

Sugarloaf Countryside Conservancy
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**Testimony to the Montgomery County Council
January 16, 2024**

I am here as a board member of the Sugarloaf Countryside Conservancy, a non-profit land trust. We obtain conservation easements donated by landowners in the Ag Reserve. The landowners receive federal and state tax deductions.

We are just one of many organizations with programs to incentivize conservation of Ag Land. There have been, at times, seven different State and County programs in Montgomery County. ¹

Hundreds of landowners who have chosen conservation over development opportunities believed in the vision of the 1980 Council that created the Ag Reserve.

ZTA 23-09 would break faith with past and future generations, by chipping away at the unique zoning that makes the Ag Reserve possible. It might be an unintended consequence, but you would be opening land values to speculation for commercial purposes. You will never put the cork back in that bottle.

How would it do that?

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- ¹ Montgomery County Agricultural Easement Program (AEP)
 - Montgomery County Transfer of Development Rights Program (TDR)
 - Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation (MALPF)
 - Maryland Environmental Trust (MET)
 - Montgomery County Rural Legacy Program (RLP)
 - Legacy Open Space Program (LOS)
 - And in 2008, the County's Building Lot Termination Program (BLT).

Allowing a commercial business, like an overnight retreat, to be exempt from TDR requirements AND to operate on farmland will drastically change land values. People who put a conservation easement on their land will see neighbors, playing under new rules, selling land for more money than it would ever be worth as farmland. The confidence in the Ag Reserve system will unravel.

What Else Can Go Wrong?

- It will be a lot harder for new farmers to buy or lease land.
- It will be harder for farm families to make the decision to keep the land in the family.
- And when other entrepreneurs dream up new businesses that need open land in the Ag Reserve to be viable, how will you say NO to them, if you have said YES to the developers of overnight luxury retreats?

Please remember this: It is a one-way journey, and - you will never put the cork back in that bottle.

The Ag Reserve has been successful. After 40 years, we have a thriving agricultural economy, with commodity crops, fruit and vegetable farms, a booming equine industry, and a resurging investment in beef cattle. Let's enhance our success, let's don't undermine it.

It's important that the whole of Montgomery County is benefitting from the Ag Reserve.

- The Ag Reserve is the lynchpin of our regional battle to fight climate change.
- Locally grown food output is booming.
- More can be done to make the Ag Reserve a resource for school children and visitors, but let's be thoughtful about how we do it.

ZTA 23-09 is an idea hatched by non-farmers, for the benefit of non-farmers, to the detriment of farming. This ZTA should be withdrawn or killed.