficult economic times and in the face of a changing climate.

Strong development pressure and high land values are challenges to protecting farmland. Climate change; soil degradation; a shortage of land for all farmers including for new, historically underserved, beginning farmers, and urban farmers; high land prices; aging farm operators without identified successors, management transitions, market changes, land access and affordability for beginning farmers, and high production costs, are all challenges to farm viability.

The Plan outlines key goals and recommendations and provide a roadmap to overcome challenges and increase farmland conservation, farmland access, food security, and the long-term economic and environmental viability of farms across all regions of the state. The plan will:

- identify a multi-year strategy until 2050
- set measurable goals related to farmland protection, farmland viability, and social justice for historically underserved or disenfranchised populations in the agricultural sector
- recommend strategies and state spending and resources need to meet those goals.
- create measurement tools by which progress will be monitored according to project goals

The goals and actions proposed by the Farmland Action Plan are:

FARMLAND PROTECTION: Farmland is a threatened and critical infrastructure, supporting food security, natural systems and climate resilience, and the Massachusetts economy. Therefore, permanent protection of farmland should be prioritized.

FARMLAND ACCESS: Farmland should be an accessible resource. Enabling this requires equitable, affordable opportunities and options.

FARM and FARMLAND VIABILITY: Protected and productive farmland is the supporting foundation of a viable and strong farm economic system.

Progress to date:

4 meetings of subject matter expert groups – 10 – 16 Subject matter experts and MDAR staff
2 listening sessions in English
1 listening session in Spanish
7 visioning and Action Planning sessions
Survey with 430 respondents including 230 farmers
3 focus groups for BIPOC farmers

The plan is on schedule to be in draft form for review by the end of the year. It is likely that a final version will be released once it has undergone a full internal review.

Comment: Ground mounted solar is a threat to farmland preservation in western Massachusetts. A: MDAR energy programs focuses on dual use solar and solar installations on roofs. This issue was highlighted in a recent Boston Globe magazine. MDAR is mindful of the concerns about solar. Comment: American Farmland Trust has ag/solar resources: <https://farmland.org/solar/>

Q: Will the report have specific policy or budget recommendations? A: The draft has some legislative change recommendations. Comment: Recommendations as prescriptive as possible and budget priorities would be appreciated.

MA Food Policy Council Advisory Committee update: Danielle Collins, Director of School Nutrition at Reading and Wakefield Public School Districts, and Advisory Committee member.

The representation is prescribed by the statute for the Council's Advisory committee. Members asked about the Open Meeting Law. MDAR's legal team will be invited to an upcoming meeting to discuss.

Members established guiding principles for working together collectively and achieving goals. These will be revisited and built upon in future meetings. These included: bringing real stories from the community to the committee; building trust and relationships based on shared values; creating space for member to dig deeply into issues; and holding space to value each other's opinions

Members discussed: 1) What does climate change and race equity mean as it relates to the food system? and 2) What are the most pressing issues for the MA Food Policy Council to tackle around climate change and race equity?

A MA Food System Collaborative report was provided Winton Pitcoff. A thread throughout the MA Local Food Action Plan is a commitment to race equity across all lines of the food system, which can be built upon through this group, for example, the Ag. Equity Bill including BIPOC farmers and investment. Another area to investigate is breaking silos with policy issues, for example, transportation links to land use, food access, farmland protection, energy. He encouraged members to review the Collaborative's report "Perspectives on Resilience and Recovery," which addresses equity issues.

MA Food Policy Council Program

- **Expanding Food Literacy in Massachusetts** [Food Literacy in Massachusetts: Local Successes, Statewide Opportunities](#) Brittany Peats, MA Food Systems Collaborative ([Executive Summary](#) link and [Resources to expand food system education at your school.](#))

Comment: DTA is posting a new RFP to implement SNAP education, which includes opportunities to subcontract with smaller agencies for wide outreach.

Comment: Promoting school wellness programs is very much appreciated. DESE has a multiagency and multi-organization approach to push forward school nutrition and education.

Comment: Can hospital dietitians be engaged as anchor expert to help with any development of materials and implementation, especially in the larger districts? In the smaller districts, a coalition could be organized to support these initiatives. Many of the small school gardens need champions and a model to support sustainability. Home economics needs to be revitalized and re-introduced.

- **Rural Policy Plan/Rural Policy Advisory Commission** presentation including food system and ag based priorities: Linda Dunlavy, Executive Director, Franklin Regional Council of Governments, and chair and author of the Rural Policy Plan. Introduction by Phoebe Walker.

