

**TO:** Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee

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

**RE:** Senate Bill 437 Agriculture-University of Maryland Extension- Urban Farmer Assistance

**DATE:** March 9, 2022

**POSITION: SUPPORT**

On behalf of the Prince George's Soil Conservation District Board of Supervisors, we support Senate Bill 437. There is a tremendous need to provide additional guidance and expertise to the growing number of urban, peri-urban and community producers across the State. The addition of two statewide University of Maryland (UMD) Extension agents, that would be solely focused on urban agriculture would help that cause.

Extension has a long history of providing top quality guidance to farmers throughout Maryland. Today, the need is greater than ever as this new version of agriculture grows. To best serve urban farmers, technical assistance from Extension agents with cutting-edge expertise in the latest research, urban agriculture business development, crop management and planning is crucial.

This growing land use has potential for a myriad of benefits related to food security, economic development, environmental stewardship, and community health.

As we strive to support this growing industry, our Soil Conservation District staff has worked closely with the UMD Extension Urban Agriculture Educator that supports Baltimore City urban farming programs. Two recent county reports, the Food Security Task Force Recommendations, and the Climate Action Plan, both 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 populations.

The Soil Conservation District's Urban Ag Conservation program supports urban farmers with the development of Soil Conservation and Water Quality Plans. Currently, in addition to conservation planning that addresses soil and water conservation issues, our Urban Ag Conservation Planner is triaging non-soil and water conservation related questions that are better suited to the expertise of an Extension agent. It would be more efficient and effective for the Soil Conservation District Planner to connect farmers with an Extension agent that is conducting specialized research and programming in a content area that aligns with the farmers' needs and interests.

Our Soil Conservation District is partnering with local state federal and private partners to develop an "Incubator Farm" in central Prince George's County. This facility will train aspiring urban producers on the basics of farming. We hope this will be a national model for others to emulate. We would welcome any opportunity to work with additional Extension agents and look 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 SB0437 – University of Maryland Extension - Urban Farmer Assistance and asks for a favorable report.