





Agritourism Study: Briefing

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Completed: 07/03/19

Description

Staff will provide an update to the Planning Board on the history, purpose and progress of the Agritourism Study, including a description of the Agritourism Study Advisory Committee (ASAC).

Staff Recommendation

Planning Board discussion and guidance to staff.

Background

The Agritourism Study is an effort to identify opportunities, constraints and potential strategies to support the evolution of farming and agricultural tourism in Montgomery County while continuing to protect and preserve the Agricultural Reserve, including its farms, rural open space and agricultural heritage. The Agritourism Study relies on the expertise of farmers, agritourism entrepreneurs, community members, industry experts and governmental representatives, through the ASAC, to provide a balanced discourse on considerations and potential solutions.

The following memorandum describes the history and purpose of the Agritourism Study, summarizes the work of the ASAC to date and identifies next steps.

BACKGROUND

History and Context

The Agricultural Reserve, established in 1980 with the adoption of the *Preservation of Agriculture and Rural Open Space Functional Master Plan*, is a land conservation policy designed to protect farmland, agriculture and rural open space. The result of decades of planning and policy development, beginning with the 1964 *General Plan (On Wedges and Corridors) for the Physical Development of the Maryland-Washington Regional District in Montgomery and Prince Georges Counties*, the “Ag Reserve” allows preservation of agricultural and rural open space by concentrating growth and development along defined corridors and population centers. It includes 93,000 acres – nearly a third of the county’s land – and extends along the county’s northern, eastern and western borders – from the Patuxent River to the Potomac River.

While the *Preservation of Agriculture and Rural Open Space Functional Master Plan* enabled preservation of agriculture, farmland and rural open space, it did not anticipate the growing importance of agricultural tourism to the ongoing preservation effort. Increased interest in agricultural education, tourism and entertainment has prompted discussion about opportunities to enhance the economic impact of the Ag Reserve and prompted the Agritourism Study.

Purpose

This study seeks to identify opportunities and constraints for the evolution of the Ag Reserve, including agricultural activities that have evolved beyond traditional farming to preserve and sustain agriculture in Montgomery County. The study seeks to encourage activities with a nexus to agriculture, including agricultural education and agritourism, that increase awareness and knowledge of the Ag Reserve, enhance its attractiveness as a destination and support its farmers and farms, while preserving agricultural culture and heritage.

ADVISORY COMMITTEE AND CONSULTANT SUPPORT

The Planning Department formed the ASAC in October 2017 and formally invited farmers, agritourism entrepreneurs, industry experts, governmental representatives and members of the Ag Reserve community to participate in the study. The role of the ASAC was to review the progress of the study and provide guidance at critical intervals during the development of the study. The diverse representation of the ASAC was intended to provide a balanced discourse on current issues and the potential impacts of agritourism in Montgomery County.

Overarching Themes from ASAC Meetings

The ASAC has met several times since late 2017, with discussions focusing on the following overarching themes:

- The Agricultural Reserve should be protected and preserved, but also evolve to enhance economic viability of farming and agricultural land, including agricultural economic development through tourism.
 - As agritourism evolves, the Ag Reserve’s unique ability to produce agricultural products for the region must be preserved.
- The Agricultural Reserve has evolved since its establishment.

- Traditional farming activities have evolved to maintain economic viability.
- Increased education and awareness are necessary to convey how and why we have the Ag Reserve.
- Ongoing agritourism activities and events are increasing and evolving, with an increased interest in and demand for access to the Ag Reserve countywide.
- Challenges to supporting agritourism today, as well as in the future, include:
 - An inconsistent, undocumented process for agritourism businesses.
 - Adequate facilities and infrastructure to accommodate events.
 - Balancing the need for flexibility with clear regulations.

AGRITOURISM STUDY GOALS

During their June 26 meeting, the ASAC established the following goals to guide the Agritourism Study:

- Protect and preserve farming, farmland and rural open space in the Agricultural Reserve.
- Support existing and future agritourism activities through improved processes for agritourism businesses and promotional tools.
- Support agritourism activities with a direct nexus to agriculture, to facilitate preservation of farming, farmland and rural open space.
- Increase awareness of the Ag Reserve’s assets, including education of agricultural practices and better wayfinding.
- Provide inclusive and equitable access to the Agricultural Reserve.

NEXT STEPS

Staff, in consultation with the ASAC, will begin to develop a menu of potential solutions to achieve the study goals. The menu of potential solutions will draw upon direct input from ASAC members, ideas and suggestions discussed during previous ASAC meetings and strategies implemented in other jurisdictions.

Staff anticipates presenting a draft of the Agritourism Study, to include the overarching themes, study goals and menu of potential solutions, to the Planning Board this autumn.