

Minutes: MA Food Policy Council meeting

March 12, 2026

9:30 – 11:30 (remote)

In attendance:

- Jessica del Rosario, DPH
- Dave Dumaresq, Farmer
- Joshua Tavares, Legislative Director, office of Senator Fattman
- Matthew Connolly, Legislative Director, office of Senator Fernandes
- Director Anne Gobi, EOHED
- Bruce Hopper, MassDEP designee
- Rob Leshin, DESE
- Commissioner Randle, MDAR
- Caro Roszell, Healthy Soils
- Kerry Shea, Legislative Aide, Representative Kane
- Torry Katsiroubas Stamm, Distribution
- John Waite, Food Processing
- Phoebe Walker, Public Health
- Shelly Yarnie, DTA designee
- Ayn Yeagle, Community Health

Not in attendance: Representative Donahue (Principle for the Day in Worcester), Amanda Kinchla, Margaret Moulton

The meeting was called to order at 9:32 AM by Commissioner Randle.

A motion to accept the minutes was made by Phoebe Walker, seconded by Shelly Yarnie and passed by voice vote: Shelly Yarnie, Jessica del Rosario, Joshua Tavares, Bruce Hopper (abstain), Rob Leshin, Commissioner Randle, Caro Roszell, Kerry Shea, Torry Katsiroubas Stamm, John Waite, Phoebe Walker, Ayn Yeagle.

This year's view from Washington, food system challenges & opportunities. Congressman James McGovern.

These are challenging times. Local food is under attack. Food for schools and food purchase programs are supported, but not statewide local food systems. SNAP cuts are projected at \$200B in the reconciliation bill, thousands of people will lose benefits. The farm bill so far is not addressing these issues (with support from seven democrats). There is nothing to support New England family farms. The bill acts as a pesticide shield to protect Monsanto, a result of the strong chemical lobby funding. There are no new investments in farmers or to help people afford food. Food banks and food pantries are at capacity.

It's important to derail this bill, or we'll be locked in for five years. There might be a better chance of making changes next year. When bad things happen such as SNAP cuts and they don't get addressed for a while, it gets accepted as the new reality. The state's Governor's Antihunger Task Force to address food access and address federal cuts is impressive, but the state can't make up for all the lost federal

funds. Private industry needs to be engaged. Food is Medicine is getting traction and has bipartisan support. There are many schools in Massachusetts that don't have kitchens – an issue all over the country. There is a federal bill to increase reimbursement rates for school meals. Republicans are sympathetic but are afraid to co-sponsor the legislation. It's a chance to think creatively about how to sell these programs, for example, it's more costly not to fund them. We hope to get to the point where the federal government has the wind at our back. An immediate concern is if the farm bill goes through.

Director Gobi: You have broad shoulders that keep getting broader with all the geopolitical events and effects on the food system. Good and bad times don't last forever, so we need to be prepared. You're a congressman for ALL of Massachusetts. Congressman McGovern: Some of our advocacy groups can push back harder. Regarding food systems and food security, we're all in this together. The seven democrats who supported the farm bill are also dealing with worse food security and should push back harder. It's disappointing that chemical companies now have liability protection, due to their lobby.

Rob Leshin: At the SNA annual legislative action conference, attendees from diverse political backgrounds had similar perspectives, especially to support legislation to increase reimbursement rates for school meals. There is agreement about the necessity for funding to connect farmers to schools that will help to implement the new dietary guidelines. Both sides of the aisle had agreement.

Congressman McGovern: We can't do this work without additional support to schools. In the short term, our lobbying approaches need to be tougher. I'm tired of people saying we're with you but not acting. We're losing ground. If we can get bipartisan support, we're off to the races.

