

Kaja R. and Minter P. Farnsworth III
BREAD AND BUTTER FARM
25101 Peach Tree Road
Clarksburg, MD 20871

January 9, 2024

Council Members
Council Office Building
100 Maryland Avenue, 6th Floor
Rockville, MD 20850

Dear Council Members:

We are writing to express our opposition to ZTA 23-09, "Outdoor Incidental Use in the Ag Reserve." We beg you to be extremely cautious in your consideration of this special interest legislation. Please do not rush forward with a controversial zoning amendment when there is no urgency indicated. No matter if you live and work down county or up county, most of Montgomery County's residents treasure and enjoy our unique Ag Reserve. We specifically purchased our farm in the Ag Reserve because of the limited development and zoning protection. We've already seen and experienced how exceptions and amendments are chipping away at what was once planned and protected against these very things.

We currently have a winery under development next to our farm on Peach Tree Road which may sound great but comes with some caveats. The county is going to allow large events, weddings, etc. regularly on our "RURAL AND RUSTIC ROAD" that was so classified by Montgomery County to not only restrict the type of maintenance that can be performed, but also to maintain the rural character. The rural and rustic roads in the Ag Reserve were intended primarily for local and agricultural use and not for the increased traffic caused by amended zoning changes, development and supposed economic growth. As stated by Christopher H. Marston, RRAC member emeritus 2012-2018, "These historic, scenic roads continue to be valuable and irreplaceable, and are integral to our working landscapes, rural areas and villages, and the functioning of the Agricultural Reserve. They strengthen our rural businesses including our farms, markets, orchards, stables, wineries, breweries and art studios along them. These roads are safely shared by all users, and their narrow pavements protect the water quality in our streams and reservoirs."

This ZTA 23-09 introduced by Natali Fani-Gonzalez and co-sponsored by Council President Evan Glass, Vice President Friedson and Council member Laurie-Anne Sayles mentions the following, "There is no place to stay anywhere near these amazing activities. Our residents are looking for authentic farm experiences, and there is keen interest from local businesses in providing accommodations for overnight stays as an accessory component of the farm's agritourism activities. Paired with farm-to-table food, hands-on farming experiences, and agricultural education, overnight stays in small, rustic structures would complement and enrich these popular agritourism experiences." There have got to be better and less permanently damaging ways to share farm experiences and stimulate economic growth in the County. Commuting to the Ag Reserve for the day to visit a winery, a pick your own farm, equestrian stables, etc. is a feasible and practical option and much less expensive and problematic than changing the zoning to allow short term overnight stays and all that goes with that.

This special interest legislation is being rushed through for the benefit of a small group of investors and land speculators that have no established experience with agriculture, nor do they appear to have any interest in farming or the protection of our very special Ag Reserve. And what is the rush? I'm sure you're all aware that once you permit this kind of amendment, there is no going back and the doors will be open for more even more exceptions to the planned use. The ZTA would completely and permanently change 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. There has been no cost/benefit analysis and no data to support claims about this ZTA's economic benefit.

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 green space, 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, especially in reserved areas meant to protect farmland and open space. Many of our neighbors on nearby aquifers have already experienced water shortages and well issues with the additional development allowed in our area.

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 these short term rental yurts or cabins "agritourism" reminds us of Obama's 2008 remarks, "You know, you can put lipstick on a pig, but it's still a pig" and "You can wrap an old fish in a piece of paper called 'change' but it's still gonna stink after eight years." Let's be honest about this attempt to further unravel the zoning that was put in place to protect the Ag Reserve and put a stop to the relentless pressure to further develop this special area. Agritourism may sound farm friendly but has proven to increase pollution through traffic emissions, increased sewage production, littering and noise. 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.

Sincerely,

Kaja and Minter Farnsworth