Thursday, May 9, 2019

Joint Committee on Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture
Massachusetts State House
24 Beacon Street
Rooms 513 & 473F
Boston MA 02133

RE:
  ● S.482: An Act regarding a farmland protection and viability action plan

Dear Chairwoman Gobi, Chairman Pignatelli, and members of the Committee:

The Massachusetts Food System Collaborative is pleased to offer this written testimony in support of the above-referenced bill.

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.

As the Commonwealth continues to acquire and hold farmland, the need for a comprehensive plan for those acquisitions and the use of those properties becomes more pressing. The MA Local Food Action Plan calls for the development of a formal statewide Farmland Action Plan to compile data on land use trends and use that data to guide state investments and policies related to farmland access, protection, and use, as supported by this bill.

This legislation to begin such a process has been proposed several times, and was vetoed once by Governor Baker. While we are aware that the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs is embarking on a land conservation planning process this year, and has indicated some willingness to consider farmland in that effort, that process will not be as compressive as the legislation proposes. We feel that the approach proposed by the legislation – with its specific call for an inclusive engagement process, thorough analysis, policy recommendations, and
establishment of benchmarks – is far more appropriate to address the issues around this vital asset.

As evidenced by the recent release of data from the 2017 USDA Census of Agriculture, which showed Massachusetts losing nearly 32,000 acres of farmland or 6% of our total acreage since 2012, the need for this type of inventory and planning is particularly critical at this time. Programs like Agricultural Preservation Restrictions and 61A have helped to stem some of the loss of farmland to development in Massachusetts, but additional efforts are clearly needed if we are to reverse this trend. By embarking on this process to understand existing conditions and develop plans and priorities for further policies and investments, the state will be taking a significant step toward protecting and even increasing land in active agricultural production.

We estimate that the cost of this project would be approximately $150,000, and we urge the legislature to allocate such funding to support this process. We note that the 2018 environmental bond specifically mentions such a plan as an allowable use of capital funds, an indication that there is broad support for such spending, as well as for the endeavor itself.

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

Sincerely,

Winton Pitcoff
Director