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POSITION STATEMENT

Senate Bill 0673 – Department of Agriculture – Urban Agriculture Grant Program
Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee
February 24, 2021

The Rural Maryland Council **SUPPORTS WITH AMENDMENT** Senate Bill 0673 – Department of Agriculture – Urban Agriculture Grant Program. The purpose of this program is to increase the viability of urban farming and improve access to urban grown foods. The bill establishes the *Urban Agriculture Grant Program* in the Department of Agriculture. Additionally, it establishes *the Urban Agriculture Grant Fund* to provide grants to nonprofit organizations in Baltimore City to implement the Program. The Secretary of Agriculture is designated to administer this Fund; authorizing the distribution of up to \$400,000 from certain abandoned property funds to the Fund for each fiscal years 2023 through 2026. The Rural Maryland Council greatly supports this bill but would like it to be amended so that grant funds are available to urban agricultural producers across the state and not just Baltimore City.

Urban agriculture has been most concisely defined by Wagstaff and Wortman (2013) as “all forms of agricultural production (food and non-food products) occurring within or around cities.” This definition includes all production in or near cities of plants or animals, whether for personal use or for sale, whether soil based or hydroponic production. While most of Maryland’s food production lies in rural areas (north-central portion of the State and upper Eastern Shore), there are a multitude of urban farms located in the State’s urban areas- Baltimore City alone has approximately 20 thriving urban farms.

Access and availability to food impacts the health, culture, and a person’s quality of life and resources. In the United States, healthy food is difficult to access for nearly 24 million people who live in areas without a grocery store. Recent reports from the *Preventative Medicine and Education for Health* show that low-income neighborhoods have 25% fewer grocery stores than middle and high-income neighborhoods. This disparity contributes to higher rates of diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease. SB673 is an investment in urban agriculture, an investment in our urban communities, and investment in a healthier Maryland. This Program and Fund enable resources to reach meaningful initiatives with the potential to grow healthier communities, food diversity, accessible markets, job opportunity, and build a sense of ownership and well-being through agricultural related activity in urban areas.

Rural Maryland Council looks for strategic partnerships to bridge rural and urban communities. The agriculture sector can help bridge the gap between these two communities. SB673 will help educate urban residents on the challenges that rural farmers encounter. The Council respectfully requests your favorable support of Senate Bill 673 with the proposed amendment.

The Rural Maryland Council (RMC) brings together citizens, community-based organizations, federal, state, county and municipal government officials as well as representatives of the for-profit and nonprofit sectors to collectively address the needs of Rural Maryland communities. We provide a venue for members of agriculture and natural resource-based industries, health care facilities, educational institutions, economic and community development organizations, for-profit and nonprofit corporations, and government agencies to cross traditional boundaries, share information, and address in a more holistic way the special needs and opportunities in Rural Maryland.

“A Collective Voice for Rural Maryland”