

THE CASE FOR A MASSACHUSETTS FOOD POLICY COUNCIL

The Food System

Everyone eats. And each time we eat, we participate in and rely on the food system to bring us safe and nutritious food. Increasingly, Massachusetts consumers are looking to local sources for their food. Purchases from local farmers markets, farm stands and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms have increased dramatically. Schools and other institutions across the Commonwealth are changing their buying habits to meet growing demand for locally-grown products. And local food production is on the rise—from new garden plots and community gardens, to new and expanding farm businesses raising an increasingly diverse array of livestock and conventional and organic crops.

In Massachusetts, as elsewhere, the 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.

Why a Food Policy Council?

Everyone has a stake in the food system—from eaters to producers, processors to grocers, chefs to food banks, public health and anti-hunger groups to land trusts, local governments to state and federal agencies. Yet too often these stakeholders operate in their own spheres, with little coordination or collaboration.

Food policy councils are innovative collaborations that have recently emerged in cities and states across the country. Food policy councils provide a way to improve coordination among the many food system stakeholders. A state Food Policy Council is needed to:

- Bring together stakeholders across the *whole range* of the food system
- Look at food issues systemically, recognizing the inter-relatedness of the food system's parts
- Address emerging food issues that fall outside of traditional program or agency boundaries
- Provide the governor and legislature with an independent set of recommendations and ideas for improving the state's food system.

The Proposed Massachusetts Food Policy Council

Legislation to establish a Massachusetts Food Policy Council (House #776) has been introduced in 2009 by State Representatives Steve Kulik and Linda Forry. The bill would establish a statewide food policy council whose mission is to create a comprehensive food policy for the Commonwealth that enhances the economic viability of Massachusetts agriculture; promotes food security and the long-term sustainability of the Commonwealth's food supply; expands production and consumption of fresh, healthy, safe and locally-produced foods; and improves the nutritional health of the Commonwealth's citizens.

The Council would be tasked with the following:

- To review existing state programs, policies and regulations that affect the food system, and to recommend means for improved coordination or implementation of those programs or policies to achieve food policy objectives
- To review proposed legislation or regulations affecting the food system and make recommendations regarding the legislation or regulations

- To propose changes to current programs or policies or to propose new programs or policies to achieve food policy objectives
- To solicit public input through public hearings or informational sessions, invite additional stakeholder participation, and conduct research and analysis as needed.

The Massachusetts Food Policy Working Group

In January, 2007, a group of food, farm and conservation stakeholders met to identify ways to strengthen the Commonwealth's food system. From this meeting emerged a working group to educate policymakers about the benefits of establishing a statewide food policy council. As word of the initiative has spread, more groups have joined; there are now nearly 30 organizations represented. The working group is collaborating with Representatives Kulik and Forry to enact food policy council legislation in 2009. In addition, the working group is exploring the creation of a non-governmental entity to facilitate outreach, advocacy, and networking among local food policy councils.

Organizations participating in the Food Policy Working Group include:

American Farmland Trust, Northampton
 Berkshire Grown, Great Barrington
 Boston Collaborative for Food & Fitness, Boston
 Boston Public Health Commission, Boston
 Boston Public Market, Boston
 Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture, South Deerfield
 Essex County & Merrimack Buy Local, Gloucester
 Farm Aid, Somerville
 Federation of Massachusetts Farmers' Markets, Waltham
 Fertile Ground, Williamsburg
 The Food Project, Lincoln & Dorchester
 Food Bank Farm, Hadley
 Food Bank of Western Massachusetts
 Gaining Ground, Concord
 Holyoke Collaborative for Food & Fitness, Holyoke
 Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources
 Massachusetts Department of Public Health
 Massachusetts Public Health Association
 Nuestras Raices, Holyoke
 New England Small Farm Institute, Belchertown
 New Entry Sustainable Farming Project, Boston and Lowell
 Northeast Organic Farmers Association
 Regional Environmental Council, Worcester
 Slow Food Massachusetts
 South End/Lower Roxbury Open Space Land Trust, Boston
 Southeastern Massachusetts Agricultural Partnership, East Wareham
 Tufts University School of Nutrition
 Worcester County food Bank, Shrewsbury
 Worcester Food Policy Council, Worcester
 Worcester Local First & Common Pathways, Worcester