



**Massachusetts Food System Collaborative
2022 State Representative and Senator Questionnaire**

Your name: James Arena-DeRosa

Office Sought, including district: State Representative, 8th Middlesex district

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What are three of your priorities that reflect your commitment to a healthy food system for Massachusetts and your constituents?

Priority 1

I support fresh, local Massachusetts products where possible

As the policy lead and Board Member of Massachusetts Farmers Markets, I am/we are always looking for ways to encourage and support the growing and marketing of local produce. Locally grown food is healthier, better for the environment, and supports our local agricultural economy. As I did when running Northeast USDA Food and Nutrition for the Obama Administration, I will continue to make fresh, local, healthy food accessible to all.

Priority 2

Work with policymakers and farmers to streamline and codify consistent rules

Public policy often puts Massachusetts farmers at a disadvantage. I offer a specific example here – there is wonderful “Farm to School” program that gets fresh fruits and vegetables into Massachusetts schools, these are a healthy alternative and the local farmers get a much better price by direct marketing. In one region farmers cleverly collaborated to be cost and time efficient (and btw better for the environment) and had a central person picking and delivering locally grown food to the schools from a group of small farms. But DOL stepped in citing overtime laws from the 1930s (good laws to protect overtime abuses – I worked with the UFW and I care about farmworkers – but laws completely misapplied in this instance). There are other issues related to hemp where products grown and brought in from neighboring states outside of Massachusetts don’t get the same scrutiny as products grown here –and I just think that is unfair and wrong. Small farmers/small businesses need consistent state and federal policies.

Priority 3

Incorporate food justice into the way we think about health and access to resources.

That 1 in 10 residents in Massachusetts are still food insecure is unconscionable in our great state (n.b. as you all likely know it got much worse in the pandemic some think as high as 1 in 5) . There is a proven relationship between good nutrition and long-term health as well as the ability to learn. As a specific example I would like to see Massachusetts become only the 3rd state in the country to offer free Universal Breakfast and Lunch in our schools – it will be better for all our kids and take away the stigma of children in line who happen to be from underserved populations.

How would you support the Healthy Incentives Program?

I'd like to see an expansion of this program. When I was leading Northeast USDA Food and Nutrition during the Obama Administration, we were pleased to be supportive of Massachusetts in this endeavor. When given a choice between foods with comparable costs, low-income consumers will choose healthy food for their families – but when faced with limited dollars they will sometimes choose heavily subsidized/cheaper but sadly unhealthy foods. Specifically, I think we should raise the amount per household that goes into the incentive program, make sure every farmers market has access to the program, and I think we should also consider expanding the list of incentive eligible products to WIC eligible foods. Low-income communities suffer the twin evils of food insecurity and obesity at the same time – in part because of flawed agricultural policies that subsidize unhealthy food.

How would you support farmers in adapting to climate change?

We have to help farmers adapt - but too often programs are structured to help the corporate farmers and not the small Massachusetts farms. For example, micro-delivery of fertilizer vs. broadcast fertilizer can make a big difference to our water, soil and health, but small farmers need support for this transition. I do think there should be more encouragement of winter farmers markets – if there were enough we'd see an extended growing season – this is related to climate change because one of the biggest contributors to transportation pollution is the long distance transportation of food.

How would you help to ensure that children understand where food comes from, the importance of healthy eating, and other essential food literacy issues?

What a blessing to work with Michele Obama's team when we had leaders in the White House concerned about child nutrition. Sadly the Trump administration reversed some of our good work in their first month in office. Basic nutrition should be part of every school district's health curriculum. I personally commit to working with the schools in my district and I do think every child should learn basic cooking skills/home ec/life skills.

What policies or investments would you support to protect farmland and increase farmland access?

Land costs are increasing. We should certainly increase funding the APR. Having been part of a farming family for most of my adulthood, I understand how stressful it can be and the temptation to sell to developers. If done right, most farmers would prefer to figure out a way to stay on the land

I do think we need to get more creative with young farmers who may not have capital resources. We should look at some of the restricted land in conservation and consider whether new families/young farmers/ farmers of color can take over the restrictions so the land isn't locked up by towns. For example, after a death in our family I would rather see the ag preservation for development granted our family be passed on to the next generation of potential farmers, but apparently it doesn't always work that way.

What strategies would you support to reduce food waste?

We have gotten better at connecting large grocery stores to food banks but there is still considerable waste in the fields – sad at a time when so many of our residents are still food insecure. Locally grown growing and sourced food is always less wasteful – smaller farms tend to have a smaller carbon footprint and less food waste. So again, supporting local sourced food itself and supporting and expanding farmers markets helps with the waste issue. And small, local farms do better with allowing food banks to glean good, unsold product sitting in the fields, and also do better looking for locales to send the non-consumable waste. Nationally the huge amount of food waste is from the mega acre farms whose profit margins are based on such high volume that food waste is just part of their business model. I think we could also look at some flexibility on restaurant food – there is balance in there somewhere – I'm not talking about bad food but food that you and I would gladly eat (take home) that has to be discarded. Given the great need I think we need to look more closely at some of those rules.

How would you work to ensure that food system stakeholders of color - consumers, workers, farmers, landowners, and others - have equitable access to opportunities in all aspects of the food system?

This is an important question as our society continues to evolve. At Oxfam I worked with black farmers who suffered from government led and institutional racism – and we know that communities of color often are surrounded by food deserts/food swamps. Farmers markets and accessible grocery stores can help – but to start stakeholders of color need to be at the table when we are deciding public policy. I have worked my whole life to give communities a voice in the corridors of power so that alone is an important step.

I think the answer on the landowning/production side requires a combination of resources and encouragement. We need to acknowledge that making land available where some people of color live bumps into environmental justice. Some communities of color have suffered terrible environmental racism and degradation. Out in isolated rural areas it may be a question of securing funds for the land. But in some locales it may require deeper investments in also making the land safe to farm.

It is infuriating that per the Donahue report - here we are in the 21st century and there is still discrimination against borrowers of color in Massachusetts (with the same credit score, income and ability to pay) – so we also have to make sure young farmers of color are not getting shut out of farming opportunities by the banks. In another issue that crosses over, I find it galling that so many young men of color still have criminal records based on minor possession of substances now legal – while millions of dollars are now being made. Yet we still seem to be struggling to encourage entrepreneurs/growers of color to benefit from this nascent industry.

Thanks for much for highlighting the importance of all these issues. We have a lot of work to do in the months and years ahead. I would embrace the opportunity to work to improve our overall local food system in Massachusetts and continue working with consumers, activists, famers, thought leaders and communities on Food Justice as member of the legislature.

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Candidate for State Representative Middlesex 8

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