



FAIR ACCESS

FOR WESTERN MONTGOMERY COUNTY

- ★ ALL NEW POOLESVILLE HIGH SCHOOL
- ★ COLLOCATED COMMUNITY SERVICES CENTER

Comments to the Montgomery County Council January 16, 2024

Introduction

The Fair Access Committee for the Western County submits these comments and asks that they become part of the record in the Council's consideration of ZTA 23-09 which would allow overnight stays on farms in the Agricultural Reserve zone that also have accessory agricultural education and tourism activities conducted as a part of the farm's regular operations.

We commend the intention behind the proposed ZTA to promote policy that could spur economic growth in the farming sector and the Ag Reserve. No matter how the Council decides to deal with the proposal, we believe there is a broader underlying issue at stake regarding economic vitality in the Ag Reserve that deserves its attention. **Based on its work over the last few years, the Fair Access Committee for the Western County believes that an overarching question regarding the Ag Reserve is how to make its economy thrive through intentional and thoughtful policies, strategies, and programs to support the small businesses and non-profits, historic sites, and recreational venues located throughout the Reserve that rely on attracting visitors from down county and from the rest of the DMV.** These venues, sites and businesses are a key underpinning of the Ag Reserve economy. Their success is reliant on the "visitor/tourist economy" and on the attraction the Reserve has for many who want to experience the open spaces, historic and recreational sites, and farmlands that it encompasses.

We believe that more than 40 years after the Ag Reserve policies were adopted, it is time to take a comprehensive look at what it has accomplished and reexamine its purpose and success going forward. It was of course intended to preserve open space and farmland and support the survival of farming. But both the Wedges and Corridors and Thrive 2050 plans note that the Ag Reserve contains many other elements and is home to thousands of residents. Thrive in particular notes that more must be done to attract visitors to the Ag Reserve so they come to better appreciate and support its existence and help support the many small businesses, non-profits, historic and recreational venues that also make up its fabric. How all these elements come together requires a thoughtful and renewed vision to take us into the next decades.

The Work of the Fair Access Committee and the Ag Reserve

There has been a consensus for decades in Montgomery County in support of preserving the Ag Reserve, a large segment of which is in the Western County. Those of us who live here have strong feelings about the need to preserve and protect it. Most of us who live here do so because we value and appreciate the undeveloped lands that define the Reserve.

The Ag Reserve is founded principally on protecting agricultural and open spaces. It was created by legislation enacted by the County Council and implemented beginning in 1980. It works primarily by restricting or prohibiting major developments in housing or commercial facilities. Its success has resulted in the creation of a 93,000-acre rural area of farms, open spaces, recreation sites, small businesses, and small towns and villages right on the edge of the highly urbanized and populated DMV.

The Fair Access Committee for the Western County was established in 2018 to promote the wellbeing of the residents of who live in this part of the Ag Reserve. **Our primary focus has been to work to ensure equity in how the county and state treat the residents of the Western County in terms of facilities, programming and services that improve lives and support health and well-being.**

While we prize the open spaces of the Reserve, it can also be easy to lose sight of the very real needs of those who live here because of its land area and remoteness. **Hidden need, lack of population, distance, and isolation are evident in the Reserve and many struggle to have their needs met.** The Ag Reserve and its economy cannot thrive if many of those who live here are left behind due to inequitable access to county and state programs, services, and facilities.

The Visitor/Tourist Economy of the Ag Reserve

The same is true with respect to the economy of the Reserve. The Wedges and Corridors Plan of 1964 and Thrive 2050 observe that the Ag Reserve contains a wealth of attractions rooted in the open lands and spaces it protects but that are, in most cases, not connected to agriculture. The Ag Reserve by its very nature helps preserve historic sites, including many notable settlements established by former slaves and freed blacks, encourages outdoor entertainment and recreation, and nurtures art of all kinds as well as unique, creative small businesses, including breweries and wineries.

The work of the Fair Access Committee over the last few years has led us to believe that a key overarching question regarding the Ag Reserve is how to make its economy thrive through intentional and thoughtful policies, strategies, and programs to support the small businesses and non-profits, historic sites, and recreational spaces located throughout the Reserve that attract visitors from down county and from the rest of the DMV.