The 2015 Plan https://frcog.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Rural_Policy_Plan_10.01.19.pdf was created to enhance economic vitality of rural communities, based on a population density of less than 500 people per/square mile, representing 170 communities or 13% of the population. The Plan was created to identify assets and challenges, how they differ from other parts of the states, best prospects, actions, and policy/program/budget recommendations. Pre-pandemic, food security was not included.

Q: Forest and ag land has an important impact on our urban friends. How can we educate them?

Comment: We would like to quantify the carbon sequestration value and recognize that western MA is a food basket for the state. COVID showed the importance of western MA as a food supplier.

Comment: The MA Healthy soils action plan will be released soon, which will include estimates for carbon sequestration.

- **MA Food Policy Council member updates**

Brittany Mangini, HIP Vendor Update: A notice of opportunity <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/healthy-incentives-program-hip-notice-of-opportunity-noo-criteria> to expand the HIP vendors across the state is open through June. The objective is modify the HIP tool to address equity on the consumer side to incentivize healthy eating, as well as on the vendor side. Priority communities and populations are highlighted based on data on who was using HIP and most importantly, who was NOT using HIP. A focus is to connect vendors that already have strong community connections. Rather than focus on the number of vendors being on-boarded, scope and reach are important.

Sub population priorities include SNAP clients who identify as black, a demographic with the biggest gap in access. There is an intersection between communities and populations. The second population priority is people with disabilities, who frequently are at high risk based on food insecurity. DTA will translate the information into multiple languages, as well as a verbal application (an interview).

Q: How many applications have been received? A: Applications haven't been counted yet but please promote this opportunity. Comment: ARPA funds have brought broad band support to rural parts of the state. Is SNAP/HIP talking to this part of the state with a focus on broad band? A: DTA has a SNAP equipment opportunity for applicants to connect with the broad band expansions.

Brittany Mangini, DTA, shared that she has been invited to join a group of thought leaders to meet in Washington DC, to discuss a broad array of perspectives for a design session. This event comes at a critical moment - as climate change and environmental harms are increasingly present as social determinants of health and wellbeing driving inequities in communities across the nation. Climate events are increasing in frequency throughout the United States, disproportionately impacting populations that are often less able than others to adapt to or recover. There is also the issue of confronting the historical policies related to housing and community development that have created health inequities related to pollution and urban heat centers, which too have disproportionate impacts on communities and families that human services agencies already serve. This session will help to build a framework for equipping health and human services leaders to prepare communities for the increasing challenges that already affect them disproportionately today and that will increasingly put them in harm's way in the future. Brittany welcomes members of the public to flag topics of relevance and email her: brittany.mangini@mass.gov

Danah Tench shared a grant update from the Clean Energy Results Program. The new GAP Energy Grant application <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/massachusetts-gap-energy-grant-program> provided through DEP for up to \$200,000 per applicant, supplements awards from MASS SAVE. Outreach is starting. The grant supports energy efficiency and clean energy improvements to building and for the first time, extends the opportunity to food producing and distribution non-profits and to small businesses that engage in food distribution, to complement MDAR's farm energy grant assistance. Energy audits can be done by MASS SAVE through the utility company as well as private energy services companies.

Rob Leshin shared that DESE and EEC are working together to develop a \$1 million farm to school grant (provided through state ARPA funds) and are seeking feedback from stakeholders to ensure that these funds make the greatest impact in local communities. Complete the linked survey below by June 1, 2022, to help gather information to use the grant to strengthen the connections between farms and schools: <https://survey.alchemer.com/s3/6805474/Farm-to-School-Grant-Stakeholder-Feedback>

- **Council members in the spotlight:**

Brittany Mangini, DTA shared her background and responsibilities.

Comment: David Webber is MDAR's contact who works closely with Brittany and DTA. He has accomplished lots of great work and provides tremendous support for our ag community.

Rob Leshin, DESE shared his background and responsibilities.

- **Announcements**

July 15, MA Food Policy Council Meeting 9:30 – 11:30 AM.

May 14: Soil Health Day at Thornton Street Farm, Roxbury
<https://www.nofamass.org/event/soil-health-day-at-thornton-street-farm/>

May 19: Johnny's Seed and American Farmland Trust webinar: Climate Adaptation for Vegetable & Flower Farmers. <https://www.johnnyseeds.com/growers-library/webinar/webinar-series-climate-adaptation-for-vegetable-and-flower-farms.html>

- **Public Comment:** Council dates farther out will be confirmed.
- **Adjournment 11:24:** A motion to adjourn was made by MacKenzie May, seconded by John Waite and passed by voice vote: *Representative Donahue, Bill Fredericks, Commissioner Lebeaux, Rob Leshin, Brittany Mangini, Mackenzie May, Caro Roszell, Danah Tench, Ayn Yeagle, John Waite, Phoebe Walker.*

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.