October 30, 2014

Melanie Jewett Army, AICP
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RI Statewide Planning Program
One Capitol Hill
Providence, Rhode Island 02908

Dear Ms. Army:

On behalf of the Rhode Island Food Policy Council (RIFPC), I am writing to offer our support for the draft State Economic Development Plan, a product of the RhodeMapRI initiative. These comments complement comments submitted by Kenneth Payne, Chair of the Rhode Island Food Policy Council, at the Public Hearing on October 28, 2014. The State Economic Development Plan in its current form takes a “whole systems” approach to economic development, and the RIFPC commends the State for doing so. We endorse Governor Chafee’s introductory declaration that “this Economic Plan is different from past plans in that it takes a broader look at how we are tackling issues…[including] energy, climate change, public health…environment, social equity, and diverse population.” The RIFPC agrees that it is impossible to discuss economic development without considering the environment and social equity, as issues of public health and quality of life are inextricably linked to economic well-being.

The RIFPC is also heartened to see the robust and extensive public outreach and engagement process that informed the development of the State Economic Development Plan (as described on p. 19 of the Plan). With rates of poverty hovering near 14 percent, and with some of the highest rates of food insecurity in New England, Rhode Island has an imperative to develop economic development strategies that include social equity and offer economic opportunities to Rhode Islanders to shift from subsistence to becoming a successful member of the workforce. The RIFPC supports State Planning’s commitment to engagement and inclusion throughout this process as well as in the Plan, and the explicit recognition of the link between poverty and access to fresh, healthy, and affordable foods (p. 112).

One of the key components of the RIFPC’s vision for Rhode Island is of a State where safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food is accessible and affordable in every Rhode Island community and in which an increasing proportion of the state’s food supply is raised, caught, and processed locally. The comprehensive inclusion of Rhode Island’s food system in the State

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The State Economic Development Plan also recognizes the strength, importance, and potential in Rhode Island’s fisheries sector, with annual total sales of fish exceeding $200 million a year (p. 37) and “an estimated 6,951 Rhode Island jobs...connected directly to harvesting, processing, distributing, and selling fish landed by Rhode Island home-ported vessels” (p.37). The Port of Galilee in Narragansett, as one of the largest commercial fishing ports on the eastern seaboard, is, and will continue to be, a cornerstone of Rhode Island’s fisheries sector. The State Economic Development Plan’s emphasis on the continued future economic necessity of our fisheries aligns with one of the core values of The Food Solutions New England New England Food Vision (June 2014): “Strong local and regional agriculture and sustainable coastal fisheries will help New England communities thrive by providing a decent livelihood to farmers and fishermen, by supporting a diverse range of economic activities extending well beyond farms and harbors, and by creating and maintaining attractive communities for people to live in and visit” (New England Food Vision, p. 10). The State Economic Development Plan’s emphasis on the fisheries sector as a significant economic asset also underscores coordinated work happening in the sector already: the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, with funding provided through the Local Agriculture and Seafood Act Grants Program partnership with the RIFPC, is currently in the final stages of developing a comprehensive statewide marketing campaign to promote local seafood, beginning with the development of an action plan that will support the promotion of scup and improve the economics of this fishery.

The RIFPC agrees with the State Economic Development Plan’s assertion that Rhode Island is at the forefront of the food movement, and that there is great economic potential in the food system (or Food Value Web), which incorporates all aspects of food-related businesses, from production and manufacturing, to distribution and sales. We would like to emphasize, however, the importance of including food recovery and resource recovery as components of this system. Resource recovery, whether through waste reduction, food rescue, or composting and anaerobic digestion, is also a critical component of the Food Value Web, and economically significant for Rhode Island.
A LOCALIZED FOOD SYSTEM
Planning enables us to collectively think about the state of the State and the systems we need to create in Rhode Island. This Economic Development Plan makes a strong case for the ways in which Rhode Island’s food system can be a foundation of long-term economic viability and vitality. Since its inception in 2011, one of the core components of the RIFPC’s vision continues to be to help create the conditions in which Rhode Island’s local food system is a growing component of the state’s economy, a connecting framework for stakeholders across multiple sectors (production, distribution, access, public health and resource recycling) and a creator of new jobs and cottage industries that contribute to the state’s long-term economic viability.

The RIFPC supports the inclusion of Agriculture and Fishing (p. 50), Food Services (p.51), and Food Systems (p.52) as Top Industry Sectors in the State Economic Development Plan. The Plan’s assertion under Cross-Sector Opportunities (p.52) that, “although the Food Service and Agricultural sectors are listed individually as focus industries in Rhode Island, the connection between the two industries – the state’s “Food System” – is the key to Rhode Island’s niche” is both forward-thinking and offers Rhode Island the opportunity to be a regional and national leader in a critical issue area with global recognition.

The RIFPC is appreciative of being included as a co-lead under Policy 2, strategy B (p.99): Review state policies to reduce/eliminate barriers to increased sales of food that is grown, raised, caught and/or processed in RI to state institutions and state and municipal agencies. Coordination among State agencies on all issues related to food will ensure that Rhode Island’s food system can thrive, and the RIFPC and the Interagency Food and Nutrition Policy Advisory Council (IFNPAC), chaired by the Director of the Department of Health, have pledged to work closely together on policy reform related to food system development.

There are two minor additions to the Plan that the RIFPC recommends for consideration:

1. Under Goal 5 (Create a stronger and more resilient Rhode Island), include food systems and green infrastructure explicitly. Increased local food capacity will ensure that Rhode Island can weather climate events that disrupt basic transportation routes, as we saw with Hurricane Sandy. Soil and green infrastructure in Rhode Island’s urban core (including community gardens and urban farms) can act as a critical buffer against stormwater as well, reducing flooding and nutrient loading into Narragansett Bay in times of heavy rainfall.

2. Under Policy 2, include strategy language that emphasizes the need for comprehensive reform of existing state policies and regulations related to food waste, encouraging prevention or beneficial reuse over disposal. While the exact percentage of food waste going to the landfill is unknown, a 2010 study by the EPA found that food waste is the largest type of municipal waste sent to landfills. With Rhode Island’s Central Landfill expected to reach capacity in 20-25 years, and with solid waste policies that are outdated to the point of dysfunction, the State needs to encourage innovation in waste management.

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The Economic Development Plan recognizes that Rhode Island needs to make an economic shift, and offers an honest assessment of the changing demographics of our State. The issues identified and raised in the Plan are systems issues, and we commend State Planning for making explicit linkages between economic development, social equity, and protection of Rhode Island’s natural resource base. The State Economic Development Plan concludes with a powerful summary of the philosophy woven throughout this Plan: “Economic development strategies can create the overarching socioeconomic, cultural, and environmental conditions that influence population health. Creating a business climate and supporting public investments that contribute to good-paying jobs can create an economically thriving community that strengthens education, social networks, and community resources, which in turn contributes to good health outcomes. Encouraging communities that are walkable and safe with access to recreation opportunities, healthy homes and healthy food can also lead to improved outcomes” (p. 152).

The RIFPC has always envisioned the potential of Rhode Island serving as a national model because of the strength of its local food system and its success at achieving community food security and optimal public health. We urge the State Planning Council to adopt the State Economic Development Plan in its current form, and look forward to being an active participant in its implementation.

Best,

Leo Pollock
Network Coordinator
Rhode Island Food Policy Council