

Massachusetts Farmland Action Plan and Urban Ag Potential Partners

Notes from meetings in December 2024

Context

In December 2024, Katharine Otto and Rose Arruda hosted meetings for individuals who play key roles within their urban agriculture organization and community, who might be interested to help implement the plan. The meetings focused on the following questions:

- How do we take the plan and translate the Plan into reality, specifically for urban ag?
- What are some actionable next steps that make sense to move forward the tasks identified within the Plan which are important to urban ag?

Meetings were offered for four in person locations across the state and one online. Meeting dates and locations were adjusted according to RSVPs, resulting in the following meetings:

- 12/4/2024 at 9am, in person in Mattapan
- 12/9/2024 at 10am, online
- 12/10/2024 at 9am, online
- 12/19/2024 at 9am, in person in Springfield

Facilitator – Katharine Otto, Farmland Action Plan Coordinator, MDAR. Katharine.s.otto@mass.gov with assistance from Rose Arruda, Urban Agriculture Coordinator, MDAR

The following is a brief summary of some of the conversation that occurred during the meetings as well as some of the comments collected from participants. In addition to oral discussion, meetings participants were asked to share their priorities, potential capacity and additional comments/ questions. This was accomplished using a paper handout for the in-person meetings and [mentimeter](#), a live polling software, for the online meetings.

- For priority, participants were asked for whether implementing the task was a priority for themselves and their organization. It was clarified orally that this is regardless of whether they might be able to help implement the task
- For capacity, participants were asked if they may have the capacity to lead or assist with implementation of the task. This followed explanation of how Katharine is looking at each task of the Farmland Action Plan for potential partners to volunteer to serve as lead implementers and other potential implementers.

Some notes regarding the comments:

- Some have been slightly edited or combined.
- Comments have been collated by topics, in no particular order
- Many comments align well with existing tasks within the Farmland Action Plan.
- A few comments highlight potential new tasks to be considered when implementing the Farmland Action Plan.
- A few comments may not belong within implementation of the Farmland Action Plan because they are better aligned with other statewide plans or initiatives such as the EEA EJ Strategy and the MA Local Food Action Plan.
- These comments are from voluntary participants in open discussion. These comments may or may not align with positions of MDAR or the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

What would you like to see worked on?

