Friday, November 1, 2019

Joint Committee on Revenue
Massachusetts State House
24 Beacon St.
Rooms 109-# and 34
Boston, MA 02133

Re: H.2551 / S.1691 An Act to promote urban agriculture and horticulture

Dear Chairs Hinds and Cusack:

The Massachusetts Food System Collaborative is pleased to offer this written testimony in support of H.2551 and S.1691, An Act to promote urban agriculture and horticulture.

The Collaborative is a network of Massachusetts food system organizations, working to promote, monitor, and facilitate implementation of the Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan. The Plan was developed for and accepted by the Massachusetts Food Policy Council, a 17-member entity comprising state agency, legislative, and industry representatives, established by the Legislature and Governor to develop recommendations, including legislative and regulatory changes, to promote sustainability and equity in the Commonwealth’s food system.

The Plan represents the views of thousands of residents and farms, as well as hundreds of organizations and businesses. It emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach to food system policy, where issues of economic development, natural resources, equitable access to resources, and others are all taken into account when considering laws and regulations related to food.

The bill under consideration addresses the changing reality of agriculture in the Commonwealth, and the rapid growth of farming in urban areas. Doing so has economic implications, in that it creates jobs, and also provides greater access to fresh, healthy, local food to residents of cities. But the cost of land for farming in urban areas is often prohibitive, and this bill would provide a measure of relief.

The bill would allow cities with a population over 50,000 to adopt an optional property tax break for land used for commercial urban agriculture. The bill is zero-cost to the Commonwealth, giving cities the flexibility to choose if and when to adopt the tax break provision. Cities can also choose how much of a tax break to provide. The bill would also provide flexibility in regards to which parcels are eligible, maximizing opportunities for transforming abandoned urban land into productive, green space. The tax break could apply to an entire parcel or a portion of a parcel being used for urban agriculture, provided that the portion is under two acres. To qualify for the
tax break, parcels would have to produce at least $500 in sales from agricultural or horticultural products.

This bill was reported favorably from the Joint Committee on Revenue in the last session, and we urge you to do so again this year. The Collaborative is available to provide additional information and connections to practitioners and advocates who can offer further details, at the pleasure of the Committee.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

Sincerely,

Winton Pitcoff
Director