Finding common ground and making real progress

Dear MASSPIRG Member,

Given the partisan rancor in our nation, one might reasonably wonder if it’s still possible for Americans to find common ground and solve problems.

It is. And we have examples:

1. Consumers, patients, doctors and nurses from across the country came together to stop the food industry’s overuse of antibiotics, a practice that leads to antibiotic-resistant bacteria—or “superbugs”—that cut short tens of thousands of lives each year. This wasn’t about red America or blue America, it was all Americans sharing a common interest that convinced McDonald’s to commit to reducing antibiotics in its beef supply chain. (See page 3 for more.)

2. From Massachusetts to California, growing numbers of people agree that it’s time to say goodbye to the single-use consumer plastics that burden our landfills and litter our neighborhoods. Our national network helped win bans on the worst type of single-use plastics, polystyrene foam cups and containers, which are toxic and non-biodegradable. (See page 10.)

3. A bipartisan majority in the last Congress approved a law allowing consumers to freeze their personal credit reports for free—the simplest and most effective step we can take to prevent identity theft. (See page 6 for how our Consumer Watchdog team made it easier for consumers to protect themselves.)

Many threats to our health and safety cut across political divides. When we get beyond the filter bubbles that inhibit real dialogue in Washington, D.C., and on social media, we can find support for solutions to these problems and others like them.

Your support for MASSPIRG is helping to bring people together and find answers for a healthier, cleaner, safer and more secure future for all Americans. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Janet Domenitz
Executive Director, MASSPIRG
Defending consumer protections

We should be able to save, invest and manage our money without fear of being tricked, trapped or otherwise ripped off by the banks or institutions we trust with our financial future. That’s why it’s so important that we protect the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB).

After the Great Recession, MASSPIRG and our national network were instrumental in helping establish the CFPB—a watchdog agency devoted to creating and enforcing fair, clear and transparent rules to protect consumers. But the Trump administration is pushing to weaken or even get rid of it.

Keeping the Consumer Bureau intact
The CFPB holds big banks, debt collectors, lenders and others accountable if they try to take advantage of consumers. Our national network helped spearhead the creation of the Consumer Bureau. Now, we’re standing up for consumer protection once again.

Last year, we reached out to people across the country about the urgent threats to our financial wellbeing, and about the great work the Consumer Bureau is doing on our behalf. We gathered thousands of petition signatures, sent emails and made phone calls to Congress to show our support for the CFPB.

Strengthening consumer protections in states
State attorneys general have expressed concern about the CFPB’s new leadership, and several have promised to double down on efforts to enforce consumer protection laws at the state and federal levels.

In December, our research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund released “Positioned to Protect,” the third in a series of reports detailing the role of the CFPB in protecting consumers and highlighting how states can strengthen consumer protections. Some attorneys general have established agencies similar to the CFPB at the state level. A number of local governments have implemented new education and enforcement programs, and the Cities for Financial Empowerment Fund is helping develop new projects to ensure that citizens are protected in the marketplace.

MASSPIRG and our national network are advocating for state and local governments to take charge of policing financial markets when the CFPB can’t provide adequate protections, and providing consumers with tools they can use to protect themselves.
Stopping the misuse of life-saving antibiotics

Because of your support this past year, MASSPIRG and our national network were able to help reduce the overuse of antibiotics on factory farms.

The overuse and misuse of antibiotics in humans, animals and agriculture is creating “superbugs” that are resistant to treatment. The World Health Organization has named antibiotic resistance one of the top 10 global threats to human health. According to an estimate from researchers at Washington University School of Medicine, as many as 162,000 people die from multidrug-resistant infections annually in the U.S., making these infections the third leading cause of death.

MASSPIRG and our national network have gathered support from activists, corporate actors and health professionals across the country to address the looming dangers of antibiotic resistance. A group of physicians and health experts, The Health Professional Action Network, is ready to be our voice in the media, in state capitols, and wherever we need to counter misleading claims or advocate for new solutions.

In honor of World Antibiotics Awareness Week in November, our national network partner, U.S. PIRG Education Fund, featured seven infectious disease physicians, specialists, scholars and pediatricians from our Health Professionals Action Network in an eight-part video series. These champions of medicine joined staff to discuss antibiotic resistance and the need to reduce antibiotic use in human and veterinary medicine.
On Nov. 15, U.S. PIRG Education Fund joined a group of panelists at Harvard University to discuss the future of antibiotics. Speakers presented solutions such as stopping the routine use of antibiotics on factory farms, investing more time and money into developing new antibiotics, and implementing legislation that curbs the overuse of antibiotics.

