



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

Your name: Natalie Higgins

Office Sought, including district: State Representative, 4th Worcester 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 believe it is essential that we ensure all of our neighbors who qualify for food assistance can access that assistance without barriers or stigma (Leominster has a SNAP Gap of 45%).

Priority 2

I want to support our local farmers to ensure that they can sustainably grow their farms and support their workers, increasing access to fresh local foods.

Priority 3

I want to support the development of food systems programs to ensure we can address vulnerabilities and prevent many of the challenges we are currently witnessing, as a result of COVID-19, the economy, and climate change.

How would you support the Healthy Incentives Program?

I support funding increases to the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP), and have seen firsthand how the HIP incentive has helped to close the SNAP Gap in my community. I support efforts to make HIP more accessible in communities (e.g., Growing Places is a HIP vendor at our local farmers markets, making it easier for local farms to get their produce to our community, and they assist with HIP-produce deliveries to our local seniors). According to Growing Places, North Central Massachusetts has untapped HIP funding totaling \$1.9M monthly, along with \$6.5M of untapped SNAP funds. We need to develop ways to make these programs more accessible, so that we can ensure our neighbors have access to the food they need and our farmers can connect with these consumers.

How would you support farmers in adapting to climate change?

All of our climate resilience and mitigation plans must include our farmers. We must ensure more flexibility in our grant programs to ensure they are accessible to our smallest farms. We are lucky to have the UMass Extension School to support our local farmers and their farms. One of my priorities is funding our public higher education system, ensuring this public good is accessible to all who want to access it. I am frustrated that the Food Security Infrastructure Grants are only funding 17% of applicants and will support efforts to increase the funding. I have continued to support the MA Healthy Soils Programs in each budget. We need to increase incentives to ensure our farms can build climate resilience, benefit from solar development on non-productive land, and compensate farmers for the ways they sustain our ecosystems (e.g., carbon sequestration, water filtration/retention, wildlife habitat creation/protection)

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

I am incredibly grateful to organizations like Growing Places, who not only support food literacy for our young residents, but aim to increase accessible healthy eating for all ages. I believe we should integrate food literacy into our K-12 school curriculum, and provide the resources our school districts need to recruit and train the personnel to implement these priorities.

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

I support efforts to invest in the state's Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) program, and to put pressure on the Administration to ensure those funds are utilized to increase the rate of farmland protection. I have co-sponsored efforts to extend farmland protection policies to farms smaller than the current 5-acre threshold by amending Article 99 of the MA Constitution. We need to listen to our farmers and support greater flexibility in conservation restrictions that reflects the changing agricultural landscape and supports sustainability. I support making more public land available for agriculture (notably my district has a city-owned 169-acre farm, managed by the Friends of Sholan Farms, an independent non-profit). Finally, I want to learn more about and support policies that could increase access to farmland for historically disadvantaged farmers.

What strategies would you support to reduce food waste?

First, I support efforts to divert edible excess food to residents in need, and understand many of our local food pantries and community kitchens benefit from these donations. I also support efforts to incentivize, and ultimately require, all inedible food scraps to be composted. While I own my own home, with an adequate yard where we can compost our food scraps, it is vital we make this accessible to all residents through municipal composting programs. I want to learn more about how we can utilize anaerobic digesters that can turn organic waste into electricity. I am grateful for the leadership of the Zero Waste Caucus, which helps me to understand not just policies to reduce food waste, but to eliminate solid waste in Massachusetts.

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?

I am grateful for the work of our Local Food Works collaboration led by Growing Places, in collaboration with Central Mass Grown, Heywood Hospital, Montachusett Regional Planning Commission, Agricultural Commissions, local farmers, consumers, HEAL Winchendon, the Health Equity Partnership, the Community Foundation of North Central Mass, Clark University, and New Venture Advisors. They have completed a Food Hub Feasibility study with the intention of creating a regional food system plan with increased access and diversity. Our local legislative delegation is teaming up to support these efforts and secured \$50,000 in state funding in the FY23 House Budget (currently in conference with the Senate).