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MAYOR

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**SB 673**

February 24, 2021

**TO:** Members of the Education, Health & Environmental Affairs Committee

**FROM:** Natasha Mehu, Director of Government Relations

**RE:** SENATE 673 – Department of Agriculture – Urban Agricultural Grant Programs

**POSITION: SUPPORT**

Chair Pinsky, Vice Chair Kagan, and Members of the Committee, please be advised that the Baltimore City Administration (BCA) **supports** Senate Bill (SB) 673.

Senate Bill 673 would establish the Urban Agricultural Grant Program in the Department of Agriculture to increase the viability of urban farming and improve access to urban grown foods; establish an Urban Agricultural Grant Fund to provide grants to non-profit organizations in Baltimore City to implement the Program; require the Secretary of Agriculture to administer the Fund; authorize the distribution of up to \$400,000 from certain abandoned property funds to the Fund for each fiscal year 2023-2026; etc.

Baltimore City Department of Public Works has a vested interest in Senate Bill 673. Recently, the Department has worked on a grant with the US Conference of Mayors, and Baltimore City's Office of Sustainability, which would also increase the viability of urban farming. A brief excerpt from their proposal, which follows highlights the importance of urban farming and the need for grant monies to assist in the implementation of the programs: "Healthy Roots Baltimore" is a new collaboration between the Department of Public Works and the Office of Sustainability in close partnership with Baltimore City Public Schools and Baltimore's network of urban farms, along with other non-profit and community partners. The program will develop community health and strengthen the sustainability of our waste and agricultural sectors by developing spaces for outdoor learning at City public schools, including infrastructure for vegetable gardening and composting, connecting students and community members to local urban farms, and providing high-quality outreach and training on healthy eating, gardening, and composting".

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In addition, the Department of Public Works, Bureau of Solid Waste, is working to increase local capacity to compost as well as the local demand for the finished product. Urban farming is a great way to increase that demand and capacity, and is a way to educate residents on the benefits of composting and where it fits into the full cycle of food production. The Bureau hopes to be able to host in-person composting workshops in the near future at some of the urban farms that already compost. Other grants have already been provided to several urban farms to increase their composting capacity.

Baltimore City believes there is a need to address multiple major health and environmental challenges simultaneously particularly in this time of a global pandemic and its impact on our citizens. We believe there is a lack of access to the benefits of safe outdoor time for City youth, along with concerns about the effects of in-home learning during COVID-19. There is also a lack of information about and access to healthy food in the most vulnerable communities along with waste streams overloaded by organic materials, a lack of healthy soil for urban farmers, and the need for urban farmers to better connect with communities for long-term positive results to our population.

Any additional grants, funding sources and programs which promote the well-being of our communities through healthy eating, healthy activities and sustainable environmental habits of composting and recycling are essential to Baltimore City moving forward with these quality of life issues.

We respectfully request a **favorable** report on Senate Bill 673.