

# THE CASE FOR A MASSACHUSETTS FOOD POLICY COUNCIL



## The Food System

Over four million people live in Massachusetts, and every day each of us depends on a complex food system of farmers, processors, distributors and retailers to bring us the food we eat. For a number of reasons—from combating global warming and reducing food miles to seeking safer, fresher and more nutritious food—consumers in the Commonwealth are turning to locally-grown foods. We see it in the growing number of farmers markets and farm stands, in the oversubscribed Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms, and on the menus of restaurants and school cafeterias. And we see it in the communities around us—from urban garden plots and community farms to new and expanding farm businesses raising an increasingly diverse array of livestock and conventional and organic crops.

Yet in Massachusetts, as elsewhere, our food system faces challenges. The Commonwealth continues to lose its most productive farmland, and the average age of its farmers continues to climb. Rising farm input costs are reducing farm profits. The laws affecting food, farms, and agricultural processing and marketing are implemented by multiple federal, state and local boards and agencies, creating a complex web of regulatory hurdles for large and small farms alike. And too many of the Commonwealth's citizens are food insecure, lacking access to nutritional foods at affordable prices which contributes to high rates of obesity and costly chronic diseases like diabetes.

## Why a Food Policy Council?

Food Policy Councils are a growing trend in cities and states across the country. A statewide Food Policy Council in Massachusetts could improve coordination among the many state agencies that regulate aspects of the Commonwealth's food system, and find new ways to expand production, consumption and access to locally-grown foods. Indeed, a recent Center for Disease Control report recognizes the vital role Food Policy Councils can play in promoting environment and policy change initiatives for health eating. A council would bring together stakeholders across the *whole range* of the food system to recommend ways to improve the state's food system and protect the land on which our food is grown. Among the activities that Food Policy Councils elsewhere are engaged:

- Exploring ways to increase school purchases of locally-grown, nutritious foods;
- Developing strategies to increase livestock slaughter and processing capacity to expand the availability of locally-grown meats;
- Expanding farmers market nutrition programs, so people of all ages and income levels can have access to fresh, nutritious foods;
- Enhancing the visibility of farm products by promoting agri-tourism and other on-farm activities;
- Promoting urban and backyard gardens for the purpose of improving the health of citizens, making use of idle urban land, and lowering food costs.

## House Bill 4255: An Act to Establish a Massachusetts Food Policy Council

House Bill 4255 would establish a 15-member statewide food policy council to advance four food system goals: to increase production, sales and consumption of Massachusetts-grown foods; to develop and promote programs that bring healthy local foods to Massachusetts residents and increase access in communities with disproportionate burdens of obesity and chronic diseases; to protect the land and water resources needed for sustained local food production; and to train, retain and recruit farmers and provide for the continued economic viability of local food production, processing and distribution.

The Council would meet at least four times a year and develop an annual report with recommendations and progress made on the four goals. The Council may:

- Solicit public input through public hearings or informational sessions, invite additional stakeholder participation, and conduct research and analysis as needed
- Propose changes to state or federal programs or regulations, or suggest new programs, policies or initiatives
- Recommend additional investments needed to reinvigorate the state's food system
- Explore potential public-private partnerships to catalyze action on the goals

### Organizations that Support House Bill 4255 Include:

American Farmland Trust

Berkshire Grown

Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program

Boston Public Health Commission

Cape Cod Cranberry Growers' Association

Citizens for Adequate Housing

Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture

Community Servings

Environmental League of Massachusetts

Essex County Buy Local Program

Federation of Massachusetts Farmers' Markets

Food Bank of Western Massachusetts

Gardening through Refugee Organizations Project

Greater Boston Food Bank

Harvard Vanguard Medical Associates

Hill Nutrition Consulting, LLC

Holyoke Food & Fitness Policy Council

Marion Board of Health

Mattapoissett Board of Health

Massachusetts Audubon Society



Massachusetts Dietetic Association

Massachusetts Farm Bureau Federation

Massachusetts Public Health Association

Needham Eat Well Be Fit Committee

New England Small Farm Institute

New Entry Sustainable Farming Project

Northeast Organic Farmers Association/Mass.

Nuestras Raices

Occupational Health Connections

Project Bread

Rachel's Table

Slow Food Massachusetts

South End/Lower Roxbury Open Space Land Trust

Southeastern Massachusetts Agricultural Partnership

The Food Project

Whitman Board of Health

Worcester County Food Bank

Worcester Advisory Food Policy Council

YMCA of Greater Boston

