

Alfred M. Wurglitz

Testimony to Montgomery County Council

January 16, 2024

Thank you for the invitation to speak at this public hearing on proposed ZTA 23-09.

I am a 46-year County resident ¹ opposed to ZTA 23-09, which would allow resort hotel-motel buildings to accommodate vacationers to be built in the County's Agricultural Reserve.

Bottom line - this well intentioned, but ill-conceived ZTA in effect proposes to trade the now economically-viable local food production function of the Ag Reserve (from over 550 farms) for resort hotel vacation opportunities for well-heeled vacationers. The proposed zoning changes are not justifiable, data driven "change" for a valid public purpose. Rather, they stand to gut a meritorious, thoroughly-vetted and time-tested zoning policy that provides County residents, and the region, a secure source of sustainable food production, and other established valuable benefits. If nothing else, the food insecurity needs of so many of our low income, homeless and residents of color feeling the disparate effects of COVID-19 during the global pandemic, underscore the wisdom of virtually all your predecessors since 1980 in adopting and maintaining the integrity and economic viability of the Ag Reserve.

Why is this ZTA a bad idea?

Preservation of the Ag Reserve's basic function has, from its start, depended on maintenance of low land prices and related land rents that can sustain viable agriculture activities, primarily in local food production. Recognizing that imperative, the measures adopted by the County in the original Ag Reserve legislation were specifically designed to maintain those low land prices and land rents. Special interests have long tried to leverage those low land price economics to benefit a variety of non-agricultural businesses by proposing zoning changes to accommodate non-farming uses.

¹ These are solely my personal views. I am currently a technology-focused principal in one of Maryland's largest law firms; a member of the Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce, and have served on the City of Gaithersburg's Economic Development Committee. During my career I have also engaged as a technology-focused economic development consultant, lecturer and author for Governor's Offices, state and local government economic development agencies, Chambers of Commerce and universities.

County Councilmembers and County Executives since the Reserve's adoption have faced those pressures simply because there is money to be made (or saved) from accessing (intentionally) low priced land for many business or other purposes than agriculture production. County government by and large has resisted those pressures successfully. Today's expanded Council faces this challenge to Reserve viability and perhaps will see others, especially if this zoning change were to be adopted.

This proposed ZTA's allows construction and operation of resort hotel-style buildings to service tourism but will not facilitate economic development that supports agriculture. Instead, it will kill the economic viability of farming in the Reserve because Ag Reserve land prices will rise as "resort" revenue is anticipated or realized. In addition to the ownership and management-contract interest of the hospitality industry itself, wealthy people who want to own a plush Four Seasons-style resort hotel will "buy a farm" on which to build and operate it. Existing farmers and "would be" Reserve farmers – farmers from our County, Maryland, other states, or immigrants with farming experience from Africa, Central or South America, Asia, and Ukraine and other parts of Europe, will be deterred from starting or operating farms in the County.

All of this is before the serious environmental impact of building and operating vacation resort facilities in the Ag Reserve.

- A multitude of additional (resort hotel) fireplaces that burn fuel and emit pollution.
- A multitude of new resort hotel water demands on the Reserve's often overstretched aquifer for vacationing tourists' resort hotel rooms and kitchens rather than farm residents and crop watering.
- A multitude of new demands for resort hotel sanitation infrastructure – a horde of new septic tanks and leach fields.
- Detrimental Impacts on the County's scenic and farm roads as a multitude of resort hotel tourists, trash trucks, construction vehicles, and workers who daily service the resort hotel and food preparation facilities travel to and from them.

As a long-time County resident with substantial economic development experience, I urge the County Council to withdraw, oppose or otherwise disapprove this proposed ZTA, and instead develop additional policies and programs that will permit increasing numbers of County residents to directly benefit from and participate in Ag Reserve activities while assiduously continuing to protect its food production and other established benefits for all residents and generations to come.

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