

Dear Members of the Environment and Transportation Committee,

February 26, 2025

Greetings from Montgomery County's Agricultural Reserve. Since 2001, Montgomery Countryside Alliance has been the key player in promoting and protecting the Reserve. We are writing to urge broad collaboration with local stakeholders, particularly farmers, on HB1228 Montgomery County Agricultural Reserve Study MC 15-25.

Montgomery County's 93,000 acre Agricultural Reserve has served as an award winning model for other municipalities seeking to balance thriving farms and growing population centers.

While a study of how to improve conditions for growing thriving farms in the Reserve is welcome - in our 20+ years as stewards of the Agricultural Reserve, we have seen an innumerable number of proposals to shoehorn activities that have nothing to do with Agriculture into the Ag Reserve. There seems to be a sense that the Reserve is somehow "empty space" in need of new activity. The Reserve is home to 500+ farm operations, almost all family run and industry topping \$70 million in sales each year. The food grown in the Reserve flows to local farmers markets and food banks. The Reserve is a hub of recreation activity throughout the year.

Though "reserved" for a specific purpose, the Ag Reserve can change and adapt to the needs of the moment, but the fragile balance of the rural economy requires moving forward carefully and with the full cooperation of stakeholders – prioritizing the voices of the farmers who are fulfilling the zone's intended use now and in the future. Here are some items the study should focus on:

**Increasing land access for next generation producers (with a focus on underserved farmers):** When the study seeks out established farmers and those seeking to join their ranks, you will likely hear about tangible actions that could improve their operations. Land prices are a top issue. MCA's Land Link program is full of aspiring and expanding farmers with many seasons of training seeking land to rent or buy. By and large, the land seekers are people of color, many of them immigrants. Most are seeking land to grow culturally appropriate food clamored for by diverse communities in Montgomery County and by local food banks. This diverse crop of farmers is already finding it hard to find and afford farmland – non-ag uses create an extra layer of competition for farmers in the only part of the county set aside for Agriculture. A fully featured incubator program to support this new generation of land stewards has been a farmer-identified need for some time.

**Balancing Competing Uses:** The recent issue of overnight accommodations in the Reserve is instructive as this study moves forward. ZTA 24-02 was first proposed to allow any size motel operations in the Reserve on farmland as accessories to agriculture. This bill was crafted without the input of existing farmers and if successful would have taken untold numbers of acres out of production. The ZTA ended up allowing rustic accommodations as a conditional use to better balance active farming, overnight stays and resource protection. Carefully deployed guardrails in proposals help accessory uses fit into the rural economy. When we talk to farmers, the accommodations they are seeking are more on-farm housing for farmworkers.

**Groundwater is an increasingly limited resource:** The Reserve relies on the Piedmont Sole Source Aquifer as the only viable source of potable water. This is by design. [Our recent study](#) with a seasoned hydrogeologist shows that unconstrained growth in the Poolesville area has the potential to dry local wells. Throughout the region more broadly, droughts are becoming more frequent and more severe and

will require more proactive conservation measures even without projected development increases. In considering new activities in support of local farms, each must fit into a more constrained water budget shared by the whole zone.

Agritourism can't happen without Agriculture – in crafting a visitor study an effort must be made to understand the needs of the farmers on the ground. Please ensure HB 1228 contains a directive for meaningful outreach and direct coordination with agricultural and conservation stakeholders.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Taylor", enclosed within a circular flourish.

Caroline Taylor

Executive Director

Montgomery Countryside Alliance