Setting off a chain reaction
In October, MASSPIRG released our national network’s “Chain Reaction IV” report grading the top 25 U.S. burger chains on their antibiotics policies. Most, including McDonald’s, received failing grades. BurgerFi and Shake Shack were the only two chains to earn “A” grades for sourcing beef raised without routine antibiotics.

The routine use of antibiotics in livestock significantly contributes to the spread of antibiotic resistance. In fact, nearly two-thirds of the medically important antibiotics sold in the U.S. are intended for use in livestock and poultry operations.

Fast food restaurants, as one of the largest markets for meat in the U.S., can play an instrumental role in pushing producers to use antibiotics responsibly if they commit to only purchasing beef raised without routine antibiotics.

Throughout 2018, MASSPIRG and our national network called on McDonald’s to make commitments to use its influence to take action that could spark an industry-wide shift toward curbing the overuse of antibiotics in the meat industry. Today, we’re pleased to inform you that McDonald’s made a commitment to do just that.

McDonald’s made a commitment
Antibiotics vital to human medicine are routinely given to animals to help them survive crowded, stressful and unsanitary conditions, regardless of whether the animals are actually sick, threatening the efficacy of our life-saving medications. That’s why MASSPIRG and our national network have been calling on fast food chains such as McDonald’s to phase routine antibiotics out of their beef supply chains.

And in December, McDonald’s showed us it was listening. The company committed to monitoring and setting reduction targets for antibiotic use in its global beef supply chain by the end of 2020. Whether you eat at McDonald’s or not, this is a huge victory for public health.

“The Golden Arches just raised the bar for responsible antibiotic use in meat production. We can’t afford to misuse these precious medicines. Otherwise, we risk losing our ability to treat life-threatening infections,” said Matt Wellington, director of our national network’s Stop the Overuse of Antibiotics campaign. “McDonald’s new commitment is a promising step forward that will help preserve antibiotics for the future, and that’s something we should all be happy about.”
Winning victories to protect Bay Staters

From preventing discrimination by insurers to protecting consumers from identity theft, MASSPIRG celebrated major legislative victories in 2018.

Until January of this year, it was legal in Massachusetts for disability insurers to discriminate on the basis of sex. MASSPIRG worked tirelessly throughout 2018 to end this practice.

MASSPIRG Legislative Director Deirdre Cummings testified before the state legislative committee on Financial Services in support of H.482, An Act Providing for Equitable Coverage in Disability Policies. The law, signed by Gov. Charlie Baker on Jan. 10, 2019, ended the practice of charging women more than men for the same disability insurance policies, bringing private disability policies in line with most other insurance products in the state.

“This is a change that is long overdue,” said Deirdre.

Previously, state-regulated individual disability insurance was classified by sex. Filings at the Division of Insurance showed different premiums for men and women with the same job classification. For some policies, women have been charged as much as 61 percent more than men. No consumer should have to pay more for the same benefits based on their gender.
A major victory for data security
During a year of high-profile data breaches, Massachusetts took charge to help consumers better protect themselves from credit fraud.

We supported a bill to enable consumers to safeguard their personal financial information by allowing them to freeze and thaw their credit reports for free. The law, called An Act Relative to Consumer Protection from Security Breaches, requires that companies give consumers free credit monitoring services after a data breach and improves consumer notifications, among other protections.

“This is good news and offers consumers new tools to protect themselves from identity theft after a security breach like the recent ones at Equifax and Marriott,” said Deirdre Cummings, legislative director for MASSPIRG. “While a good first step, we still have some more work to do to hold companies accountable for failing to properly safeguard our personal information.”

Freezing your credit files prevents thieves from opening new lines of credit in your name. Consumers need these protections, and we applaud Massachusetts legislators for instituting them.
Protecting consumers from dangerous products

In 2018, MASSPIRG Education Fund and our national Consumer Watchdog team conducted independent testing and research to identify dangers that can pose risks to our health, safety or well-being; and worked hard to get dangerous products off of store shelves.

In 2018, MASSPIRG released a series of reports by our research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund. March’s “In Your Face” report found asbestos in three different shimmery makeup products sold at Claire’s, with one containing more than 150,000 fibers of asbestos per gram of product. Asbestos is an extremely dangerous substance that can increase the risk of skin cancer and cause lung cancer, mesothelioma and even death.

Our network quickly alerted Claire’s to these test results, and asked the company to recall the items and inform customers immediately, but representatives refused. MASSPIRG is now calling on Congress to pass legislation that will protect our kids by requiring appropriate testing and labeling of cosmetics.

