



Monday, April 10, 2023

Joint Committee on Revenue
24 Beacon St., Room 506
Boston, MA 02133

RE: S13/H41: Proposal for a legislative amendment to the Constitution for a legislative amendment to the Constitution relative to agricultural and horticultural lands

Dear Chairs Moran and Cusack, and members of the Committee:

The MA Food System Collaborative supports changing our State's constitution in order to extend supports to farmers who cultivate small parcels of land, as proposed by S13 and H41.

It has been nearly 50 years since Article XCIX was enacted, giving the legislature the authority to reduce the tax burden on agricultural land, an action that has contributed greatly to the viability and sustainability of the Commonwealth's farms. While that Article's limitation of such benefits to parcels of land five acres and larger may have been appropriate at the time, it is no longer so because the nature of farming has changed significantly.

Advances in technology and plant genetics, the dramatic loss of farmland and subdividing of many large parcels, the growth of urban agriculture, and increased consumer interest in and support for local foods has resulted in many farmers stewarding multiple small parcels, or even supporting a viable farm business on very small parcels of land. At the same time, the increasing cost of farmland has resulted in the exclusion of many – particularly farmers of color and young farmers – from being able to afford even small parcels, particularly without the benefit of such tax relief. These issues were raised repeatedly by many farmers and other stakeholders during the development of the state's Farmland Action Plan, which is expected to be released by the administration in the near future.

Changes in farming will continue to occur. Given forces such as climate change, the state's goals for net zero greenhouse gas emissions, and the growing need for affordable housing, changes in farming practices will likely occur quickly and unpredictably. And the need for local agriculture will continue, as an essential element in our state's food security, public health, and climate resilience. We support the goals of both bills, but prefer the language as proposed by S13, which would eliminate all acreage requirements from the article, to prevent the need for revisiting this issue again in the future.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

Sincerely,

Winton Pitcoff
Director