

January 30, 2024

Letter to the Montgomery County Council

Re: ZTA 23-09, Farming - Incidental Outdoor Stays

Dear Council Members:

Thank you for this opportunity to speak on the proposed legislation. Since the establishment of the Agricultural Reserve, the League of Women Voters of Montgomery County (LWVMC) has been monitoring its activity and council actions impacting it. The consensus position of LWVMC is to support the preservation of agricultural lands through a variety of means. LWVMC has studied the [Agritourism Study](#) completed in 2019 by the Park and Planning Commission and supports agricultural tourism within the Agricultural Reserve provided that such use relates to agricultural activities, but we also call for restrictions on permitted uses. Our position is that activities that stimulate a need for commercial activity not related to agriculture within the Reserve need to be carefully regulated. Overnight facility development is likely to increase the pressure for other non-agricultural uses in the reserve.

LWVMC opposes ZTA 23-09 as written because we believe it would negatively impact the Agricultural Reserve over the long term. We are concerned by the ZTA's proposed deletion of the following sentence from the zoning code, as it would allow unlimited area for the incidental overnight structures, even with the 10-unit maximum:

"The maximum footprint for any structure and the total footprint of all structures primarily used for education or tourism is limited to 10% of the total footprint square footage of all structures on the site used for agriculture."

No alternative limitation was included.

Another concern is that encouraging overnight stays in the reserve will increase the load on well water and septic systems there, even with composting toilets. Will the county be able to protect those systems or will overnighting facilities eventually require water and sewage services to be extended into the reserve?

When the agricultural community spoke to the council's Economic Development Committee during the panel on agritourism on Nov. 6, they did not mention overnight accommodations in the Agricultural Reserve. Indeed, transportation options and signage were their priorities. We believe the area that surrounds the reserve has space for lodging that would allow a tourist to be about 5-20 minutes away from most points in the reserve and that this is sufficient.



LWVMC also wishes to note that when the Agritourism Study was completed in 2019, the expectation was that the council would review the agritourism goals and then request that the Planning Board develop an agritourism plan. Unfortunately the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted normal processes, and the Agritourism Study was still waiting for a council review when ZTA 23-09 was introduced on November 7. We believe a well thought out agritourism plan should be developed to support council actions regarding agritourism. It appears that the Economic Development Committee will be updated on the study in February—we urge the council to call for an agritourism plan following that event! Therefore, **LWVMC supports tabling ZTA 23-09 until various actions impacting the Agricultural Reserve have been evaluated and a comprehensive plan for agritourism is developed.**

Once again, LWVMC appreciates the council listening to community organizations and residents when it comes to the Agricultural Reserve. We take tremendous pride in this shining resource for our county and want to see it responsibly preserved for future generations to enjoy it as much as we do today.

Susan Albertine
President,
League of Women Voters of Montgomery County