

To: House Health & Human Services Committee, Rhode Island General Assembly

From: Caitlin Mandel

Date. 5/23/2024

RE: H-8280 To Establish a Commission to study how the State can Adopt Good Food Purchasing Standards

Dear Chairwoman Donovan and Committee Members,

My name is Caitlin Mandel, and I am a longtime resident of Rhode Island and lover of local food systems. I am writing in favor of Representative Kislak's proposed legislation H-8280, which will establish a commission to study how the state and vendors can adopt good food purchasing standards in state and vendor procurement. Good Food is defined as food that is healthy, affordable, fair and sustainable. Good Food Purchasing policies would increase access to fresh and healthy foods through value-driven purchasing standards. By adopting such an approach, the State of Rhode Island can improve the health of its citizens by helping to support a regional food system that is ecologically sound, economically viable, socially responsible, and will increase access to fresh and healthy foods to all communities. Our local food producers and purchasers have been asking to improve our food system, but it is difficult to do so without structured, evidence-based guidance and a framework.

Our current state procurement practices have left meal production in many institutions wanting. Our current state institutional food system procurement could be seen as wasteful and hurting our economy and environment. An example can be seen in our school systems. The Recycling Project finds that 27,777 pounds of food get wasted on a regular school day. In the end this means that Rhode Islanders are paying valuable tax dollars to not adequately feed our children and throwing food waste into our landfills causing more environmental damage with the methane gas emissions that it produces.

A focus on state institutional food procurement standards recognizes the buying power of public institutions' ability to reform our food system for the betterment of our state as advocated by a Harvard report on government purchasing. It can create opportunities for smaller farmers and low-income entrepreneurs to thrive, provide just compensation and fair treatment for food chain workers, support sustainable farming practices and reward good environmental stewardship.

Evidence of the dramatic impact that can occur through adopting Good Food purchasing practices is presented in a Civil Eats article reporting on Boston's adoption of a Good Food value-based purchasing in 2019. It referred to the success of the Los Angeles Unified School District, which two years after Good Food purchasing practices went into effect increased the percentage of locally purchased fruit and vegetables served from 9 percent to 75 percent. The district also reduced its yearly meat spending by 15 percent, saving more than 19 million gallons of water, according to PolicyLink.

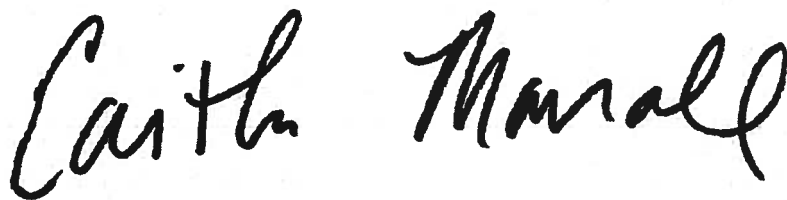
The added value of establishing such a commission will provide a pivotal point of alignment in the state. It can support the Department of Health's current work to study state institutional procurement practices. This along with the many efforts of other organizations working to make a better food system has the potential to be synergistic. It will align with the 5-year food system retrospective of RI and recommendations done by Relish Rhody's, as well as the Department of Education's Farm to School work, the Director of Food Strategy at the Commerce Corporation and the work of the Department of Environmental Management.

What we need is to provide scaffold to build a new, local food economy. We need to look to frameworks that align and leverage best practices, innovative solutions and will recommend policy priorities/solutions to act on. A study to look at how to incorporate Good Food Purchasing (GFP) standards will provide that scaffold. It will answer many of the questions posed by Rhody Relish's retrospective. It can answer how we might deepen integration of food systems with other public planning efforts at the state and municipal level, how we can move forward toward a more inclusive plan that elevates the perspective of traditionally underrepresented groups, how we can mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change.

GFP value-based procurement can add to what Relish Rhody has learned about building more resilient food-based supply chains and what areas have potential for high growth. It will allow for a framework to view the emerging trends needed to be elevated or prioritized, how to measure and track impact. It can answer who could be responsible for implementation and evaluation, how we can better assist and help scale the food producers and processors, farmers and fishers in Rhode Island, the majority of whom are small businesses.

In closing again, I enthusiastically support bill H-8280, to establish the commission study how the state can adopt Good Food Purchasing Standards, which can support the state's ability to leverage of Rhode Island's purchasing and procurement practices to improve public health, sustainability, fair working conditions, local opportunity and improve our region's food system for the health and well-being of the state. Thank you.

Most sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Caitlin Mandel". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Caitlin Mandel
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