

From: Knight Kiplinger

Date: 1/8/2024

Please include this written statement in the testimony record for the hearing Jan. 16 on proposed ZTA 23-09. Thank you!

== Knight Kiplinger

To: The Montgomery County Council

From: Knight Kiplinger, Seneca, Md. (in Poolesville region of Ag Reserve)

Re: ZTA 23-09

Dear Friends:

I am a landowner in the Ag Reserve, with a 400-acre farm in Seneca that has been in my family for 65 years. Almost all of our land is under county ag preservation easements. Much of it is farmed in commodity crops (corn, soybeans, wheat) by a leading member of the Montgomery Agricultural Producers, whose members are highly respected friends of mine. And part of our farm is in pasture for grass-fed livestock, with small plots of organic vegetables. My family was strongly supportive of the creation of the Ag Reserve 40 years ago, and we continue to be.

In the civic realm, I am board chair of Historic Medley District, our western MoCo historical society; a member and funder of the Montgomery Countryside Alliance; and supporter of the Poolesville Fair Access committee and its initiatives for the economic vitality of the western county. But my position on the proposed ZTA is mine alone, and I am not speaking on behalf of any of these organizations or their members.

While I strongly support the creation of appropriately scaled and sited hospitality lodging in the Ag Reserve, I do not favor adoption of this ZTA at this time.

I have long favored a creative approach to authentic agritourism in the Ag Reserve, where such activities coexist with a vibrant commodity-based and retail farming sector. I am on record as believing that the Ag Reserve needs hospitality lodging that enables our downcounty residents and others in the DMV (and beyond) to make overnight stays while touring our farmers markets, historic properties, parks and trails, wineries, breweries and farms.

Every similar ag and historic region in the country, such as northwestern Loudon County, around Leesburg, Middleburg, Waterford, Lovettesville, etc., has attractive small accommodations for agritourism---but we don't. I expressed such views at a western county economic conference in Poolesville Oct. 27, before I had heard of or seen the proposed ZTA.

At present, we have virtually no such facilities—such as hosted bed-and-breakfasts and small inns—due to overly restrictive county rules relating to short-term lodging, septic standards and general commercial activities in our rural areas. Visitors to the Ag Reserve are limited to short day trips, and they have to return home each evening or find lackluster commercial rooms in hotels and motels in the I-270 corridor, in Germantown and Gaithersburg. This is no way to build a successful agritourism sector.

Creating appropriate guest lodging in the Ag Reserve would support our growing agritourism businesses without jeopardizing in any way the cornerstones of the Reserve—large-scale commodity agriculture and small-scale retail farming.

These uses can be compatible, if the hospitality lodging is appropriately sized and located and part of a carefully considered, multi-part plan. Such planning should focus on creating hospitality lodging in and around existing villages in the Ag Reserve, adapting existing facilities --such as historic homes and farm structures---for short-term lodging. Agritourism sites- - such as markets, wineries, artist studios, and wedding venues--should be allowed—indeed, encouraged—to create such lodging on their properties, through adaptive use of existing structures, so that their guests can stay overnight and spend another day or two in the vicinity, patronizing other Ag Reserve businesses.

This approach would focus on integrating small-scale lodging into the current fabric of our villages and farms, rather than building new clusters of cottages specifically for this purpose, as seems to be envisioned by the ZTA. Some new structures could become part of the mix in time, but should not be the first step in this process.

My careful study of the proposed ZTA leads me to the conclusion that it was hastily crafted without much input from the local community and our civic leaders. While I could suggest a number of revisions that would make it useful as part of the overall plan I'm suggesting, I think it would be best to defer action on it while a broader approach is considered. For this reason, I oppose enactment of it at this time.

Some opponents of this ZTA seem to want no changes in the Ag Reserve and do not seem to want any exploration of the hospitality lodging concepts that I am urging. I believe this position to be short-sighted, as it will eventually undermine public support for Ag Reserve. It will block opportunities for downcounty taxpayers to experience the enormous value they are getting from the Ag Reserve, both environmentally and economically. (I am also gratified to hear that many of my neighbors in the Ag Reserve like the ideas I am proposing.)

While some of us may disagree on the long-term strategy for bolstering agritourism, we are united in our feeling that this ZTA is not the right first step. Yes, it could be improved by amendment, but it would be better to start from scratch with a community-based planning process.

Thank you for your consideration of these ideas. I look forward to playing a role in the next stages of this process.

Sincerely,

--- Knight Kiplinger