These entities, venues, and organizations are uniquely vulnerable because they depend on customer visits to a large, open, sparsely populated rural area that is far from urban/suburban centers. Attracting people out here and getting them to linger and visit as many places as possible is vital to the success of these businesses and organizations. Understanding why people come, where they go, what they like, what they know about the Reserve, and what draws them back is important in developing better programs and strategies to promote visits to the wonderful venues of all kinds in the Reserve.

Thrive 2050 and the Visitor/Tourist Economy of the Ag Reserve

Thrive 2050 observes that while farming should remain the primary use in the Agricultural Reserve, the area set aside for the rural land use pattern also provides opportunities for recreation and tourism, uses that must be better understood and supported. The plan notes that aside from supporting the many small businesses and venues of all kinds in the Reserve, the more visitors who come to see it, the more they will come to appreciate it and the stronger the public consensus for protecting it. **Helping preserve and promote the visitor/tourist-based small business economy of the Ag Reserve also helps preserve it.**

Thrive 2050 provides very little in terms of what could be called a "Master Plan" for the Ag Reserve. It focuses on what assets, facilities and venues are in the Reserve, its basic origins, how to continue to protect and preserve it, and on the importance of educating the public and encouraging visitors to experience its wonders. It does not have much to say about the broader underlying economy in the Ag Reserve for example or what needs to be done to attract visitors and better educate the public about the Reserve, except in high level terms.

The County sponsored an agritourism report in 2019 and much of its focus is on farms and farming and how to help farmers add to the economic viability of their operations by attracting visitors to their farms. These are laudable goals but again, there is not a lot of original research in the report and while it contains numerous recommendations, most of them require extensive work and consultation before they can be implemented. There has been no follow-up to the report as far as we can determine.

The county has focused attention on agriculture and its vitality (it has a whole department dedicated to it) as a foundation of the Ag Reserve but far less on the rest of the Reserve's people, economy, and social condition. The result can be a failure to have informed and constructive discussions about possible policy changes that may help improve the lives of Western County residents because there is no "unifying vision" that goes much beyond preserving agriculture and the farming economy. We are, in effect, debating and discussing issues in a vacuum because of the lack of good underlying data and information.

The Fair Access Committee released a white paper at the October, 2023 Western County Economic Forum it sponsored. The paper explained how many small businesses, non-profits, historical and recreation sites operate in the Reserve that have no direct connection to farming. The way this segment of the Ag Reserve economy works is far less well understood and there is no one agency responsible for helping in that regard within county government. The paper described the "hub and spoke" economy of the Ag Reserve with Poolesville, at its commercial center, providing access to a wide range of restaurant and eating venues, important historic buildings and sites, school facilities, including a high school that will soon be rebuilt, dozens of summer and fall events on the town's green "Whalen Commons", multiple parks, and highly connected, walkable neighborhoods.

Poolesville's ability to serve its residents and those of the Western County while also attracting and serving more visitors and tourists helps the "spokes" around the town throughout the Reserve that depend on consumer and visitor traffic. By developing better information and data on the visitors and tourists who are coming and might be enticed to come to the Western County and the rest of the Ag Reserve, the county can help boost the fortunes of the many "spokes" throughout the Reserve.

At the summit, fifteen recommendations or ideas were discussed that the speakers felt could help boost the Ag Reserve economy. These ranged from more visible, easier to see and understand signage to help guide visitors to venues, to research and data examining where visitors to the Reserve are coming from and going to and their knowledge and understanding of the Reserve, to considering ideas to allow limited overnight stays for visitors.

The Town of Poolesville has independent zoning, taxing, and planning authority and is undertaking a number of initiatives to help spur more visitors and economic activity. For example, it helped fund initial studies to establish a co-op grocery store. It has also developed the “Streetscape Plan” to enhance the safety and attractiveness of its main downtown roadway, Fisher Avenue. It recently procured funding from the federal government which, when combined with its own funds, will make the new plan a reality. Its new Master Plan will soon be released as well with an updated vision for the Town’s future.

The Fair Access Committee for the Town is working to ensure funding to build a community center with clinic space, support to enclose its swimming pool so it can be used year-round, and funding to help transform a key historic building in town into an arts and performing arts center. Its work is focused on ensuring residents of not only the Town but the Western County have access to many of the services and facilities other residents throughout the county can conveniently access.

