

## **Agritourism Study**

### **Background**

Increased interest in agricultural education, tourism and farm-to-table businesses has prompted discussion about ways to enhance the economic impact of the county's award-winning Agricultural Reserve. While the Functional Master Plan for the Preservation of Agriculture and Rural Open Space enabled preservation of farming in Montgomery County, it did not fully anticipate the growing importance of agricultural economic development to the ongoing preservation effort.

Important emerging issues in agricultural economic development—agritourism, farm-to-table activities, increased interest in small-scale wineries and breweries, and culinary tourism—have been addressed individually as initiatives were proposed. This approach risks inadvertent creation of conflicts and precludes a comprehensive approach to agricultural economic development issues.

The Agritourism Study included in the Planning Department's FY18 work program represents an effort to develop, with Executive Branch agencies, farmers, entrepreneurs and other interested stakeholders, a comprehensive, countywide approach to land use and zoning strategies for agricultural economic and cultural development.

### **Study Approach**

Using extensive outreach, the study will articulate issues raised by farmers, entrepreneurs, planners and regulators. Work will be closely coordinated with the Office of Agriculture to assure that the study will benefit agricultural entrepreneurs, decisionmakers and other interested parties. It will look at applicable sections of the county's zoning ordinance, its subdivision regulations, and the building code to determine if modifications are needed to provide additional clarity and direction. The study can also be used to broaden understanding of the processes associated with seeking permits for activities that support farming. The study will look to the Department of Permitting Services and other Executive Branch agencies to help explain the need for and value in regulating some agriculture-related activities. Additionally, the study will draw and expand on work done some years ago in the county's Heritage Area Management Plan to look at important themes and ways to market the effort.

### **Tasks 1-8**

#### **Task 1 - Stakeholder Coordination and Input**

The goal of the study is to cooperatively develop, with Executive Branch agencies and other stakeholders, appropriate strategies for encouraging increased economic development in support of farming and ensuring that applicable regulations and guidelines are both comprehensive and readily grasped by decision makers and prospective entrepreneurs.

**Advisory Committee:** An Advisory Committee composed of community stakeholders and agritourism experts will be established to review progress of the study and to provide input at key intervals and decision points. Agritourism experts and advocates

from the non-profit and private sectors, in addition to local officials, will provide a balanced discourse on the current issues and status of agritourism in the County. Advisory Committee membership includes representatives from Montgomery County Department of Agriculture, Montgomery County Department of Permitting Services, and key Montgomery County staff; in addition to civic associations and farmers with expertise in agritourism.

**Technical Committee:** Technical Committee will consist of key Planning and County staff. This committee will meet regularly to help guide the project's direction on more of a day-to-day basis.

## **Task 2 – Interviews**

To get a better sense of the kinds of planning and zoning issues facing property owners and to generate ideas about how they might better address them, there will be a series of interviews/focus group discussions, organized by Planning staff. These interviews will provide Planning staff and the Committees a better sense of the kinds of issues being faced and it will further provide guidance for subsequent research on what other communities have done to address similar questions.

- Stakeholder interviews to understand issues and opportunities
  - Determine what is “actually working” in terms of agritourism
  - Identify what is threatened by current plans, policies, development patterns, and market forces

## **Task 3 - Comparative Review**

Comparative review of agricultural tourism and economic development efforts in other jurisdictions in this region and nationally. Thurston County Washington, for example, has an extensive set of zoning and regulatory mechanisms devoted to economic development activities in its agricultural areas.

## **Task 4 – Zoning/Building Code Evaluation**

Detailed evaluation of the county's Zoning Code, its Subdivision Regulations, and the Building Code. Where necessary and appropriate, make recommendations for modifications.

## **Task 5 - Montgomery County Heritage Area Management Plan**

Evaluation and updating sections of the 2002 Montgomery County Heritage Area Management Plan to determine if adjustments are needed to incorporate agricultural economic development and cultural initiatives; market analysis undertaken for the original heritage plan could be reviewed and updated as part of this effort.

**Finalizing the Study:** Tasks 6 and 7 will primarily be the responsibility of the Planning Staff and may require multiple meetings with various elected and appointed individuals and bodies.

**Task 6 – Narrow Choices**

- Begin to narrow potential solutions to address agritourism issues based on input from Advisory Committee, Planning Board, County Executive, and County Council.

**Task 7 – Identifying/ Refining Policies**

- Identify policies and regulations that need to be modified as necessary based on direction from the Advisory Committee, Planning Board, County Executive, and County Council and complete report.

**Task 8 – Composing and Presenting the Final Report**

- Prepare and present final report to the Planning Board and Council.