

January 2, 2024

Dear Councilmembers:

I'm writing to express opposition to ZTA 23-09, "Outdoor Incidental Use in the Ag Reserve," which is special interest legislation being rushed through for the benefit of one or two land speculators who are not farmers and have no established experience with agriculture.

Unlike a special exception for a particular use, the ZTA would completely change, irrevocably, the way land is bought, leased, and used in the Ag Reserve. It would drive up prices so that a large majority of real agriculture producers, most of whom lease much of the land they farm, would find land increasingly unaffordable to lease.

The sponsor of this ZTA says we need it to be "competitive with other counties." What are we competing for – their congestion, loss of farmland and greenspace, water shortages, suburban sprawl, concrete, and acceleration of climate change? Once land is taken out of farming it is lost forever. We must stop thinking of farmland as disposable land to be exploited.

The Ag Reserve has been funded for more than forty years by people who bought into its purpose to preserve agriculture, open space and rural character for the benefit of residents Countywide. That investment should not be abandoned for the benefit of a few land speculators. Countless MoCo citizens enjoy the myriad results of the Ag Reserve vision, and now many small farms are beginning to gain a foothold on producing table crops for local food. Please don't add to farmers' challenges by driving up land costs. "Yurts" and cabins for short-term rental are not farming activities, and they will in no way support food production. Calling them "agritourism" does not negate that fact.

There are much better ways to stimulate economic growth, and to address housing needs in the County than to begin to unravel the zoning that protects the Ag Reserve against relentless pressure to develop it.

Let's take a thoughtful, studied approach that uses real data and an actual cost/benefit analysis, with appropriate stakeholders at the table. This process worked well for the Solar ZTA and the Cemetery expansion ZTA in progress. This ZTA needs to be paused and more carefully considered.

Thank you for your consideration,

Bev Thoms

Tiewyan Farms



TESTIMONY ON ZTA 23-09: Outdoor Incidental Use in the Ag Reserve,

This proposal would allow motel-style units on land most anywhere in the Ag Reserve. When non-farming landowners can buy up land in the Ag Reserve for commercial lodging operations, calling it an accessory to an accessory to farming, farmers looking to buy or lease land for growing food and fiber will face significantly greater cost - in the one part of the county expressly set aside for agriculture.

Page 27 of the County's publication Envisioning Our Future published in June 1988 states:

AS THE ENTIRE NORTHEASTERN CORRIDOR BECOMES ONE VAST MEGALOPOLIS, WE SEE MONTGOMERY COUNTY'S AGRICULTURAL PRESERVATION AREAS AS A REFUGE - FOR WILDLIFE, FOR PEOPLE LONGING FOR FRESH AIR, AND FOR A VITAL AGRICULTURAL INDUSTRY THAT WOULD OTHERWISE BE CROWDED OUT BY HIGH LAND PRICES. IT WILL BE THE "GREEN LUNG" OF THE WASHINGTON METROPOLITAN AREA FILTERING OUR AIR. IT WILL BE A SYMBOL THAT WE CAN PRESERVE SOME OF OUR HERITAGE WHILE MOVING INTO THE FUTURE.

This ZTA which allows up to 10 cabins per farm will succeed in polluting the air, and the water because of the density of development it will provide throughout the Reserve. It will use up needed farm land for tourism instead of actual farming. Such dense development in the name of 'agritourism' will spoil the quiet rural character of the landscape, and deprive farmers of the services they need to farm in order to serve tourists. It is exactly what the AG Reserve was created to prevent.

I understand that most farmers and groups that support them are against this rushed proposed change because it shortchanges the very people this zone is meant for. I stand with farmers - withdraw this ZTA.