MASSPIRG also released our national network’s annual “Trouble in Toyland” report in November, identifying unsafe toys that skirted safety regulations and made it onto store shelves and internet marketplaces. Our national network and health professionals across the country held news events to alert parents and others of the dangers some toys pose to children.
Lead is a potent neurotoxin that affects how kids learn, grow and behave.

MASSPIRG Legislative Director Deirdre Cummings speaks with Boston 25 News about lead in school drinking water.

Protecting children from lead

Providing tools to help get the lead out of schools
If you want to prevent lead poisoning, the best solution is simple: Get the lead out of anywhere that people, especially children, can be exposed to it.

That’s why on Oct. 22, 2018, in honor of Lead Poisoning Prevention Week, MASSPIRG partnered with our national network to release a new-and-improved toolkit to get the lead out of school drinking water.

“At a time when we have driverless cars and 3D printers, we shouldn’t tolerate a system that delivers lead-laden water to anyone, let alone our children,” says MASSPIRG Legislative Director Deirdre Cummings. “Luckily, this is one problem we know how to fix. We just need to do it.”

The kit provided parents, teachers and concerned citizens with facts, a video, action materials and additional resources to help get the lead out of local schools.

$30 million to get the lead out
In the past year, we saw our state leaders get serious about getting the lead out of drinking water.

On Jan. 23, Gov. Charlie Baker released his Fiscal Year 2020 budget, including up to $30 million to help school districts tackle the health threat of lead in drinking water. Lead is a potent neurotoxin that impairs how children learn, grow and behave. Yet of more than 43,000 taps tested at 980 Massachusetts schools since 2016, 59 percent were positive for lead in the water.

“Gov. Baker’s proposed funding marks a key milestone in our efforts to get the lead out of our children’s water at school,” said MASSPIRG’s Deirdre Cummings. “We look forward to continued leadership from the Baker administration and the Legislature to ensure that all our children have safe drinking water wherever they go to learn and play each day.”

MASSPIRG and our network partners at Environment Massachusetts are still advocating for better protections in Massachusetts, including a health-based standard for lead in drinking water in schools and child care centers, as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics.
Working to ban Roundup unless and until it’s proven safe

On August 17, a study from Environmental Working Group found glyphosate, the active ingredient in Monsanto’s Roundup, in a number of oat-based breakfast foods marketed to kids.

“Roundup has been linked to cancer by the World Health Organization and the state of California, but it, and generic versions of it, is still the most widely used herbicide in the U.S.,” said Kara Cook-Schultz, our national toxics program director. “If it’s showing up in kids’ breakfast foods, we should be absolutely sure of its long-term health effects.”

According to the study, 31 out of 45 tested products had glyphosate levels higher than what some scientists consider safe for kids. Using this and other growing evidence of Roundup’s widespread effects on public health, MASSPIRG’s Toxics program spent 2018 gathering support for state-level legislation to ban the hazardous pesticide.

**Monsanto’s day in court**

In 2014, Dewayne Johnson, a father of two, was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin lymphoma, a deadly form of cancer. As a former county school pest manager, Johnson sprayed hundreds of gallons of Roundup—using it 20 to 30 times per year.

In August 2018, a jury supported Johnson’s claim that Roundup caused his cancer, finding Monsanto accountable for hiding the health risks of Roundup and awarding Johnson millions in damages.

“I would never have sprayed that product on school grounds or around people if I knew it would cause harm,” Johnson testified.

Twenty-six million pounds of Roundup are sprayed on school grounds, parks and gardens every year, and Johnson’s case was the first to go to trial of more than 800 people suing Monsanto, claiming Roundup caused their cancer. The evidence against Roundup has been piling up for years, and in 2018, our national network was able to help pass five bans on Roundup in cities and counties across the country.
A renewed commitment to move us toward zero waste

From electronics to plastics, we throw away too much stuff. Some of this waste could be reused, recycled or repaired. Some of it should never have been produced in the first place. MASSPIRG is tackling the Bay State’s trash problem.

Defending our right to repair
If a product you own breaks, you should be able to fix it or find someone who can. But products ranging from dishwashers to smartphones are purposefully made to be difficult, if not impossible, to repair.

“While companies profit, the public is forced to pay the price in financial costs and environmental damage,” said Nathan Proctor, director of our national campaign for the Right to Repair.

When Microsoft pressed criminal charges against e-waste recycler Eric Lundgren for copying restore disks that allow people to fix old computers—even though the software on those disks is available online for free—our national network launched an effort to urge Microsoft to work with recyclers, not penalize them.

