

Conservation Montgomery

TO: Montgomery County Council

January 9, 2024

RE: ZTA 23-09

The Agricultural Reserve was originally set aside to support and foster farming, maintain forests and protect open space and clean water supplies. During the pandemic it became an invaluable source of local fresh food when grocery shelves were empty. Programs such as Land Link have brought needed diversity to the food available and the communities served in our County as well as increasing the variety of farmers able to grow food.

We join the many voices of opposition to this proposed ZTA, which includes the farm community itself. By altering the very definition of farming, this ZTA would change the nature of uses allowed in the Ag Reserve Zone (AR) and violate the reasons our Ag Reserve was created in the first place. More importantly, it has been proposed without a process that includes the very stakeholders it will impact.

Proposing such a drastic zoning change to our farmland inflicts significant, long term economic and environmental damage to our entire farming community which relies on the water supply provided by a sole source aquifer. Geological conditions and shallow soils make the Reserve sensitive on many levels. Farmers need adequate water for crops. Residents require clean drinking water. Streams are dependent on water seeping through the ground to maintain adequate base flow that supports biodiversity. More development will draw more water.

Impacts created by past development decisions have already brought a decline in water quality to the last, best clean streams such as Ten Mile Creek. Past, current and future drought conditions threaten our back-up water supply in Little Seneca Reservoir.

We cannot risk diluting the purpose of having such invaluable farmland by starting a chain reaction ending with loss of the Ag Reserve where farmers grow local food and maintain forests and farms to protect clean drinking water supplies. It is always a concern this process may already be underway, accelerated by recent land use decisions. Accessory structures for overnight accommodations is not farming and not tourism that enhances farming. As in European countries lodging can be successful and support farming, if done sensitively. We trust the Council will choose to abandon this particular proposal and start over with a process that engages all stakeholders from the start.

Sincerely,

Ginny Barnes, *Vice-Chair*
Conservation Montgomery