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## **PROGRAM PLEDGING HEALTHY FOODS IN LOW-INCOME AREAS LACKS FUNDING**

By Colin A. Young

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STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, MARCH 30, 2016.....Rebekah Gewirtz laid out the problem in simple terms: large swaths of urban and rural Massachusetts lack good access to grocery stores and healthy food retailers.

Access to grocery stores is linked to lower rates of obesity, diabetes and other diet-related health issues, she said. The state has already put a solution in place to address the problem, Gewirtz said, but it has yet to be funded.

The Massachusetts Food Trust Program was created by the Legislature in 2014 to provide loans, grants and other technical assistance to support the development, renovation and expansion of healthy food retailers and food enterprises in low-income communities.

Gewirtz, executive director of the Massachusetts Public Health Association (MPHA), was joined Tuesday by lawmakers and activists to push for the Legislature to fund the Food Trust and allow it to do the work it was created to do.

"While Massachusetts is one of the most well off states in the nation, the Grocery Access Task Force convened several years ago found that we ranked third worst for grocery store access," Gewirtz said. "A Boston Foundation report that came out very recently found that low-income Boston neighborhoods ranked sixth worst in the nation for African-American youth health and last for Latino youth health."

The association is asking lawmakers to support a request for \$500,000 in the fiscal 2017 budget for operating expenses and authorization for \$10 million in capital spending over five years.

Sen. Eileen Donoghue told advocates in a House lounge Tuesday about the success of Lowell's Mill City Grows, a mobile market that sells fresh produce at health centers, senior housing facilities, parks and other locations where residents have limited access to fresh food, and what the Food Trust funding could mean for its future.

"A grant or a loan from the Food Trust can help Mill City Grows open a new market, increase its food production or hire new workers," she said, adding that organizations all over the state would benefit similarly. "Funding from the two sources will have health and economic benefits in communities all around the commonwealth."

According to the MPHA, states like New York and Pennsylvania have leveraged as much as \$15 in private and federal funding for every \$1 of funding for similar programs.

Secretary of Energy and Environmental Affairs Matt Beaton was scheduled to speak at Tuesday's event, but had a late schedule change and did not attend.

Beaton told the News Service that had he been able to make it to the event, he would have talked about the \$300,000 in Gov. Charlie Baker's proposed budget for the Buy Local grant program, which is focused on getting local food from grower to consumer as efficiently as possible. He also would have detailed the \$163,000 EEA grant program for urban agriculture, an issue in line with the Food Trust's mission.

The secretary said the Food Trust is in line with the Baker administration's interests and that he will give it due

consideration when deciding what will be funded through the capital budget.

"Going forward, I think it's great work and a great concept that they have going on," Beaton said. "While it's hard to say right now because we have not fully built in our capital budget, they are certainly a group I have met with and look forward to continuing the conversation with and we will consider at EEA giving support to as we develop our capital program."

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