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Senate Committee on Economic Development, Housing, and General Affairs
Senator Alison Clarkson, Chair
Vermont General Assembly
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633

Dear Chair Clarkson and Honorable Members of the Senate Committee on Economic Development, Housing, and General Affairs,

Good morning, Committee. Thank you, Chair, Vice Chair, and Committee Members, for allowing me time to testify before your Committee today on Bill H.321, an act relating to miscellaneous cannabis amendment.

My name is Sara Farnsworth, I am a long time Chittenden County resident, currently residing in Jericho. I operate a tier 3 outdoor cultivation business in Williston on land I lease via a fairly unstable agreement with one of Chittenden Counties most controversial landowners. To the best of my knowledge, I am the largest 100% women owned and operated cannabis farm in Vermont. Despite being an economic empowerment applicant, I can not recall one instance in my licensure where I was ever prioritized for being a queer woman.

I am a 9th generation Vermonter with agrarian roots, and I was a first-generation college student. I've been on a quest to break out of generational poverty my entire life. As a single mother of two children, my sons also have grown up with the support of the systems set in place to assist people like us with low-income levels. My oldest child is now 19, and my youngest is 13. For the entirety of my children's lives, I have been furthering my education and gaining valuable work experience all with the hopes that "if I work hard enough, financial stability will some day come." I currently work 2 part time jobs in hospitality and special events/weddings and also run my business, which pays me less than a livable wage, but enough to at least contribute to my single income household monthly expenses. I can tell you with certainty that I am financially struggling. Add to this the $45k I put on a credit card to start up my business and I am just not sure how I am going to ever get ahead.

While I was studying for my MBA in 2019, I began writing a business plan for the soon to be adult use cannabis market in Vermont. I pitched for capital, I pitched for land. I found business/land partners and within 6 months it was clear the partnership was not working. I bought out my partners and have owned my business 100% since that time. I handle every aspect of my business from security, compliance, propagation, cultivation, sales, distribution, bookkeeping and everything in between. I am a proud DIY'er, doing things on a low budget and often with recycled materials to get the job done. I have a strong commitment to sustainability and empowering women.

I was organized and incredibly driven to obtain one of the first cultivation licenses of my tier type when the market first rolled out. I was able to establish brand recognition and established relationships with some key dispensaries, many of which I still am doing business with today. This first to market advantage has been so clear over the last year while I've seen dozens of tier 1 cultivators and those later to market who are struggling to make sales. Retailers are already reserved shelf space for the folks they've been working with, and not enough retailers are spread widely enough through the state. A moratorium on retailer licenses as proposed in Section 4 of H.321 would essentially be a death sentence for myself and other cultivators, and we desperately need to have other avenues for selling the goods we produce through farmers market type events and direct to consumer sales. This is vital to not only my survival but for the survival of about 200-300 other cultivation licenses that I fear do not have adequate retail store presence to sustain any level of business continuity. Despite my advantage over other producers, I am still struggling. We are in the midst of market collapse with prices racing to the bottom as producers struggle to make sales with so few options for retail avenues. It won't be long and we will see the negative impact of population dense areas oversaturated with stores such as Burlington and Morrisville, while other areas are deserts with no stores in a 30-mile radius, and no way to open retail due to the CCB closure. Please allow the CCB to move forward and implement its new administrative rules for retail siting developed with industry input as directed by the General Assembly with Act 166 (2024) from last legislative session that already provides the mechanism is end retail saturation in towns that may have density, the language in Section 4 will create a state-wide moratorium on retail licenses which will be economically devastating.

Having raised my children in low-income residential areas, I have been subjected to the rules of federal housing law and have been unable to consume or possess cannabis at my residence. This is problematic for Vermonters who live in low-income housing, and therefore we should work to allow public consumption wherever lit tobacco is allowed. Additionally, we see so many tourists who travel to Vermont to experience craft cheese, beer and cannabis and partake in our tourism, and they need to also have a place to consume. If we want craft cannabis tourism to kick off here and be a viable draw to Vermont, we really need to allow for public consumption. I've talked with guests at the many events I work and the out of towners wish for a place to consume also, so let's make a policy change that encourages folks to visit our craft state and purchase and consume the products produced here.

ALL INQUIRIES PLEASE CONTACT
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As an outdoor cultivator, I have one harvest lot per year. Indoor license types have as many as 8 harvest lots per year. The difference between the two warrants a fee schedule change. I advocate for reduced outdoor cultivation license fees and increased indoor cultivation license fees. I am currently processing my license renewal. I had considered reducing my license tier to cut costs, and to produce less cannabis in 2025 due to market saturation. I was told I may not ever be able to have the tier 3 license again so I am holding on to it, but the cost of nearly $5k in addition to a $3,500 quarterly rental payment due in the next 30 days, I am not quite sure I even have the cash flow currently to sustain this. For months I have been considering what else I might do with my degree, but I really am passionate about what I do and want to try to stick it out with the goal always being to get out of poverty. I'm not sure cannabis is going to be it for me considering the direction we are headed in and I am actively looking for other work to supplement my income to be able to weather the storms of bill H.321 being sorted out.

I also want to believe that the economic empowerment designation was created to give women and LGBQT (as well as others) expedited processing. As of this date, I have never received any benefit from this designation, and my observation is that this has merely been a tool the CCB has utilized to brag to the legislature about the group, but with zero impact to those who hold this designation. I implore you to consider including economic empowerment applicants alongside the benefits provided to social equity applicants, such as reduced fees for licensure and product registration, and access to technical and financial assistance, and find other avenues to help lift this group that is disproportionately impacted. In conjunction with this, it is imperative that the cannabis excise tax revenue be spelled out and allocated in this bill to prioritize funding for the community development fund and further prioritize financial benefits for tier 1 cultivators and manufacturers.

Please also strike the municipal cultivation districts and setbacks for outdoor cultivation from Act 166 (2024) which was included in legislation last year to shut down a sole producer in Essex and will have implications for farmers across the state, including me. We are asking the committee to consider amending the bill with the language produced by Vermont Growers Association, Rural Vermont, and the Vermont Cannabis Equity Coalition.

As a small producer I would love to answer questions you may have or have further discussions regarding my comments and input. I encourage you to email me or we can set up a time for a call to further discuss my experiences navigating the volatile cannabis AU market in Vermont. I believe that together we can create a bill that works for the Vermonters who are blazing this trail and paving the way for a viable industry here.

Respectfully submitted,
Sara Farnsworth
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