

MA Food Policy Council Annual Meeting minutes

Remote meeting – THURSDAY, November 12, 2020 9:30 – 11:30 AM

In attendance:

Senator Jo Comerford

Representative Daniel Donahue

Bill Fredericks, Office of Senator Ryan C. Fattman

Representative Hannah Kane

Commissioner Amy Kershaw, DTA

Commissioner John Lebeaux, DAR

John Lee, Farmer

Rob Leshin, DESE

Mackenzie May, Direct to Consumer

Lea Susan Ojamaa, DPH

Eric Stocker, Distribution

John Waite, Food Processing

Focus on the MA Food Security Infrastructure Grant Program including highlights and case studies.

The meeting was called to order by Chair and Commissioner John Lebeaux at 9:35 AM. At this annual meeting, typically held at the state house, he welcomed participating legislators including Senator Tarr and Gobi and Representatives Natalie Blais, Paul Schmidt, and Lindsay Sabadous.

Acceptance of Minutes: A motion to approve was made by Senator Comerford, seconded by John Lee, and passed unanimously via role call: Senator Jo Comerford, Representative Daniel Donahue, Bill Fredericks, Representative Hannah Kane, Commissioner Amy Kershaw, Commissioner John Lebeaux, John Lee, Rob Leshin, Mackenzie May, Lea Susan Ojamaa, Eric Stocker, and John Waite.

Officers Reports: Council Chair and MDAR Commissioner John Lebeaux. This is the five-year anniversary of the MA Local Action Plan (Plan) and ten-year anniversary of the MA Food Policy Council. As a new commissioner, one of my first jobs was to develop recommendations into priorities for EEA. The Council has evolved into a very efficient networking/clearing house for areas of shared interest related to the Plan.

Vice Chair John Waite, Bylaws report and secretary nomination. There will be upcoming suggestions for changes to the bylaws and perhaps the enabling legislation. Danah Tench was nominated for the Secretary position by John Waite, seconded by Representative Kan and passed unanimously via roll call: Senator Jo Comerford, Representative Daniel Donahue, Bill Fredericks, Representative Hannah Kane, Commissioner Amy Kershaw, Commissioner John Lebeaux, John Lee, Rob Leshin, Mackenzie May, Lea Susan Ojamaa, Eric Stocker, and John Waite.

Program: MA Food Security Infrastructure Grant summary & project snapshots across sectors

Grant status report summary, Ashley Randle, MDAR Deputy Commissioner: Deputy Commissioner Randle shared an overview of MA agriculture based on the 2017 census and including a mention of a special designation this year for Massachusetts Cranberry Month and that aquaculture is the fastest growing sector in the Commonwealth. On April 22, the Food Security Task Force was established including many Council members to address issues across the food system. On May 17, the \$36M Food

Security Infrastructure Grant (FSIG) was announced, the largest food system grant program administered by the Commonwealth. To date, about 75% of all applications have been reviewed. The Plan was a model for infrastructure needs in the food system and was included in the grant application. These investments support the food system both long and short term.

Healthy Incentives Program, Hannah Spare, Executive Director and Rumbila Abdullahi, Brightwood market manager, All Farmers, West Springfield. Introduction by DTA Commissioner Kershaw, who thanked all legislative colleagues for being terrific partners in supporting the HIP expansion with 39 new vendors being added. It has been a priority to focus on communities that didn't have access to HIP previously and at-risk communities.

Hannah shared the important impact of the FSIG program in the Springfield area, for improved access in several communities. Her expectations with a new farmers market were vastly exceeded. Four languages spoken in the area. Rumbilla shared farmers participating in the farmers markets for the first time and were overjoyed to support the community. A unique aspect of the farmers market was accessing information in their own language without fees or barriers to participate. Both the Brightwood and the Merrimac neighborhoods are where the farmers live. Several important culturally appropriate products are sold to over 400 immigrant and refugees, an important asset to the communities. Some 92% of total sales were through SNAP and HIP since these communities didn't have access because of language and other barriers. Word got around quickly about how HIP worked and on the last day, some of the farmers sold out. Customers were disappointed that the market was ending for the season. Farmers are excited to start earlier next year. This is an important opportunity to have a diverse local food system by communities and for communities. There have been over 1,000 immigrant farmers that have resettled in MA without access to land, infrastructure, training, and markets. With the racial equity lens, we look forward to what is in the future. Thank you for helping to expand the impact with this grant and the HIP program.