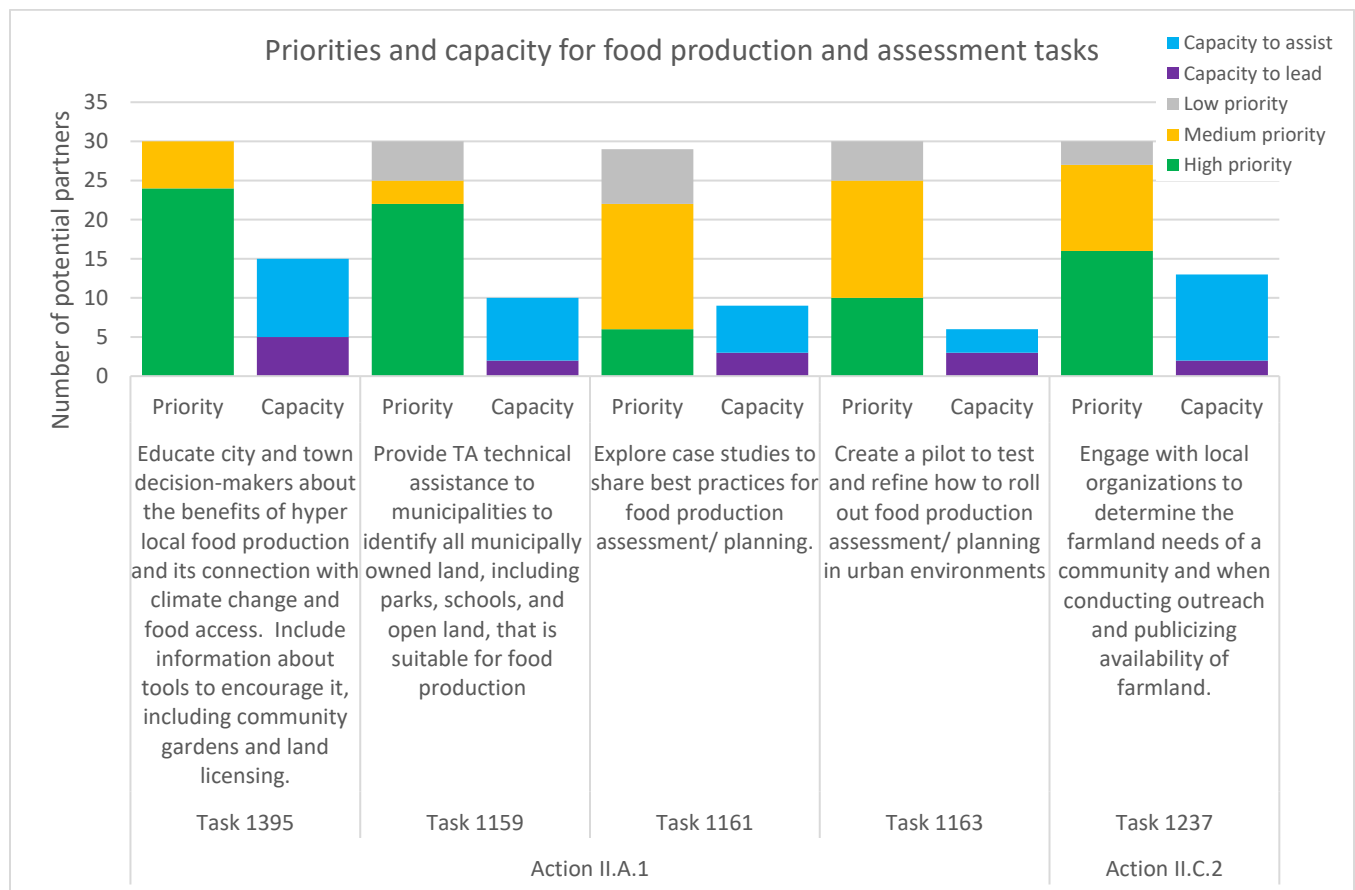
Food Production and Needs

The following tasks were the focus of this topic discussion

- Tasks 1395, 1159, 1161 and 1163 (see text below) within Action II.A.1 (Assess all existing, publicly held land for its suitability for agriculture and make more of it available for agriculture.)
- Task 1237 within Action II.C.2 (Explore options to expand and strengthen equity and diversity criteria for applications for agricultural use of public land, and prioritize access for historically underserved, new, aspiring, and low-income farmers.)

The following are the priorities and capacities of most participants over the four meetings.

- The majority of participants assigned higher priority to tasks 1395 and 1159
- Tasks 1161, 1163 and 1237 appear to be more medium priority for participants
- There was potential capacity to lead and to assist for all five tasks.
- Alignment of high priority and more capacity to get involved for tasks 1395 and 1237 indicate they be ready to start soon, if they have not already.



Comments and questions

General

- Fewer studies, more action
- Many of these tasks can be led by local food policy councils, but funding will likely be an issue. Funding for the Local Food Policy Grant program would build capacity for FPCs to help with this work!

- Wrapping up a 2-year planning project with findings/resources aligned with some of these questions. Looking forward to following up after connecting with the coalition. NSFFC
- Have to navigate "best land use" discussion - very sensitive!
- Whole farms
- Central Mass RPC is doing research in Worcester about municipal land for urban ag
- State level partner help with working with schools. Schools are under-resourced. Denver urban gardens
- Connections to work at prisons with food systems, including in Plymouth County

1395 - Educate city and town decision-makers about the benefits of hyper local food production and its connection with climate change and food access. Include information about tools to encourage it, including community gardens and land licensing.

- Include conservation with climate change and food access.
- 1395 and 1161 should be done in parallel

1151 - Provide TA technical assistance to municipalities to identify all municipally owned land, including parks, schools, and open land, that is suitable for food production

- No specific comments

1161 - Explore case studies to share best practices for food production assessment/ planning.

- Include non-Boston region examples. Springfield officials don't listen well to Boston models.
- 1395 and 1161 should be done in parallel
- What does food production assessment entail?
- There might be a good amount of resources for 1161 already.
- Limitation that this just focuses on one element (food production)?
- Cambridge, Somerville and Boston case studies to share.
- Regional Planning Agencies could be helpful to assist on this task

1163 - Create a pilot to test and refine how to roll out food production assessment/ planning in urban environments.

- Lots of organizations are doing this – share what's being done and build their capacity
- Limitation that this just focuses on one element (food production)?
- Regional Planning Agencies could be helpful to assist on this task

1237 - Engage with local organizations to determine the farmland needs of a community and when conducting outreach and publicizing availability of farmland.

- Urban Ag Program
- Justice-involved. Improve gleening state-wide.
- neighborhood/ community
- Facilitating a positive relationship between a community and new/ existing farmers so that they can support each other is important. Not sure if that is connected to this item
- Engage with local organizations as the experts.

