

CHRIS WEST
Legislative District 42
Baltimore and Carroll Counties

Judicial Proceedings Committee



Annapolis Office
James Senate Office Building
11 Bladen Street, Room 322
Annapolis, Maryland 21401
410-841-3648 · 301-858-3648
800-492-7122 Ext. 3648
Chris.West@senate.state.md.us

THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

January 23rd, 2024

The Maryland State Senate Education, Energy, and The Environment & Budget and Taxation Committees

The Honorable Brian J. Feldman & Guy Guzzone.

2 & 3 West Miller Senate Building

Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: Senate Bill 311: *Agriculture - Maryland Food and Agricultural Resiliency Mechanism Grant Program - Expansion*

Dear Chairs Feldman and Guzzone, and members of the Committees,

In my legislative district, there is an organization known as First Fruits Farm. It was established in 1998 by Rick Bernstein and his wife, Carol. First Fruits Farm is a non-profit, Christian ministry dedicated to providing fresh, nutritious food for the hungry through volunteer service and community partnerships. 100% of everything that First Fruits Farm grows is DONATED to feed children and adults who are struggling with hunger. During the past 25 years, First Fruits Farm has harvested and distributed just under 25 million pounds of fresh produce to feed low income families in central Maryland.

The main partner of First Fruits Farm is the Maryland Food Bank, but other beneficiaries of the food grown by the Bernsteins include shelters, schools, churches and community food distribution centers. The incredible generosity of the Bernsteins has truly and dramatically transformed the lives of thousands of food-insecure families in central Maryland.

Stephen Mather was the founder of the National Park System. Following his death, plaques were mounted in our national parks stating, "There will never come an end to the good he has done".

I truly believe that the same can be said about the Bernsteins – There will never come an end to the good they have done on behalf of so many thousands of needy families in central Maryland.

At this stage, the programs of First Fruits Farm have grown so extensive that they have outrun the ability of Rick and Carol Bernstein to pay for them with their personal resources. They need some financial assistance. That's why SB 311 is being introduced.

The purpose of Senate Bill 311 is to establish the *Maryland Food and Agriculture Resiliency Operating Fund*. The fund will be a non-lapsing fund with \$1 million deposited into it by the State each year. As written, the Fund will provide annual grants to qualifying non-profit farms and community gardens which operate on at least 250 acres of land that is conserved within a land conservation program, which grow between two to three million pounds of produce annually and which exclusively donate said produce to Maryland food banks and other charitable food providers at no cost.

I call your attention to the fact that the Secretary of Agriculture is represented at this hearing. In recent days, the Secretary contacted me and suggested that the qualifying parameters of this bill should be somewhat loosened so that other non-profit farming operations in Maryland could qualify for financial assistance from the Fund. Rick Bernstein was totally amenable to the Secretary's suggestions. Accordingly, a friendly amendment has been prepared along the lines suggested by the Secretary.

I appreciate the Committee's consideration of Senate Bill 311 and would be happy to answer any questions the Committee may have.