



MARBIDCO
growing rural ventures™

MARYLAND AGRICULTURAL AND RESOURCE-BASED
INDUSTRY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION
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Mary Shank Creek, *Chair* / Stephen R. McHenry, *Executive Director*

TESTIMONY STATEMENT

BILL: Senate Bill 437 (Agriculture – University of Maryland Extension – Urban Farmer Assistance)

COMMITTEE: Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs

DATE: March 9, 2022

POSITION: Support

The Maryland Agricultural and Resource-Based Industry Development Corporation (MARBIDCO) supports Senate Bill 437, which requires the University of Maryland Extension to hire two extension agents dedicated to promoting urban farming. The extension agents will perform applied research and provide technical assistance and training related to urban crop production methods and agribusiness management for urban farmers. The bill also requires the Governor to annually include \$300,000 in the budget for the extension agents hired.

MARBIDCO has been co-leading efforts in recent months to develop supportive urban agriculture policy recommendations and has helped to facilitate several meetings with a variety of stakeholders around the State including the participation of urban farmers and agricultural service providers from State and local government agencies, University of Maryland Extension, conservation organizations, Farm Credit, local land trusts, and county soil conservation districts. Senate Bill 437 is an outcome from these discussions.

Bill Summary

Farm service providers and farmers throughout Maryland name training and technical assistance as critical hurdles for beginning urban farmers and impediments to growing the urban farming industry. House Bill 540 will directly address the needs noted by urban farmers through the responsibilities of the new Extension agents – one focused on production methods and crop management and the other focused on urban farm and agribusiness management.

The production methods and crop management Agent will provide education on areas including: planning and scheduling crop planting and harvesting in urban areas, including outdoors, indoors, in greenhouses, and in high tunnel production systems; production management practices for controlled environment agriculture systems; growing trials and production methods for crops grown in urban areas, including specialty crops such as heritage vegetables, ethnic vegetables, herbs, microgreens, and cut flowers; propagation and transplant production; training on and certifications for good agricultural practices; and training on organic certification.

The Agent dedicated to urban farm and agribusiness management will provide education on areas including: accounting and financial management; identifying potential customers and business development; marketing; human resource management; different business types and structures; land acquisition; insurance; and licensing and permitting.

Additional Background Information

MARBIDCO supports the growth of commercial urban farming in Maryland because it helps preserve green space within developed areas and can provide access to healthy food to residents that live in Healthy Food Priority Areas (formally called food deserts). According to a recent study, 146,000 Baltimore City residents (23.5%) live in Healthy Food Priority Areas. Children and black residents are also disproportionately affected. According to the report, children are the most likely of any age group to live in a Healthy Food Priority Area (28.3%) and black residents are the most likely of any racial or ethnic group to live in a Healthy Food Priority Area (31.5%).¹ Urban farming can provide another access point for healthy fresh food, as urban farmers often sell their product in the local community. Urban farms also may provide community benefits such as education and job training opportunities. And they can be the community focal point of a neighborhood.

MARBIDCO has also been supporting commercial urban farming through some of its existing loan and grant programs. MARBDIDCO currently offers the Maryland Urban Agriculture Commercial Lending Incentive Grant Program, which provides a grant incentive up to \$10,000 to encourage urban farmers to seek commercial lender financing for the development or expansion of their agricultural enterprises. The grant can provide the equity capital needed to qualify for the loan through the commercial lender.

MARBIDCO also offers grants of \$1,000 to any small farmer that completes Level 2 or Level 3 of Future Harvest's Beginner Farmer Training Program (including urban farmers). This summer MARBIDCO will also be providing grants of up to \$1,000 for cold storage equipment purchases (with 30% of the available funding set aside specifically for urban farmers). MARBIDCO has also financed a farm real estate purchase in Baltimore City (with a secured loan partnering with a commercial lender) and is currently exploring the development of an urban farmer land access program working in conjunction with local land trusts.

In conclusion, MARBIDCO supports the growth of commercial urban farming in Maryland. Urban agriculture offers increased access to healthy, fresh, culturally appropriate food while also creating job opportunities and helping to support local economies. Urban agriculture also helps to preserve greenspaces in urban areas which is good for the quality of life and reduces the distance that food must travel to market. House Bill 540 supports the growth of urban agriculture by providing research and technical training identified by urban farmers as critical hurdles to their growth.

As such, MARBIDCO respectfully requests a Favorable Report for Senate Bill 437.

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MARBIDCO was established by the Maryland General Assembly 15 years ago to help enhance the sustainability and profitability of the State's agricultural and resource-based industries to help bolster rural economies, support locally produced food and fiber products, and preserve working farm and forest land. MARBIDCO is a nimble, quasi-public financial intermediary organization which has a mission to serve exclusively the commercial farming, forestry, and seafood industries of Maryland. Assisting young and beginning farmers are a special focus for MARBIDCO, as is farm operation diversification (through value added processing activities). Commercial urban farming has also become a focus of MARBIDCO's efforts.

In delivering its financing programs, MARBIDCO works cooperatively with commercial banks and farm credit associations, as well as a host of federal, State, regional and local government agencies, and universities. Since 2007, MARBIDCO has approved 1056 financings totaling nearly \$80 million for food and fiber business projects located in of all Maryland's counties (including Baltimore City) – and in the process has leveraged more than \$170 million in commercial lender financing. For more information about MARBIDCO's programs, please visit: www.marbidco.org.

¹ [*Report: 'Food Desert' Gets a Name Change in Response to Baltimore Community Feedback*](#), Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future, January 17, 2018.