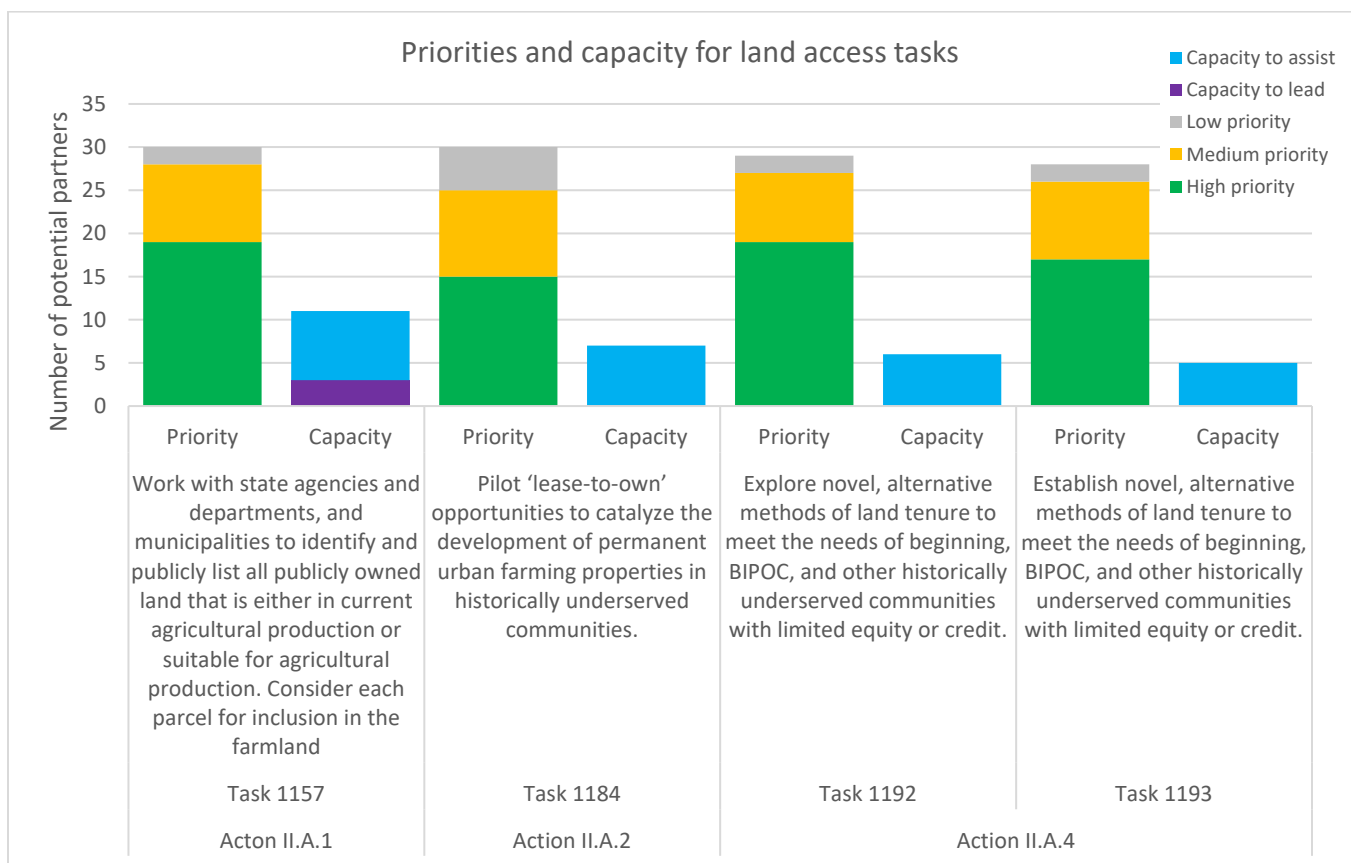
Land access

The following tasks were the focus of this topic discussion

- Task 1157 (see text below) within Action II.A.1 (Assess all existing, publicly held land for its suitability for agriculture and make more of it available for agriculture.)
- Task 1187 within Action II.A.2 (Strengthen the state land licensing program.)
- Tasks 1192 and 1293 within Action II.A.4 (Increase the amount of privately leased farmland, coupled with agreements designed to meet the needs of farmers.)

The following are the priorities and capacities of most participants over the four meetings.

- While over half of the participants indicated each task was high priority, there were also a notable number of participants who assigned medium priority.
- All tasks had potential partners with capacity to assist
- Only 1157 had potential partners who may have the capacity to lead that task.



Comments and questions

General

- REC is working with small BIPOC farmers in Worcester currently who do not own land/have informal land use agreements. We would love to be able to support them to have more protected long term land
- Plymouth County engage in an MVP grant funded assessment with Marion Institute and KARAT (Open source planning tool)
- Difference between multi-use designation and zoned for farming.
- Promote existing models, both in Massachusetts and other states.
- Access for cultural crops, migrant and refugee.
- Language access is important.

- Culturally sovereign food systems.
- Build generational wealth.
- Production of cultural crops is about serving immigrants and others
- How do we use public land for its best use? Work with other state agencies related to other potential uses – eg EOHLIC and housing
- Challenge of gentrification should be considered
- Think creatively – eg roof top gardens, hydroponics, raised beds, container gardens and other growing methods
- Could green building regulations be used to encourage solar and/or green roofs?
- Issue of sale of products on public land.
- Easier to stay on land if you have a strong business
- Importance of SNAP, HIP and local food purchases
- Connect rural farmlands to urban markets
- Access to markets should be equitable.