In 2018, MASSPIRG supported the introduction of a Right to Repair bill, because it shouldn’t be this difficult to keep our products away from the trash heap.

A plan for solid waste
Massachusetts set a goal in its 2010-2020 Master Plan of reducing solid waste disposal to 4.5 million tons a year. But that will no longer be sufficient—the most recent figures show that 5.6 million tons of waste a year are heading to incinerators and landfills.

“We cannot recycle our way out of the disposal problems in Massachusetts,” said Janet Domenitz, MASSPIRG executive director. “We need to turn the garbage truck around, and commit to a goal of zero waste.”

The Solid Waste Master Plan is the commonwealth’s blueprint for dealing with waste, required by law to be issued every 10 years since 1990.

MASSPIRG joined several other organizations in an effort to revamp the state’s approach to waste reduction. This coalition is using the drafting of the 2020-2030 Solid Waste Master Plan to point out the obstacles standing in the way of progress toward reducing waste, and lay out a process and plan for moving forward.
Advocating for 21st-century transportation solutions

MASSPIRG wins increased funding for regional transit
They don’t get as much attention as the Greater Boston MBTA system, but they deliver more than 32 million rides a year—and now they’re getting an infusion of new funds, thanks in part to MASSPIRG advocacy.

On July 26, 2018, Gov. Charlie Baker signed a budget providing $88 million in funding for the state’s Regional Transit Authorities, which provide a lifeline for people living in Springfield, Worcester, Lowell, New Bedford and towns in between. The funds will help avert service cuts on bus routes throughout the state.

“This is a big step in the right direction, but it’s just the beginning,” said our national 21st Century Transportation Campaign Director Matt Casale. “Moving forward, we need to expand and streamline public transit throughout the commonwealth.”

MASSPIRG was joined by more than 20 organizations in signing a letter to Gov. Baker, urging him to approve the funding.

Using Volkswagen’s misdeeds for good
On July 19, 2018, the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (MassDEP) released its proposal to use $23.5 million of the state’s Volkswagen emissions cheating scandal settlement on electric vehicle infrastructure.

“We commend MassDEP for committing to building a cleaner, healthier and more sustainable transportation network for Massachusetts,” said Matt Casale. “Volkswagen cheated its customers and put all of our health at risk by avoiding emissions standards, but the settlement provided the commonwealth with an opportunity to accelerate the transition to an electric transportation system.”

Transportation accounts for nearly half of the greenhouse gas emissions in Massachusetts, not only contributing significantly to climate change, but also putting our children at risk of asthma and increasing instances of lung and heart disease.

Throughout 2018, MASSPIRG worked to clean up our transportation system and reduce our reliance on fossil fuels to avoid the worst consequences for our health and our planet. The money from the settlement will be integral to the transition to an electric transportation system, a key step in moving our state toward a cleaner, healthier future.
Making Massachusetts more democratic

Automatic voter registration—it’s the law
In August 2018, after a four-year push by MASSPIRG and our partners, Gov. Charlie Baker signed a bill into law that establishes automatic voter registration. Now, when eligible residents interact with agencies like the Registry of Motor Vehicles or MassHealth, they will automatically be registered to vote.

“If there was a World Cup for election reform, passing automatic voter registration would definitely be a huge goal,” said Janet Domenitz, executive director of MASSPIRG. “Everyone who cares about democracy scored.”

An estimated 680,000 people who were previously unregistered to vote are now eligible. The legislation was endorsed by 65 organizations, including Common Cause, the League of Women Voters and MassVOTE. With your support, we’ll continue modernizing our elections.

Students mobilize young voters
Following a weekslong effort to register, educate and mobilize student voters, MASSPIRG Students claimed a “turnout victory” in the November midterm election.

Estimates showed a 48 percent to 75 percent increase in turnout at student-heavy polling locations on campuses with organized youth voter mobilization efforts, including 500 voters at Salem State University, 1,673 at UMass Lowell and more than 5,600 at UMass Amherst.

“Right now, 18 to 29-year-olds are the largest and most diverse set of potential voters alive. If we all voted, we could elect leaders who share our vision of the future,” said Theresa Soldan, a Salem State junior and MASSPIRG Students board chair who coordinated the nonpartisan New Voters Project campaign on her campus.

MASSPIRG Students’ New Voters Project campaign is a youth voter mobilization effort with a 35-year history. Prior to the Oct. 17 voter registration deadline, more than 3,500 students updated their registration with MASSPIRG Student volunteers on college campuses.
2018 ANNUAL REPORT

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