Commissioner Lebeaux commented that he and Deputy Commissioner Randle toured this site and it was a truly inspirational experience to meet these growers.

EAA Secretary Kathryn Theoharides was introduced by Commissioner Lebeaux. His goal was to advance the profile of the Massachusetts food system, which accelerated with COVID-19. Secretary Theoharides shared that a silver lining to the pandemic has been a greater appreciation of the importance of our food system, public health, and our green spaces. She was thrilled to join this meeting on the 5-year anniversary of the Plan and 10 year of the Council and offered congratulations. She recognized state agency's work so far and to current review the goals to track what's been done including some of the pivots and what still needs to be accomplished. The HIP program, Food Trust, Food Ventures and many other initiatives show creativity in the development and implementation of these programs. The Secretary expressed her honor to cochair the Food Security Task Force. She thanked legislators and the community in their support to develop the \$36 M FSIG, created in response to the COVID-19 pandemic for support in the short term and holistically for the long term, not just for farms but for the wide food system. The rapid support from the Administration was important. The Council's established relationships and wide stakeholder groups complemented the efficient development of the grant. Transportation has been important for direct delivery, increasing capacity of pantries, increasing capacity of local food partners, and solutions for SNAP benefits and farmers, retailers, and fishers to help them adopt to the current disruptions as well as greater access to local food. A fish market or farm stand for example, has been able to expand to provide more local food at a time when the need is now. The pandemic continues to highlight how important it is to invest in the local food system and support our

underserved communities. The Plan and the Council provide a solid foundation for this important work. She shared a big thank you to Senators and Representatives for their leadership.

Commissioner Lebeaux was delighted that Secretary Theoharides was able to join the meeting.

Schools, Rob Shaheen, Nutrition Director, New Bedford Public Schools. Introduction by Robert Leshin, Director, Food & Nutrition Programs, ESE. Rob shared that the 400 plus school nutrition directors across the state have distribute over 30M meals, with over half as free or reduced in cost. Thousands of school buildings were empty except for school foodservice staff who almost over one weekend figured out how to get their meals out. Community eligibility districts include New Bedford, who provide free breakfast and lunch to all their students. Rob thanked Secretary Theoharides and Commissioners Lebeaux and Kershaw for allowing schools to apply for the FSIG. Schools support the Plan in critical ways to maximize the reach of local foods, especially during this pandemic.

Rob Shaheen said this grant has been a lifeline since schools provide a critical role in providing healthy food. They realized there were many opportunities to build the program with a new pod type of design and serving equipment. The serving areas currently aren't very inviting and will be completely redesigned including new mobile equipment. In the new dish room, students will be use reusable trays instead of disposable trays. Cooking equipment will be replaced to increase the capacity for 2 – 6,000 more meals and to let staff focus on scratch cooking. The refrigeration capacity will increase by 50% to be able to make these additional meals. The supper program is not being fully utilized. The new kitchen will be an asset to support the supper program to get meals to students, as well as future emergencies to get food out in an organized way. Rob thanked everyone for this tremendous opportunity. They'll take full advantage of every penny to support this expansion. They received \$1.4M for these innovative renovations/redesign for the kitchens.

MA Food Caucus update: Representative Hannah Kane and Senator Jo Comerford Since they had to attend a legislative budget session, their report was pushed up in the agenda. Representative Kane thanked EEA Secretary Theoharides for advancing the issues in the Plan and Commissioners Lebeaux and Kershaw for their roles on the FSIG. She also acknowledged Representative Donahue and his work advocating for the Food Trust as well as Representative Schmid and Senators Gobi and Lessor - all who are involved on the Caucus and are an example of government at its best. Since March, the Caucus has been focusing on issues due to the pandemic and all related food system issues. The Caucus was also a part of the FSIG including the recommendations for increasing investment to MEFAP, thanks to Representative Ferrante. The HIP increased investments are appreciated and the legislative leadership and outside advocacy that made it happen. Senator Comerford thanked Representative Kane and share warm thanks to members of the administration in EEA, Commissioners and Deputy Commissions for all their work. She shared appreciation for food security being in the spotlight and the inclusion of seafood, as well as a shout out to Grow Foods Northampton for their creativity in approaches to food security and Commissioner Kershaw for her work to strategically sustain HIP. In times of crisis, the state needs to find the good distribution models that support infrastructure development. Senate and House value these programs and look toward to sustain this critical program for our common and shared values.

