



Chair Barve and Members of the House Environment and Transportation Committee,

BILL: HB 1534

POSITION: SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS

The Farm Alliance of Baltimore is a grassroots member organization of urban growers, including farms, community gardens, and individuals. Since our founding in 2011, we are the only such organization in the city of Baltimore, and as such we are positioned to potentially receive funds through an open and transparent process of state grantmaking through a new Urban Agriculture Fund. If, as we hope, the state legislature passes legislation to establish this pilot Fund under the Program Open Space project, we are poised to distribute these funds equitably through a fair and open application process to these growers who are benefiting and empowering Maryland residents through providing sustainable access to healthy, fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables.

FARM PROFILE: The Greener Garden

The Greener Garden is an award-winning, minority-owned and family-owned farm on about 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ acres that grows top-quality Certified Naturally Grown vegetables for farmers markets and for their local community in the Hamilton neighborhood of East Baltimore. Farmers Warren and Lavette Blue, who have been farming for more than two decades, joined the Farm Alliance several years ago and have invested thousands of dollars of their own money on building out their small greenhouse, fixing their tractor, and making other improvements to their farm. They have built eight hoopouses on their farm and train and mentor several young and beginning farmers each year, ensuring that the next generation of urban farmers will be able to operate farms in the city. The Farm Alliance has provided them with critical marketing outlets and peer support for periods of labor shortages on their farm. A Maryland Urban Agriculture Fund would go a long way toward ensuring that their farm can continue to operate for years to come.

The City of Baltimore has already invested significantly in urban agriculture as a fledgling industry sector. Since urban farms and gardens began springing up across the city about ten years ago, the City has empowered these hardworking urban entrepreneurs in several ways: through its adoption of the Sustainability Plan chapters on Urban Agriculture and Food Systems; its passage of the Urban Agriculture Tax Credit; and its commitment of valuable city staff time and resources toward establishing city license and land leasing agreements for urban agricultural producers.

Additionally, the federal USDA through its Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has established a cost-share program that has helped several of our urban farm members to build high tunnels (hoophouses) in order to extend the growing season and provide opportunities for year-round marketing of produce. As a result of these and other policies, urban farmers were able to produce and sell over 6500 pounds of fresh healthy local veggies and fruits through the Farm Alliance in the past year. Through our programs, our 17 farm members were able to reach at least 1500 City residents, either as direct customers or participants in our mobile kitchen's community cooking demonstrations. The investments by Baltimore City and federal government agencies make a real difference to our farmers, who are a diverse group of trained growers that include women-owned businesses, family farmers, and minority-owned businesses, and to Maryland residents and consumers. It is time for the state of Maryland to seize this opportunity to step up and match these efforts.

FARM PROFILE: Strength 2 Love 2 Farm

An African-American-owned farm business since 2012, Strength 2 Love 2 Farm in Sandtown-Winchester in West Baltimore is a program of the nonprofit Intersection of Change. This farm employs residents returning from incarceration, and grows greens, scallions, sweet potatoes, and other vegetables and cut flowers inside its 16 high tunnels almost year-round. One of the largest and most high-yield farms in our membership, Strength 2 Love has built a reputation for creating jobs and providing nutritious local produce to several markets around the city as well as in the community. This farm remains a positive, anchoring presence in what is otherwise a community hard-hit by poverty and food insecurity. For the past few years, the Farm Alliance has provided Strength 2 Love Farm with marketing outlets and scholarships for its farm staff to attend conferences and trainings. An Urban Agriculture Fund from the state of Maryland would help this farm to overhaul its irrigation system and renovate some of its high tunnels, as well as purchase seedlings for production.

Despite the vital role urban farms play in our city's food system, economy and environmental sustainability and resiliency, our farm members cannot access many of the subsidies and grant programs typically offered to farms in other jurisdictions throughout Maryland. For example, the Southern Maryland Farmer Mini Grant Program provides \$2,000 grants annually to eligible farms for purchase of plants, marketing and promotion, and other projects. Through an Urban Agriculture Fund, the Farm Alliance would be able to distribute state supports for these farms along a similar model.

Today, we are asking that the State of Maryland leverage the investments made by City planners, food policymakers, federal agencies, and sustainability experts, as well as the investments made by the farmers themselves, with a financial commitment to a pilot Urban

Agriculture Fund as part of the Program Open Space project in the City of Baltimore. To ensure that the funds are spent equitably, we also support the creation of a Baltimore City-based review board to set policies governing the Fund's distribution and grantmaking procedures. We ask that you support the amended version of House Bill 1534 that would:

- Define “urban agricultural producer” as an establishment operating within Baltimore City limits from which \$1,000 or more of agricultural products were sold or would normally be sold during the year.
- Establish a review board to adopt regulations and administer the fund, of which at least 75% must be comprised of Baltimore City agency staff and other Baltimore City stakeholders, including farmers and resident representation
- Prioritize grants for the purposes of implementing the City's 2019 Urban Agriculture Section of the Sustainability Plan
- Require a that a nonprofit organization receiving grant funds distribute at least 70% of the funds to urban agricultural producers for securing land, maintaining safe, environmentally sustainable and socially responsible practices, or supporting viable urban agriculture enterprises
- Ensure equitable distribution of grant funds by requiring that the nonprofit distribute funds only to urban agricultural producers who demonstrate a measurable beneficial impact on improving local food access and/or other community benefits; and that a minimum of 70% of funds distributed go to minority owned or operated urban agricultural producers in historically disinvested communities.
- Require that nonprofit organizations receiving grant funds may not use more than 30% of the grant money for program development, promotion and outreach, program data collection, evaluation, administration, and reporting.
- Require the non-profit organization receiving grant funds to be incorporated in or maintain its principal place of business in Baltimore City and has been an established nonprofit located in Baltimore City for at least 2 years
- Amend funding years to 2022 THROUGH 2025

Sincerely,



Mariya Strauss
Executive Director, Farm Alliance of Baltimore