Q: What can we do about the farm bill? A: Look at which democrats voted with the republicans and see who you know who might have influence. There is more sympathy for food system causes in the Senate than in the House. This administration is not allowing amendments to bills. SNAP cuts, for example, can't be fixed on the House floor. The farm bill needs to be outright defeated with confidence that the political realities will change next year and be more favorable. Comment: There is an opportunity around ultra processed food. It's important to be careful who is on the committee to decide which foods are on the list. Ultra processed food definitions should be based on accurate information. Q: What can we do to support small farms? There is little support beyond the state. A: There are no investments in small and medium sized farms in the farm bill. The Farm to School program is gone. Moderate republicans and democrats voted for \$200B in reductions. Hunger has increased. SNAP recipients have work requirements which are baffling. People don't fit nicely into categories. Requirements may not sound terrible but can mean that many recipients lose access to benefits. On the Ag Committee, people don't have a clue about the challenges that individuals face. The bill also shows why we need campaign finance reform. The impacts of groups that made generous contributions are reflected in the bill. It's time to start calling people out. There should be a price to pay for those who voted for the bill. Massachusetts has a bipartisan group who work together which is not true in other states. If we can hold everything harmless this year, next year we should be able to get some concessions. Massachusetts has been key in making sure that we're on the right side of these issues. Things are not hopeless.

Commissioner Randle shared that there is a lot to be hopeful of and with our key partners, we've shown over the last year what MA stands for. Antihunger task force recommendations are being implemented.

We are digging in deeper and pushing back. There is a consensus around farms and our local food system and how we can leverage those talking points to make meaningful change. Congressman McGovern commented that MAHA staff are reaching out. They feel that they haven't been represented. Massachusetts programs and farms are setting examples for the rest of the country. The challenge is to be able to scale the programs. He is open to all ideas and suggestions. He thanked everyone.

MA Legislative Food System Caucus: Kerry Shea, office of Representative Kane. She noted appreciation for Representative Blais' past work and now celebrates her move to UMASS Amherst. Representative Norm Earle is a farmer from Bristol who has joined the Caucus. Priorities for FY 27 include \$29.7M for school, \$4.4M for school lunch, funding for MDAR at \$10.3M, \$15.5M for nutrition services and a few others that are being watched closely. The supplemental budget includes farm tax credits of \$5,000 for donation and a few other food system items. There was strong state level advocacy at the LFPA briefing held on March 5. It was great to be a part of Ag Day. Please join the Caucus and the Collaborative on March 26, to discuss the importance of this bill and FY27 legislative priorities. Please share any budget priorities with the MA Food System Caucus.

MA Food System Collaborative: Becca Miller, Legislative Director.

Becca thanked everyone for their food system work. At Agriculture Day at the State House, the speeches were important and impactful. It was nice to see Kat Chang Laznicka, Reed Farm, Sunderland, be recognized with an award for her work as a poultry farmer. Natalie Bias's work over the past seven years has been important. Everyone looks forward to her strong advocacy for UMASS moving forward as associate vice chancellor for government relations. The Collaborative's Local Food Policy Summit had 50 participants from across the state. On the farms, snow has made it difficult for farm work in greenhouses. The Local Food Purchase Assistance Program (LFPA) working group day was impactful with comments from food system advocates and legislators. HIP lobby day is March 26. Dave Dumaresq, farmer and Council member, will be speaking and will advocate for HIP funding, LFPA grant funding and a farmer tax credit. The Environmental Bond Bill will be reviewed later this month. Q: How can the Council's Advisory Committee support additional advocacy? A: There are several priorities including the Ag Omnibus Bill and budget items, and the Environmental Bond Bill that can be supported.

Program

Milestones and metrics: local food in Massachusetts school's deep dive. Simca Horwitz, Co-director, Massachusetts Farm to School.

Simca is honored to cover this work and appreciates the working relationships with DESE and MDAR to support schools, farms, and fisheries across the state. School meals are critical but unfortunately, funding for the Massachusetts Farm to School program has been cut. DESE has new tracking software to tell the story of the local food purchasing and metrics. It's in testing with 55 schools, for more and local food purchases. Simca shared success stories and program metrics. There is legislation to codify this work, modeled on Northeast Food for Schools. Learn more about the MA Food for MA Kids Coalition: www.mafoodformakids.org Plan to support two relevant state legislative initiatives.