Creating an Inclusive and More Comprehensive Policy Framework for the Ag Reserve

To create a vision that is more inclusive for all the residents, businesses, and venues in the Ag Reserve, we first need to have a grounding in a well-designed and researched set of facts and data on everything from the small business “visitor/tourist” economy of the Western County, to healthcare outcomes, to the social and financial make-up and condition of the residents of the area.

Fair Access believes it would behoove the County Council to sponsor several studies that would help lay the groundwork for fruitful discussion and policy work in the future concerning how to make the Ag Reserve as successful as possible for all who live in it and come to visit. Once those studies are done, a number of approaches could be taken to constructively consider the future of the Ag Reserve:

1. Convene a forum or conference to pull all the data together to consider and develop possible recommendations;
2. Task the Council's Economic Development Committee to use the studies to convene a series of hearings that could result over time in legislation or policy changes to consider; or
3. Consider an approach used with some success to discuss and understand complex policy issues by convening a “Chautauqua”, a guided listening and discussion process that often helps create consensus and a renewed vision for the future.

The Fair Access Committee would suggest the following research be considered and funded to help guide the process of re-envisioning the future of the Ag Reserve:

- The Office of Legislative Oversight (OLO, a permanent study group funded by the Council) could conduct a review of the Ag Reserve economy, social indicators, and health indicators. It would gather all data that has been developed elsewhere plus look at similar indicators in other areas of the country and the state that have a large farming economy as we do nearby a large urban

area with lots of historic sites, recreation attractions and small business venues. The study could help create a much better idea of the social and economic health of the Ag Reserve and its residents.

- The Council could ask the County's Planning Department to do more research on the Ag Reserve economy, focused not on the agriculture and farming sector but rather on the rest of the Reserve's visitor/tourist economy that has not been studied as extensively nor in a comprehensive manner. Part of such a study would be to look at the "hub and spoke" model that the Fair Access Committee identified in its recently released (October, 2023) economic white paper. Another important part of the study would be to examine in a much more granular way poverty, ethnic diversity, and the financial status of families in the Ag Reserve. Distance, hidden need, isolation, and lack of population defines the Reserve in terms of its residents and these factors are unique in the County and have an impact. The Planning Department began to do some of this work last year and made an initial presentation before the Western County Economic Forum in October, 2023.
- The Town of Poolesville funded a market study recently on the feasibility of establishing the aforementioned co-op grocery store in Town (the only grocery store closed in Town in 2012). In part, the study used anonymized GPS data that is available from reputable marketing companies to assess where people are coming from when they go shopping for groceries and where they are coming from (in some cases, they are leaving from work and visit a store). Visit Montgomery has begun a study using anonymized GPS data that does much the same thing but looks instead at visitors to the Ag Reserve and where they are coming from and go to in the Reserve. Visit Montgomery is only just beginning this work. Much more can be done to obtain a more robust picture of where people are coming from when they come to the Reserve and where they travel to within the it. Data should be developed using survey information on why people visit the Reserve, what they know about it, their image of it, and knowledge about it. Visit Montgomery, the Montgomery County Economic Development Council and the Planning Department could be tasked with doing a major study on these issues.
- The County did an incredibly informative study on health care outcomes in 2018 by Zip Code that finally helped to reveal some of the serious health problems we face in the Ag Reserve due to distance and isolation and an aging population among other things. We have known about these problems for years but until the study was completed, the County candidly did not really understand the problems that distance, isolation and lack of population pose when it comes to health care outcomes. The study did not look at the Dickerson or Barnesville Zip codes and recent data in the County's own "equity map" (which is broken down in a more granular fashion than the Zip Code study) shows that in certain segments of the Ag Reserve, poverty levels and likely health outcomes are a serious problem. An update to the Zip Code study that includes all segments of the Ag Reserve is needed and would be helpful in filling in the picture we have of the Ag Reserve, its economy, and its residents.

We encourage the Council to consider these proposals seriously. We think the data and information we are suggesting could be fundamental to developing good policy regarding the Ag Reserve so that it can really thrive and benefit all its residents and the county as a whole.