1157 - Work with state agencies and departments, and municipalities to identify and publicly list all publicly owned land that is either in current agricultural production or suitable for agricultural production. Consider each parcel for inclusion in the farmland licensing program.

- Include condition and infrastructure
- Include water access – wells, water costs, etc.
- Consider potential soil contamination
- Consider in terms of viability.
- Identifying “land suitable for urban ag” isn’t always a great idea as that that is also good for competing land uses such as housing – so hesitant to advertise suitable for ag
- Trustees identifying land for ag and housing together. Working with developers and municipalities on this. Mixed parcels with housing and urban gardens either to support the residents or even better also the surrounding neighborhood.
- Community Gardens.

1184 - Pilot ‘lease-to-own’ opportunities to catalyze the development of permanent urban farming properties in historically underserved communities.

- Should this be “steward-to-own”?
- Support and promote existing models that are working in your region.
- Include immigrants and refugees? cultural crop?
- Maine Farmland Trust example.

1192 - Explore novel, alternative methods of land tenure to meet the needs of beginning, BIPOC, and other historically underserved communities with limited equity or credit.

- Which novel land tenure models have been implemented with considerable success in MA or elsewhere?
- Rematriate land to indigenous people
- Promote existing novel, alternative methods of land tenure as new task?

1193 - Establish novel, alternative methods of land tenure to meet the needs of beginning, BIPOC, and other historically underserved communities with limited equity or credit.

- No comments, although many from 1192 also apply for this task

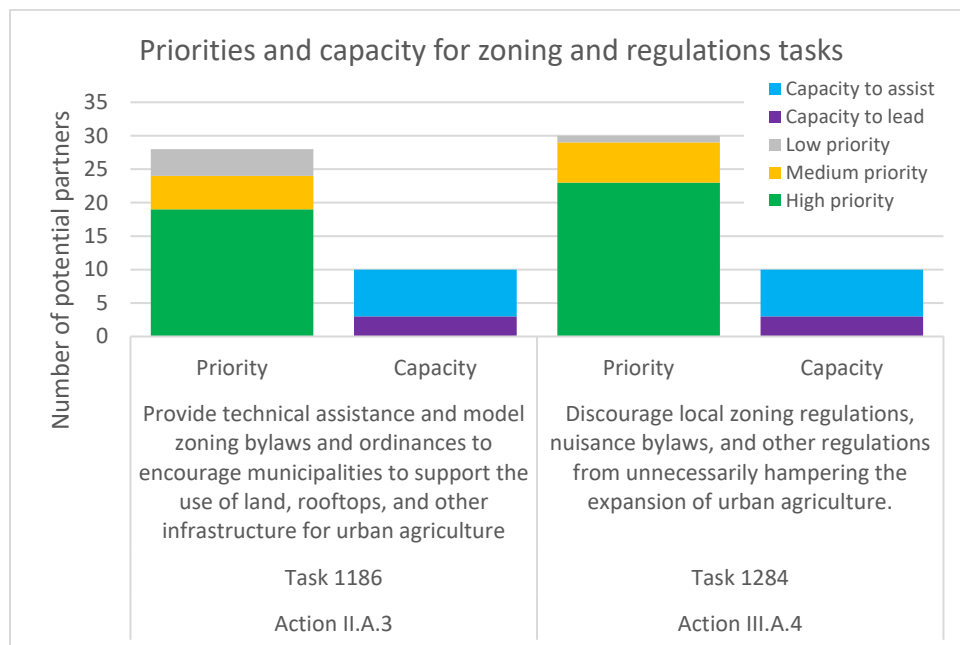
Zoning and Regulations

The following tasks were the focus of this topic discussion

- Task 1186 (see text below) in Action II.A.3 (Create preferential zoning and ordinances to support urban ag.)
- Task 1284 in Action III.A.4 (Explore opportunities to modify local taxation, policy and regulations to support farming.)

The following are the priorities and capacities of most participants over the four meetings.

- Both tasks were high priorities for most participants
- Both tasks had potential partners with capacity to lead and assist with implementation
- Alignment of high priority and capacity to get involved indicate that both tasks may be ready to start soon, if they have not already.