View MA Fresh grants interactive map at: <https://www.massfarmtoschool.org/mafresh-grant/>

Read more about all grantees: <https://www.massfarmtoschool.org/mafresh-grant>

NFS Interactive map at: www.massfarmtoschool.org/nfs-map

NFS Full Report: <https://www.massfarmtoschool.org/nfs-full-report/>

Learn more about the Northeast Food for Schools Challenge: <https://www.northeastfoodforschools.org/>

Rob Leshin thanked Simca, Lisa, Abby, and the DESE team. When he started at DESE 17 years ago, farm to school was a niche program. Now it's a critical and standard offering. Massachusetts is well positioned with partnerships and infrastructure to support the program, and a strong ROI that cycles back into local economies and farms. Q: Beyond funding, what can we do? Simca: Initially we had to convince ourselves that local sourcing was important. Now the focus is operationalizing the process. Schools see higher participation when families and students know that the offerings are local. We need to support current staffing, including chef-led culinary training to use local ingredients.

The Massachusetts 250 Farm to School campaign aims to highlight how Massachusetts schools, colleges, universities, and early education programs involve the community, incorporate Massachusetts grown and produced foods in school meals, integrate food and agriculture into curriculum, provide hand-on learning experiences, and build connections between local farmers, schools and community partners. More information is [here](#) with a link to submit a project.

Governor's Anti-Hunger Task Force Report: review of recommendations and engagement opportunities: Ashley Randle, MDAR Commissioner.

There were five listening sessions across the state. There will be a farmer information session in April regarding crop planning for the food bank systems. A top recommendation was the farmer pact food donation legislation, filed by Comerford and Kane. The legislation supports farmers in what they are already doing already, with a tax credit up to \$5,000 and funding for "Hunters Share the Harvest program." There is deer pressure in the state. Hunters have donated over 95,000 venison meals. Funds are being investigated to support more processing. "Share the Catch" is in the recommendations with a commitment from the Greater Boston Food Bank to source local seafood in the emergency feeding network. This was a collaborative process. When the final report is released, the Council can dig into implementing the recommendations of the report. The Governor's Anti-Hunger Task Force will reconvene on a regular basis. The recommendations are about partnership and collaborations. The FSIG program was born from the Task Force and continues to be an important program. Now that we're seeing cuts to programs, we need to think how about funding sources and we can maintain impact. Rob Leshin commented that many recommendations support programs that are already in place. There are systems components about making data available including where the child nutrition programs are located and other metrics. DESE has been implementing some of these programs already.

Committee updates: Ayn Yeagle will work with the Advisory Committee to support current legislative issues and welcomes the Council to also reach out for their needs.

Council member updates

John Waite: The Western MA Food Processing center is 25 years old, started in 2001 with MDAR funding. Over the years, some 800 businesses have used the Center. Council members will be invited to a celebration at the end of June.

Caro Roszell: Last month, EEA accepted bids for a healthy soil coordinator. Her team looks forward to working with the coordinator to advance healthy soils practices across the state, the Healthy Soils Initiative and the MA Food Policy Council.

Shelly Yarnie: HIP usage is back on track after restoration of incentive levels. DTA is assessing opening additional HIP vendor applications. DAT is gathering HIP messaging options to build awareness/participation in the program.

Ayn Yeagle shared that LFPA lobby day is followed by legislator meetings with expectations for broad support. Additional legislative support is welcome.

Commissioner Randle thanked legislators and their staff for attending the Council's annual meeting in January.

Announcements

May 8, 2026, MA Food Policy Council meeting (remote) 9:30 – 11:30

Public Comment

Liz O'Gilvie thanked DTA for their support and work.

Adjournment

A vote to adjourn the meeting was made at 11:16 AM by Bruce Hopper, seconded by John Waite and passed by voice vote: Shelly Yarnie, Jessica del Rosario, Dave Dumaresq, Joshua Tavares, Director Gobi, Bruce Hopper, Rob Leshin, Commissioner Randle, Caro Roszell, Kerry Shea, Torry Katsiroubas Stamm, John Waite, and Ayn Yeagle.

This meeting was held remotely via teams in accordance with an Act Relative to Extending Certain State of Emergency Accommodations ("Act"), signed on July 16, 2022, and extended pertaining to the Open Meeting Law to June 30, 2027.

73 in attendance