

TO: House Appropriations Committee

FROM: Steven Darcey, CPESC Executive Director Prince George's Soil Conservation District

RE: House Bill 540 Agriculture – University of Maryland Extension – Urban Farmer Assistance

DATE: February 22, 2022

POSITION: SUPPORT

On behalf of the Prince George's Soil Conservation District Board of Supervisors, we support House Bill 540. Urban farming is growing in Prince George's County and the State. There is a tremendous need to provide guidance and expertise to the growing number of urban, peri-urban and community producers. Currently there is a void of technical assistance and training available to these aspiring producers. The addition of two statewide University of Maryland (UMD) Extension agents, that would be solely focused on urban agriculture, would help fill that void. Extension has a proud history of providing top quality guidance to farmers throughout Maryland based on the most current research. Today, the need is greater than ever as this new version of agriculture grows.

Between 2015 and 2019, Prince George's County passed several pieces of key urban farming legislation. As a result, almost 80% of Prince George's County is zoned for urban farming. This growing land use has potential for a myriad of benefits related to food security, economic development, environmental stewardship and community health. Our Soil Conservation District has worked with UMD Extension's Urban Agriculture Educator to support urban farmers in Prince George's County. Soil Conservation District and our stakeholders are striving to incentivize this growing industry in the County. Two recent county reports, the Food Security Task Force Recommendations, and the Climate Action Plan, reference the importance of expanding urban agriculture as a strategy to support the county's resilience to climate change and food insecurity. Unfortunately, food insecurity disproportionately impacts low-income, Black, and Latinx population. This problem increased in our County from 14.3 percent to over 17 percent during the pandemic.

In 2018, the County funded an Urban Agricultural Conservation Planner in the Soil Conservation District's Urban Ag Conservation program to support urban farmers with the development of Soil Conservation and Water Quality Plans. Legislation was also passed for an Urban Agricultural Property Tax Credit. Currently, in addition to conservation planning, the District's Urban Ag Conservation Planner is triaging non-soil and water conservation related questions from urban farmers that are better suited to the expertise of an Extension agent. It would be more efficient and effective for the Planner to connect farmers with an Extension agent conducting specialized research and programming in a content area that aligns with the farmers' needs and interests. This bill has the potential to expand UMD Extension's Urban Ag Program to reach more urban farmers and better serve these producers in Prince George's County and around the State.

Our Soil Conservation District is partnering with local state and federal partners to develop an "Incubator Farm" in central Prince George's County. This facility will teach aspiring urban farmers the basics of farming. We hope this will be a national model for others to emulate. To best serve urban farmers participating in the incubator project, technical assistance from UMD Extension agents with cutting-edge expertise in urban agriculture business development, crop management and planning is crucial. Our Soil Conservation District would welcome any opportunity to work with additional Extension agents and looks forward to providing input on what research and programming efforts would best suit our Prince George's County constituents engaged in urban agriculture.

For the reasons stated above, the Prince George's Soil Conservation District supports HB0540/SB0437 – University of Maryland Extension - Urban Farmer Assistance and asks for a favorable report.