Comments and questions

General

- The usefulness of zoning to encourage urban ag is limited and varies a lot - seems extremely complicated to approach on state level. This could be a big task with limited rewards. Instead it could be more effective to focus on community engagement and education by urban ag groups.
- Zoning doesn't need to be a big barrier if urban ag ordinance that has some good land use provisions (eg Worcester)
- Remember to include lack of knowledge and barriers thrown up by building departments as relates to urban ag structures and the permits they need. Educate building depts and planning depts. Consider state building regs.
- What kind of agriculture and pesticide use on public land?
- Incentivizing ag that is truly healthy eg no chemicals, adjacency to chemicalized spaces and no monocropping
- Urban Ag 101
- Right to Farm communities also have challenges

- Need to balance enabling urban ag without using it to limit housing development. Can be used as a excuse
- Where is there overlap between Open Space and Recreation Plans (OSRPs) and the Farmland Action Plan?
- Importance of educating municipal leadership – city planners encountered a lot of resistance from leaders after 2015 and 2017 symposiums that focused on urban ag for city planners. Therefore need to do several things at the same time.
- Transparency and education for growers to be advocates
- Education for boards of health and ag comms needed

1186 - Provide technical assistance and model zoning bylaws and ordinances to encourage municipalities to support the use of land, rooftops, and other infrastructure for urban agriculture

- Funding to achieve this
- Zoning workshop, bylaws.
- Varies by municipal "Article 89". Article 89 from Boston could be used as a model.

1284 - Discourage local zoning regulations, nuisance bylaws, and other regulations from unnecessarily hampering the expansion of urban agriculture.

- Could be especially helpful for the expansion/ development/ establishment of urban farms, who often face resistance from other neighborhood groups and have to use different strategies/ face different struggles than traditional farmers.
- Support Regional Planning Agencies to work with municipalities

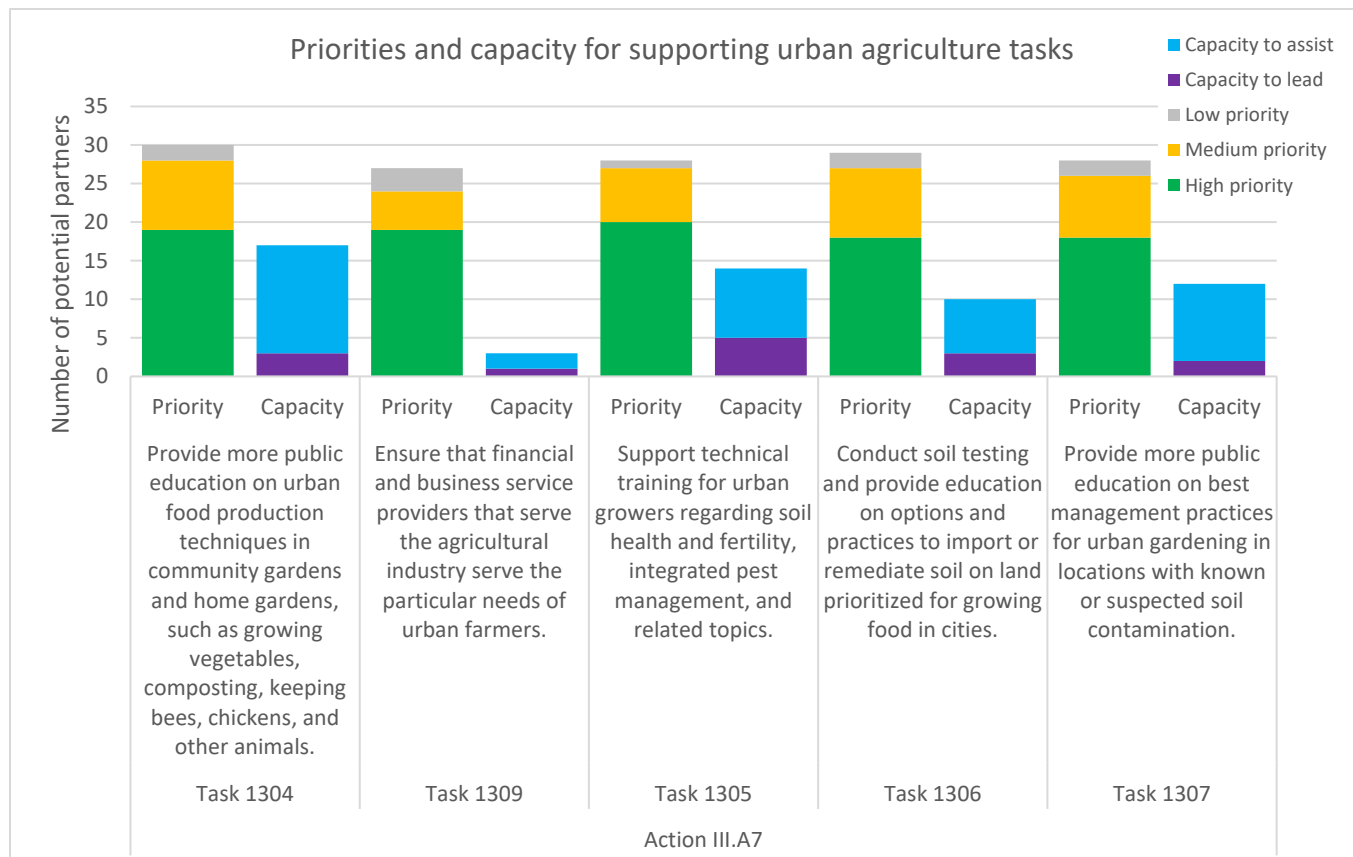
Support Urban Agriculture

The following tasks were the focus of this topic discussion

- Tasks 1304, 1309, 1305, 1306 and 1307 (see text below) in Action III.A.7 (Support Urban Agriculture.)

