

ZTA 23-09 Testimony

Marc Potash, 400 Acre Farm Owner in the Montgomery County Ag Reserve
January 16, 2024

Good evening, President Friedson, and esteemed members of the County Council. My name is Marc Potash, and I'm here tonight to express my support for Zoning Text Amendment 23-09.

I am the owner of almost 400-acres of working farmland located in the Montgomery County AG reserve, where we cultivate 200 acres of rye, engage in livestock farming, operate a whiskey distillery, and employ 8 full-time team members.

I endorse this ZTA with the conviction that it will enable visitors to the Ag Reserve to gain a deeper appreciation and richer experience of this area.

Furthermore, I believe the passing of this ZTA will play a critical role in fostering the long-term viability and health of the agricultural areas within Montgomery County.

A quick search for "farm stays" on Google reveals numerous rural communities across the country that allow overnight stays. These communities, like ours in Montgomery County, take great pride in their agricultural landscapes. However, what sets them apart is their decision to capitalize on the uniqueness and beauty of their rural areas by offering farm stay accommodations.

Unlike temporary tents or yurts, many of these accommodations are individual structures. ZTA 23-09 presents an opportunity for Montgomery County to provide a similar level of experience, showcasing one of the county's genuine strengths, rather than compelling individuals to seek such experiences elsewhere.

As I am sure you are aware, currently a visitor to the Ag Reserve who is there for a farm tour, a visit to a winery, brewery, or distillery, to pick apples or to attend a wedding, cannot stay overnight in the Ag Reserve —except for a very limited number of bed and breakfasts.

Opponents of the ZTA argue that it would be the demise of the Ag Reserve.

This simply is not true.

Opponents said virtually the same thing about ZTA 18-03 in 2018. And 7 years later, out of 454 farms in the Montgomery County Ag Reserve, there is only 1 brewery, 3 wineries and 1 distillery in operation.

Moreover, when you go to www.VisitMontgomery.com, there is an entire section called the "Tastemakers Trail Map" dedicated to bringing people to these establishments. These businesses are the pride and joy of Montgomery County and the winemakers in the Upcountry embrace the grape to glass business model. Montgomery County itself has invested over 20 million dollars in Crossvines, enabling local growers to bring their grapes to age and bottle for wine making.

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ZTA 23-09 enhances the educational and tourism activities already permitted in the Ag Reserve. It ensures that any overnight stay is accessory to the primary use of the property, limiting structures to 10 units, prohibiting cooking facilities, and allowing only two adults per unit per stay.

How does a family spending the night on a farm after a day in a nearby pumpkin patch pose a threat to the Ag Reserve?

Farming is inherently challenging and with narrow financial margins. In many cases farmers will earn less than \$200 dollars per acre per year.

ZTA 23-09 introduces an additional revenue source for farm owners while allowing Montgomery County to retain revenues that currently flow out of the county when families book farm stays elsewhere.

Furthermore, ZTA 23-09 would empower aspiring farmers to enter the agricultural sector, allowing them to augment their yearly earnings and meet the loan obligations for land expenses that traditional farming will not cover.

Lastly, this ZTA serves to promote and educate visitors about the amazing assets of the Montgomery County Ag Reserve.

I strongly urge the Council to support ZTA 23-09.

Thank you.