



Heirloom and Specialty
Organic Crops

March 19, 2015

To the Committee on Environment,
CT General Assembly
Testimony re: SB 38, Committee Bill 5734

Dear Representative James Albis and Senator Ted Kennedy, Chairmen:

I am Elizabeth Aaronsohn, present chair of the board of directors and long-time volunteer worker at Urban Oaks Organic Farm in New Britain. I live at 424 Commonwealth Ave. in New Britain.

I am writing to give strong support to Proposed Bill # 38, introduced by Sen. Gerratana: AN ACT PROVIDING FUNDING FOR THE URBAN OAKS ORGANIC FARM IN NEW BRITAIN, as part of Committee Bill # 5734, "An Act Concerning Farmers' Market Coupons for Senior Citizens."

This bill belongs here because New Britain has been identified by a 2012 UConn study as the third most food-insecure city in the state. An extraordinary number of New Britain seniors, families, and children here suffer from malnutrition due to poverty and lack of access to healthy food. As the attached maps, letters, and data will show, Urban Oaks is perfectly positioned to address at least part of that problem.

In the summer of 2014, some 800 families and seniors from our neighborhood and other city neighborhoods of extremely low income used their WIC, SNAP, and Farmers' Market Coupons at our farmstand and/or mobile market. We were able to double those benefits, as we had done for several summers, because members of the Urban Oaks board wrote grants to raise \$13,000 to do that. We had to, because the US Congress has recently again cut food stamps and other such currency for people of very low income, and in fact is right now threatening to cut those even more deeply. The attached letter from a recipient of WIC testifies to the importance to that population of our farm's commitment to food justice.

Urban Oaks was initially founded in 1999 to help overcome an area of severe blight in New Britain. Over many decades, the once-flourishing but long-abandoned Sandelli flower farm from the 1930s had become a waste dump, keeping the densely populated neighborhood demoralized. The city asked the state to step in, and some \$500,000 was spent revitalizing the property. So blighted was the former farm that it took 300 dumpsters to carry away all the trash. Now, thanks to the state's investment, the city's commitment, and the hard work of the farm's staff, board, and other volunteers, it is a vibrant green space, employing mostly New Britain residents, and representing what we like to call an oasis of hope and promise within what is clearly a food desert.



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According to both the North/Oak NRZ and police officers stationed in our area (see letter from NRZ chair), the incidence of crime in the area is significantly reduced, in great part due to the presence of Urban Oaks Organic Farm. The farm's founding and continuing mission is to improve the environment and nourish the community through sustainable, responsible organic urban agriculture right where it matters most: in the heart of a food desert.

While it is admirable that the state is working to preserve rural farmland, our 3 ½ acres in an urban area is too small and invisible to qualify for the preservation guidelines. On those few acres, we produce an astonishing amount of food, but we don't enjoy the economy of scale. We sell (or give away to the local soup kitchen) all the produce we grow. We write grants furiously to try to fund the expanding expectations of our educational and charitable programs, beyond just providing what is known as the highest quality fresh organic food in the region.

However, like all urban farms with a social mission, including Will Allen's famous Growing Power in Milwaukee, which receives funding for its own wonderful programs from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Urban Oaks has needed a regular infusion of money in addition to its sales in order to make ends meet. We are not big agribusiness, which receives regular Farm Bill subsidies while (mostly) poisoning our food and environment. After the initial state investment to reclaim the land and restore the greenhouses in 1999, for several years the state supplied an additional amount of money through the Community Investment Act so we could pay our city taxes—the arrangement made with the city and state in lieu of rent to our landlord—and meet some unexpected emergencies, such as an extra-cold winter that sent CNG bills soaring, or the totaling of our delivery van on black ice the day before Thanksgiving. But that infusion of money dried up a little over five years ago, and we have been seriously struggling ever since.

We have proven that we can and will spend state money responsibly. Fresh fruits and vegetables are a necessity for everyone. Given the serious years-long drought in California, which is only increasing with climate change, it seems that urban agriculture is the food of the future, and we are at the forefront of it, but we need your help. We hope this committee will approve Senator Gerrata's request for \$25,000 in on-going support for Urban Oaks Organic Farm.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Aaronsohn,
Chair, board of directors,
Urban Oaks Organic Farm
www.urbanoaks.org
urbanoaksorganicfarm@gmail.com
aaronsohn@ccsu.edu



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MEMO TO: Elizabeth Aaronsohn, Chair Board Urban Farm in NB, CT.
FROM: Yvette Ghannam, President North Oak NRZ
DATE: May 23, 2014
SUBJECT: Support to the continuation of having a farm in the North Oak Area
(actually the poorest area in the city of New Britain, CT).

As the fine agencies in public health, The Center of Disease Control and Prevention, and the Healthy People 2020 document have stated that children obesity is a serious health condition in our whole nation. The City of New Britain is not an exception since the United States Census reported that in 2013 the median income per family was \$40,294 (national was \$69,461) and the percent of persons below poverty level, was 22.4 % (national was less as 10.2%). Therefore, the North Oak NRZ recognizes the pressing need of having the Urban Oaks farm to continue to function as an agent of social change through community supported agriculture.

The North Oak NRZ members and stakeholders recognize the many benefits that this farm brings to our community. It allows poor families and all residents of New Britain to buy ultra-fresh vegetables & fruits that consequently help families to improve their health and wellbeing as well for those involved in the farm working. This farm is like a "hidden treasure" since it is located in the middle of what used to be the area of the highest crime activity (gangs, illegal drugs, prostitution, etc.).

We noticed that thanks to the hard work of the New Britain Police Department, North oak NRZ, CCSU and the farm itself, the crime activity had been reduced dramatically. The farm has other benefits: it allows children in that neighborhood to learn about safe nutrition and to come to the farm to understand the careers in farming. Another benefit of the Urban Oak Farms is to increase



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green spaces as well as the wellness of the land used for the farm. In addition, the Urban Oak Farm allows diversity and brings together many different cultures that care deeply about the health of their family members. Finally, this farm bring encourages self-reliance among the residents at large since New Britain is a city with great level of malnutrition a due to the lack of financial funds to buy healthy foods. We urge to the management of the Urban Farm to continue being a vibrant agricultural community agent.