The following are the priorities and capacities of most participants over the four meetings.

- All five tasks have the majority of participants indicating they are a high priority
- All tasks have potential partners with capacity to lead and assist
- Alignment of high priority and capacity to get involved indicate that tasks 1304, 1305, 1306 and 1307 may be ready to start soon, if they have not already.



Comments and questions

General

- Soil testing and remediation technical services are important but would like to see language included around resources to cover those costs- long term funding for soil tests would be huge!
- New - Provide resources and funds for remediation
- Fund FLI studies.
- Demonstration gardens to education farmers on alternative growing (aqua/hydro), 12 month growing system and yield increase.
- Brownfields and authorized use limitation sites – what about using them? May not be for ag production, but for associated land use such as parking area. Is there a role for brownfields redevelopment funds?
- Broaden the list of public benefits of urban ag
- Need to balance soil testing and remediation – currently good at testing but not at remediation.
- Need to consider Board of Health regulations alongside urban ag regulations.

1304 - Provide more public education on urban food production techniques in community gardens and home gardens, such as growing vegetables, composting, keeping bees, chickens, and other animals.

- Some confusion over what this task intends. Refine the language?
- Provide funding for doing more public education. We need funding to support existing public education not MDAR doing it.
- If 1304 is more about urban food production for advocacy, I would move to high priority.
- Technical assistance and advocacy.
- Utilize "free" education through community colleges.
- Link to identify urban farm sites.
- Community gardens as a starting point for urban agriculture so an important foundation.
- Chicken coop and bee keeping issues in some cities
- Move chickens to separate task – a distraction from getting remainder of food production advanced

1309 - Ensure that financial and business service providers that serve the agricultural industry serve the particular needs of urban farmers.

- Would be especially helpful for urban farmers, whose needs are very specific compared to large rural farms.

1305 - Support technical training for urban growers regarding soil health and fertility, integrated pest management, and related topics.

- Would be especially helpful for urban farmers, whose needs are very specific compared to large rural farms.

1306 - Conduct soil testing and provide education on options and practices to import or remediate soil on land prioritized for growing food in cities.

- need money for remediation
- should be connected to land access piece

1307 - Provide more public education on best management practices for urban gardening in locations with known or suspected soil contamination.

- Support our organizations to provide that education.
- Need to be able to afford remediation.
- Be more explicit about remediating land. Explore using brownfields

