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Maryland Department of Agriculture

Legislative Comment

Date: February 24, 2021

BILL NUMBER: Senate Bill 673

SHORT TITLE: Department of Agriculture - Urban Agriculture Grant Program

MDA POSITION: Information

EXPLANATION:

Senate Bill 673 would establish an Urban Agriculture Grant Program in the Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA). The purpose of this program is to increase the viability of urban farming and improve access to urban grown foods. MDA would also be required to administer the Urban Agriculture Grant Fund, which will provide grants to nonprofit organizations in Baltimore City.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Urban agriculture in Maryland offers the potential to provide economic opportunity and positive societal benefits. For example, Baltimore's Strength to Love urban farm has the following mission statement: "To create opportunities of growth and employment for residents of Sandtown-Winchester and surrounding neighborhoods who have experienced incarceration, through the planting, tending, harvesting, and selling of organically grown produce and flowers."

MDA currently provides marketing materials and promotes urban agriculture through its Maryland's Best program. Additionally, urban agriculture producers frequently participate in MDA's Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP), accepting FMNP checks from Women, Infant and Children (WIC) recipients and senior citizens with limited income.

MDA promotes urban agriculture in its partnership with Maryland Public Television's hit program, "Maryland Farm & Harvest." In an episode that initially aired in fall 2019, the program featured Baltimore City's Strength to Love II farm. video.mpt.tv/video/episode-703-dv2vfa/

A 2019 study by Cornell University's Small Farms Program shows that while much attention has been paid to societal benefits of urban farms, there is real economic potential, as well. Challenges for urban farmers are significant: it is harder to find land to farm in cities and capital start-up

costs are high. Despite the risks and slim profit margins, some urban farms have managed to develop successful business strategies that merge economic objectives and social missions, according to Cornell.

Urban agriculture in Maryland has the potential to provide empowerment of entrepreneurs; access to employment opportunities, job training, and skill development; expanded access to local nutritious food in underserved communities; community beautification; and opportunities to build connections among city residents.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Marketing Service, "From rooftop gardens to aquaponics centers in old warehouses to growing crops on abandoned properties, urban agriculture provides many benefits to a community, including closer neighborhood ties, reduced crime, education and job training opportunities, and healthy food access for low-income residents."

Baltimore City's Urban Agriculture Plan aims to increase the production, distribution, sales and consumption of food locally grown within Baltimore.

If you have additional questions, please contact Cassie Shirk, Director of Legislation and Governmental Affairs, at cassie.shirk@maryland.gov or 410-841-5886.