Fisher, Jared Auerbach, CEO, Red's Best, Boston. Introduction by Story Reed, Permitting & Statistics Program Manager, DMF. Story noted that Massachusetts seafood suffered a 29% decline with over \$120M in losses so far, mostly due to restaurant closures. Wholesalers were almost 100% shut down.

Red's Best is one of those impacted wholesale dealers who buys local seafood. The Commonwealth's FSIG has provided important and unpredicted support for the seafood sector. There is currently strong consumer interest in retail seafood products and home cooking. Red's Best FSIG supports a pivot to retail sales.

Jared founded Red's Best in 2008. They directly offload commercial boats in and use their own technology to efficiently track and trace product from smaller boats, providing an essential service. Fishermen often provide product without knowing the price. Red's Best supports small unloaders including over 800 small fishermen from at least 378 different boats and including a wide variety of species. They also have a K-12 and college program. Red's Best has great pride in supporting small producers and noted that fishermen and farmers are amazing. When COVID hit, there were many fishermen depending on Red's Best to find markets. High end seafood in the US is very restaurant dependent and where most seafood is consumed. Sales of artisanal fish from smaller boats is more skewed towards restaurant consumption. The grant supports the future of Red's Best to have a resilient supply chain to process, package, and freeze so that production doesn't stop, even when there is disruption in the supply chain. Some local fish is harder to process and not easy to run through a production line. A FSIG supports new equipment for vacuum packing and efficient processing. A new freezer on the pier will allow additional storage. Jared shared his deep appreciation of this support.

Food Bank, Paul Mina, President & CEO, United Way of Tri County, Framingham. Introduction by Lea Susan Ojamaa, Deputy Director, Bureau of Community Health and Prevention, DPH. She shared that it takes many people working across many platforms to increase access to healthy food and address food insecurity from the state and the local level. The MA in Motion Programs have been very important. The Tri County United Way has been key in their region, and a leader in addressing food insecurity in the region.

Paul Mina's organization owns three food pantries, including one of the largest in MA. Deliveries for the GBFB and over 26 local small pantries pick up product from their Framingham location. The FSIG for— supports more transportation, infrastructure and freezers to accept large volumes of product. They'll also be able to pick up more product with expanded cold storage.

Fruit Grower, Ben Clark, Co-Owner & 4th-Generation Farmer, Clarkdale Fruit Farms, Deerfield. Introduced by Commissioner Lebeaux. Commissioner Lebeaux met Ben early in his tenure, and noted they are both from multigenerational farm businesses. He has toured the farm in its beautiful location with hilly terrain that helps to manage frost. Farm stands are an important part of the Valley's community and have been very impacted by COVID. He noted that increased interest in local that has resulted in one of their best seasons ever for some growers, once they were able to adopt and pivot.

Ben shared his appreciation of support from the Commonwealth to farms and all the work that's been done. The 105-year-old farm includes a retail stand that sells mostly fruit grown on 45 acres as well as apple and pear cider. Business had to change due to COVID-19 but it has turned out to be a robust sales year as more people have become interested in supporting local farms. A challenge has been distribution to local schools, grocery stores, restaurants and winter farmers markets. Pickup trucks had been used for distribution but with the FSIG program, a van will be purchased that will be important to expand distribution ability as well support food safety by keeping products refrigerated at the correct temperature. The farm's reach will be expanded to get to farmers markets in areas that they typically don't serve. Clarkdale Fruit Farms was in the first round of the HIP funding years ago. HIP sales have

been strong. Ben anticipated that continuing and shared his thanks. He noted his appreciation for the leadership of Congressman Jim McGovern, Senator Comerford, and Representative Natalie Blais.

Shellfish grower, Dan Ward, Owner, Ward Aquafarm, Falmouth. Introduction by Introduction by Story Reed, DMF. Story Reed reported that oyster farmers and the shellfish industry have been devastated by the pandemic with their sales off 70 – 90% since March. He added that now (and anytime) is a great time to purchase oysters from your favorite retailer!