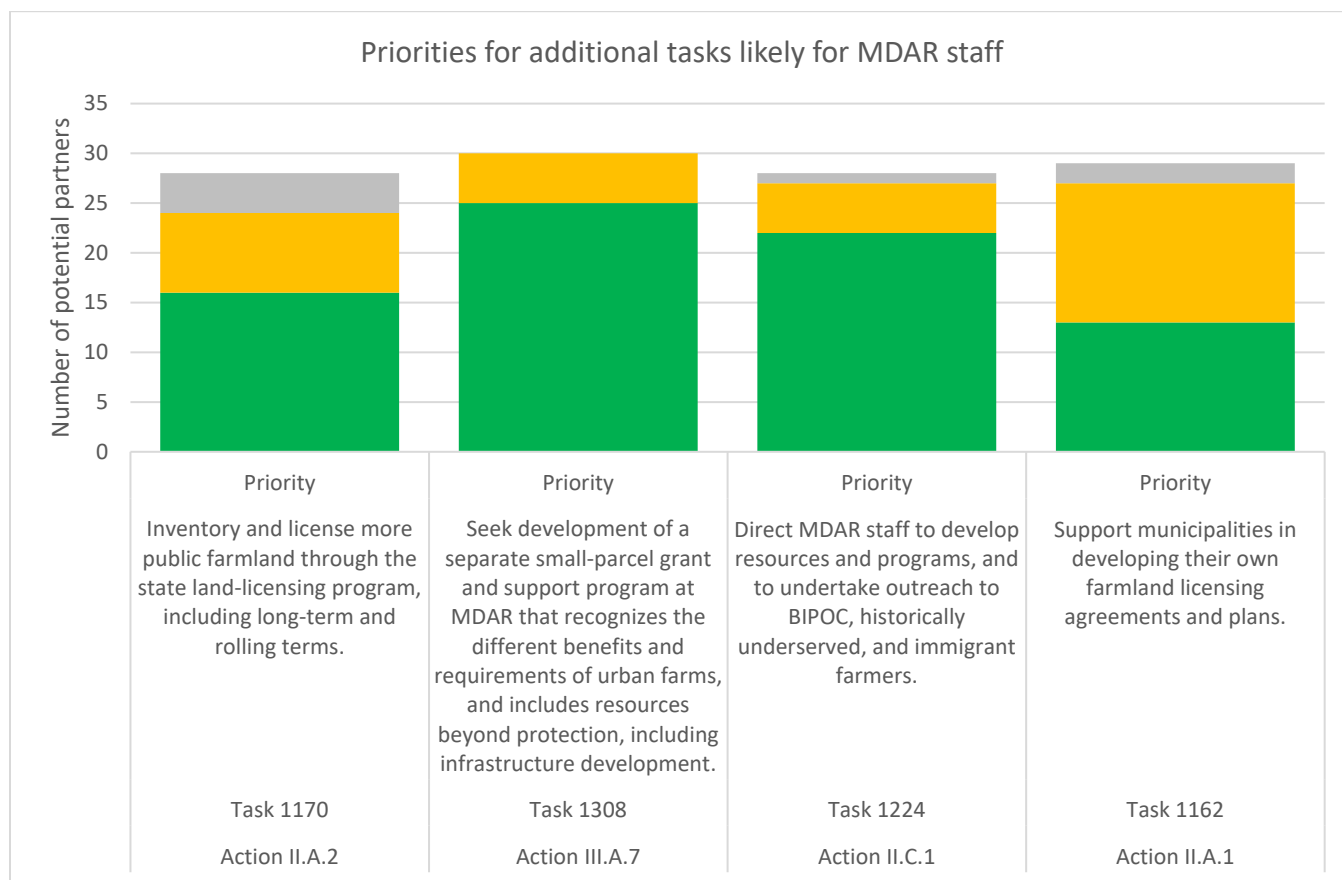
Additional tasks for MDAR staff

The following tasks were the focus of this topic discussion

- Task 1170 (see text below) in Action II.A.2 (Strengthen the state land licensing program.)
- Task 1308 in Action III.A.7 (Support Urban Agriculture.)
- Task 1224 in Action II.C.1 (Ensure that investments, programs, and policies promote equity for farmers from historically underserved communities.)
- Task 1162 in Action II.A.1 (Assess all existing, publicly held land for its suitability for agriculture and make more of it available for agriculture.)

The following are the priorities of most participants over the four meetings.

- Participants were not asked about capacity since these tasks primarily focus on work that may be led by MDAR staff)
- Tasks 1170 and 1308 and 1224 have higher priority for participants.
- Task 1162 has a more mixed response with more medium priority alongside high priorities.



Comments and questions

General

- Call out the importance of supply chain - eg distribution and aggregated storage. Develop urban food hubs. Flexible procurement contracts.
- Happy to share our licensing processes and documents
- How does MDAR define urban ag?
- How much state land is in urban areas?

1170 - Inventory and license more public farmland through the state land-licensing program, including long-term and rolling terms.

- No comments

1308 - Seek development of a separate small-parcel grant and support program at MDAR that recognizes the different benefits and requirements of urban farms, and includes resources beyond protection, including infrastructure development.

- How does this differ from existing urban ag program?

1224 - Direct MDAR staff to develop resources and programs, and to undertake outreach to BIPOC, historically underserved, and immigrant farmers.

- Increase capacity of partners to apply for applications outside MDAR

1162 - Support municipalities in developing their own farmland licensing agreements and plans.

- No comments

Is there anything else partners should consider? Including other questions and comments

The following questions were asked of participants towards the end of the meeting:

- *Is there anything else partners should consider?*
- *How can partners take the plan and translate the Plan into reality, specifically for urban ag?*
- *What are some actionable next steps that make sense to move forward the tasks identified within the Plan which are important to urban ag?*

The following is a summary of answers to those questions as well as other questions and comments that arose during the meeting.

Next steps – Connecting, building capacity and advocacy

- Bring others to the table
- Get word to the right people. Spread the word to our connections. Real meaningful involvement
- Look for ways to connect
- Urban ag tours next summer
- Importance of advocacy and organizing is really important. Need group to come together not one person complaining. Public entities – city and state – can't do it.
- Engage in local, state and federal advocacy for policy, systems and environmental change, especially around supporting BIPOC cultural crop production and small-scale diversified and urban agriculture.
- Connect to urban ag based legislative block and food caucus
- Elevating urban partner voices to NRCS, including opportunity with new Urban County Committee.
- Connect to existing groups – eg MA Food System Collaborative, Urban Ag Policy Council, Urban Ag Coalition, NRCS Quarterly Urban Agriculture State Technical Subcommittee, Food Policy Council, etc.
- Raise community to take leadership roles. Expand capacity. Build from strengths. Not top down.
- Investment in developing new leaders and build from community strengths
- Build relationships to identify growers in EJ neighborhoods
- Connect with other multi-farm coops
- Conversations with schools

