



March 4, 2021

2021 SESSION SUPPORT TESTIMONY
SBo723: Food System Resiliency Council

BILL: SBo723: Maryland Food System Resiliency Council
COMMITTEE: Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs
POSITION: Testimony of Support of Senate Bill 0723
BILL ANALYSIS: *Establishing the Maryland Food System Resiliency Council; providing for the composition, co-chairs, co-vice chairs, and staffing of the Council; providing that a member of the Council may not receive compensation but may be reimbursed for certain expenses; authorizing the Council to establish certain subcommittees; specifying the duties of the Council; requiring the Council to submit certain reports to the General Assembly on or before certain dates; making this Act an emergency measure; defining certain terms; and generally relating to the Maryland Food System Resiliency Council.*

Dear Chair Pinsky and Members of the Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee:

The Montgomery County Food Council (MCFC) urges you to **SUPPORT** this bill to establish the Maryland Food System Resiliency Council within the Maryland Emergency Management Agency, as a formalized body to guide statewide food system activities in response to the challenges created by COVID-19, and with the intent to ensure a self-sufficient, sustainable local food economy for the long term, that can support nutritious, equitable food access and food security for all Marylanders.

The hunger crisis that developed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in record-setting SNAP enrollment rates throughout the state of Maryland, an over 40% increase in demand amongst regional food assistance providers, and significant supply chain challenges that left grocery store and food bank shelves empty. Food Councils throughout the state mobilized immediately to respond to this crisis and to coordinate and implement food assistance efforts at the local, state, regional, and federal levels.

The Montgomery County Food Council convened more than 2,000 partners in 2020, and the collective impact of these collaborative efforts has been evident in the coordinated community-wide response to the pandemic hunger crisis. MCFC partnered with the County's Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security to lead the Montgomery County COVID-19 Food Security Task Force, which has proved to be invaluable in guiding ongoing response efforts and cross-sector initiatives to meet the elevated food assistance needs. As a coalition, we are able to more efficiently address gaps in service, sustainably leverage limited resources, and support food assistance providers in a way that no one organization can alone. We have also worked closely with other Food Councils, community-based organizations, food and beverage businesses, farmers, government agencies, and other food system partners throughout Maryland and the DMV to identify and implement best practices, share information, and effectively leverage Federal and State resources in our local jurisdictions.

We strongly support this bill, which would formalize and expand upon the synergy and strength that has been built within the regional food security network in recent months. The need for thoughtful and creative coordination doesn't end at County borders-- connecting with partners throughout the State, including government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and businesses, is critical to the success of short-term food access programs, as well as long-term strategic planning for a more resilient, sustainable, and equitable local food system for Maryland and the region. By establishing a Maryland Food System Resiliency Council, we can ensure that there is an official and reliable structure to support this necessary work. We believe that formalizing a state-wide body that supports the regional food system will best help Maryland residents emerge from this current emergency, and to be prepared when other food emergencies arise.

A statewide Food Council would also be able to inform a broader, coordinated effort to address systemic inequities in the local food system. COVID-19 has exacerbated the effects of the existing crises of hunger and racial inequity. A Food System Resiliency Council will collaboratively build on local efforts to address statewide the challenges that communities of color have historically faced in accessing food and land, economic opportunities, and environmental justice, which are direct results of deep structural and systemic racism. As a coalition, we can make progress towards ending hunger and food insecurity, and establishing a more just, sustainable food system for the long term.

There are multiple states throughout the country that have enacted policies similar to SBo723, including Colorado, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Nevada, all with similar goals of leveraging statewide food system relationships to increase food security, increasing production, sales and

consumption of foods grown and made in-state, establishing protections for land and water resources, and strengthening partnerships between state agencies and community-based organizations. Food Councils throughout Maryland have been partnering in an informal community of practice for the past 8+ years, since the first Food Councils in Maryland were established in the early 2010's. However, productive and effective partnerships are limited by the capacity of individual Councils and a structural disconnect with local and state governments. This legislation will provide critical staffing support and framework for the administration and operation of collaboration between government and key food system community partners.

SBo723 will effectively foster a resilient, equitable, and sustainable food system in Maryland to respond to the emergency at hand, as well as for the long term. **For these reasons, the Montgomery County Food Council supports SBo723 and urges you to vote FOR this bill.**

The Montgomery County Food Council is a nonprofit organization that serves as the primary connection point for businesses, nonprofits, government agencies, and residents around food system issues in our County. We bring together over 2,000 local and regional partners in community-wide education, advocacy, and capacity building initiatives. Our work cultivates a more resilient, sustainable, and equitable local food system by enhancing food access for the over 100,000 at risk for hunger, expanding food education opportunities for all residents, supporting our County's farms and food and beverage businesses, and addressing the impact of local food production, distribution, consumption and recycling on our natural resources.

For more information, please contact: Heather Bruskin, MCFC Executive Director at the email and phone number below.