Dan Ward will have more flexibility to sell direct to consumers with the FSIG supporting his move to setting up a to be a licensed dealer. He has 7 farms with oysters, bay scallops, and kelp, with a business goal to help the industry expand in a sustainable manner and as a meaningful component in the MA food system. Massachusetts produces a high volume of oysters. At least 90% of farmed shellfish is oysters, with some 97% mainly consumed in restaurants requiring someone else to open the product for the consumer. Dan was in the process of bringing a wholesale facility on-line to offer another sales opportunity but had put it on hold when the pandemic started. The FSIG provided a great opportunity to bridge the gap. He shared his appreciation for the opportunity to convert his facility to sell wholesale, on-line and direct to the public.

MA Food System Collaborative: Winton Pitcoff: Massachusetts' Local Food System: Perspectives on Resilience and Recovery report. Commissioner Lebeaux noted Winton's important role as an important educator on the MA Local Food Action Plan. Winton thanked the Council and noted that many items he wished to address had been highlighted earlier. Many policy recommendations in the Plan have been moving over the past five years including the Food System Caucus, removing excess edible food waste from the waste stream, and climate change support. There has been five years of learning in addition to the food system shifts with the COVID crisis. The Collaborative worked with 35 stakeholder groups to understand their perspectives and what's needed now and issued a report:

<https://mafoodsystem.org/media/projects/pdfs/MALocalFoodPerspectives.pdf> Many of the same challenges remain such as food insecurity (which is not caused by food being too expensive). It's ironic that food system workers are eligible for SNAP benefits twice as often as others. On the producer side, MA workers earn less compared to the global markets in the form of investments and education. Inequities can be traced back to the slavery on which the food system was built. Improved land access supports a need for a state farmland action plan. Other needs include integrating the food system more closely into climate change, UMASS extension support for growers and SNAP education, teaching food systems in the schools and goals and benchmarks to track progress.

Waste Bans and Food Waste Reduction Progress-public comment: John Fisher, DEP

John share the good progress in reducing food waste, now up to over 300 tons, mostly through digestors at dairy farms. DEP is developing a 2020-2030 master plan, with a goal to reduce additional food waste. There has been growth in the number of businesses diverting food waste. There have also been strides with food rescue operations, with over 50% growth. Food is the #1 material disposed of in trash. Massachusetts has long list of waste ban products, as part of a comprehensive plan, and DEP monitors compliance as items are delivered for disposal. Proposed changes for public comment, including the addition of mattresses and textiles, effective date of Oct 2021 <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/massdep-public-hearings-comment-opportunities>. The new regulations would double the number of businesses subject to the ban. Restaurants are most affected. Some larger schools will also be affected. There is a technical assistance program in place for assistance.

Announcements

January 29, 2021, Friday, 9:30 – 11:30 MA Food Policy Council meeting, *Massachusetts food system organizations have been very successful in receiving national grant awards for technical assistance. The meeting will focus on these projects and how resources are interconnected with each other and the MA Local Food Action Plan.*

February 24 & 25, 2021, Harvest New England Marketing Conference on-line, for New England farmers interested in learning new marketing ideas or fine-tuning strategies for business.
www.harvestnewengland.org.

Public Comment: Commissioner Lebeaux shared that FSIG wouldn't have come into place without the work of this group over the years. He thanked John Waite for tech support and to Bonita Oehlke for work for the Council, a fabulous job.

Adjournment: A motion to adjourn was made at 11:54 made by Lea Susan, seconded by Mackenzie, May and passed unanimously via roll call: Bill Fredericks, Commissioner John Lebeaux, John Lee, Mackenzie May, Lea Susan Ojamaa, Eric Stocker, and John Waite.

Please join my meeting from your computer, tablet or smartphone.
<https://global.gotomeeting.com/join/688000445>

You can also dial in using your phone. United States: [+1 \(571\) 317-3122](tel:+15713173122) **Access Code:** 688-000-445

In March 10, 2020, Governor Baker, acting pursuant to the power provided by Chapter 639 of the Acts of 1950 and Section 2A of Chapter 17 of the Massachusetts General Laws, declared a State of Emergency due to the outbreak of the 2019 coronavirus ("COVID-19"). In accordance with the State of Emergency, the Massachusetts Food Policy Council ("MFPC") meetings are being conducted through virtual means to allow real-time public access.