Next steps – Other

- Transition community group for community gardens to NPO with staff.
- Identify schools currently or interest in growing & composting
- Review Farmland of Local Importance soils
- Identify property at risk for loss
- Identify mentors for building urban ag plan
- Better understand how urban ag fits into master planning and similar processes
- Encourage local Food Policy Councils to incorporate into their action plans next year?
- Follow progress of North Shore mapping exercise by Essex Greenbelt
- Get region talking about urban ag, especially connect to food access program.
- Zoning workshop series would be helpful

Implementing tasks

- How is MDAR reaching out to implementers?
- Who is already doing this work and how can MDAR and partners compliment it?
- Need an organization associated with urban ag to bring people together. How do we operationalize support for these tasks?
- Create 101s related to the plan and leverage existing groups. Raise urban ag voices, including at MDAR
- Who's the lead, who has expertise seems like a good approach

- Get more people in historically disadvantaged community involved.
- Many urban ag groups are in survival mode and don't have the capacity to participate. Getting involved takes time
- We should consider input roles and supporting efforts that we have limitations. It would be great to chat about that when committees are developed
- All of this is building from the strengths of the community. Community activation and power shifting.
- Work within a network of multi-sector partnerships to expand capacities and organizational reach and bring additional resources to our communities.
- Help community to rise up to leadership role and expand capacity of community involvement in this plan.
- What are the low hanging fruit to get mobilized?
- How can we create compelling story telling?

Funding for partners and implementation

- Need funding for implementation
- Are there funding needs that could be filled by trust-based endowment – eg to help with staffing and operations
- Is there funding to stipend/find lead organizers on various tasks?
- Leverage a combination of state, federal, foundation, and donor funds to establish programs and social investments

Resources for farmers

- Just as public school teachers get health insurance and retirement plans from the city/ state, farmers should be afforded the same benefits.
- A fund for training new farmers on farms needs to be made for salaries and for conferences.
- Need help for applying for non-MDAR grants

Workforce development

- How do we incentivize new farmers?
- How can we support interns and training?

Food distribution

- Incentivize large businesses like Target, Walmart and Costco to drive customers to farmers markets.
- Incentivize municipalities to drive customers to farmers markets. SNAP/ HIP should only be allowed to be utilized at farmers markets and farm stands.

Pursuing equity and justice. Supporting historically underserved farmers

- Many BIPOC don't identify as BIPOC.
- Systemic anti-blackness
- Immigrants are not BIPOC
- Urban ag led by white or latinx staff/ advisors
- MDAR has the Right of First Refusal for land. MDAR should think about selling land back to BIPOC farmers.
- Complexities about not being white are complex. Don't be afraid.
- Urban ag led by white or latinx staff/ advisors
- Land back and repatriation should be front and center. Justice based.
- Include repair and reparations framework. Lots of harm done by existing ownership structures. Ownership of land is influenced by racism, BIPOC have access blocked, systemic racism issues. Hope that these conversations will provide opportunities to provide access opportunities for BIPOC farmers.

- Must focus on land reparations, land-back, and repatriation or none of this work will be justice and sovereignty oriented.
- What about repatriation of land for ownership and stewardship by indigenous communities? Can this be part of the plan (example Maine Farm Trust recent land transfer to Penobscot community)
- How does a reparations framework inform this work?

Community Preservation Act (CPA)

- CPA has just one bucket for "open space/ recreation". Could a separate bucket be added for urban ag? Okay with some public access, but not 24/7
- Legislative change to add or increase use.
- Could CPA funds to be used for funding for small farmer hoop houses, adding water to property and other infrastructure costs?

Additional partners to involve

- Include community colleges
- Involve Stockbridge School of Ag as a land grant school potentially producing farmers

Legislation and regulations

- Chapter 61A regulates taxation for farms over 5 acres. There is no regulation for farms under 5 acres. All farms need relief on taxation.
- Legislature could incentivize municipality to do things

Types of agriculture

- Need to focus on diversified, chemical-free farms and growing. Incentivize this.

Housing

- APR needs to be adjusted to allow for housing needs of farmers! No farm home, no farm. People can't afford to buy a house here plus a farm.

Protecting land

- How do we diversify who ensures that land is held in ag in perpetuity? Explore transferring land to a person or an entity to keep it permanently ag land but not as an APR, but as an agreement of some sort to keep it ag in perpetuity. There could be a future crisis if all the land is held by government and then there are government issues which result in it being given away.

Educating service providers

- Education of service providers on urban ag is intersectional and complicated

Other

- What is happening with Special Commission on Agriculture in the 21st Century?
- Addition for hexagons on opening slide on "Why farms/urban ag?" - reconnect people to culture and land.
- Need to reconnect people to land
- Need systemic perspective as the lens for MDAR
- Intersection between plans – what's covered by one and not another?
- What is viability? It means different things to different people
- Need to go beyond the fiscal bottom line. Include cultural competency.