






Agritourism Study: Final Draft

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DESCRIPTION

Staff will present the final draft of the Agritourism Study to the Planning Board.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Planning Board discussion, guidance to staff and approval to submit to the County Council for a briefing.

SUMMARY

Increased interest in agricultural education and tourism activities has created new opportunities to preserve farming and farmland as well as reinforce the agricultural economy. With these new opportunities, there are also new challenges. The Agritourism Study seeks to understand these opportunities and challenges and develop a menu of potential solutions to promote agritourism while maintaining the integrity of the agricultural and rural character of the Agricultural Reserve.

The Agritourism Study relies on the expertise of farmers, agritourism entrepreneurs, community members, advocacy organizations, and governmental representatives, through an Agritourism Study Advisory Committee, to provide a balanced discourse on the opportunities, challenges and potential solutions.

The following memorandum describes the process used to develop the Agritourism Study, including the work of the Agritourism Study Advisory Committee in the development of the study themes, goals and menu of potential solutions. While these foundational elements of the study represent the opinion of the majority of Committee members, this memorandum also describes areas where Committee members had differing opinions on potential solutions.

BACKGROUND

Study Process

The Agritourism Study, included in the Planning Department’s fiscal year 2018 work program, was initiated to identify issues, challenges and opportunities to support the economic viability of farming and ensure that the implementation of agritourism was comprehensive, consistent, predictable and transparent for entrepreneurs, implementing agencies and the community. The study was also originally envisioned as an opportunity to evaluate the intersection between agritourism and heritage tourism, initially explored in the 2002 *Montgomery County Heritage Area (Heritage Montgomery) Management Plan*.

An Agritourism Study Advisory Committee was established in late 2017 to provide input at key intervals and decision points as well as review the progress of the study. The committee, including farmers, agritourism entrepreneurs, members of the agricultural community, advocacy organizations and governmental representatives met for nearly two years and discussed issues, challenges and opportunities to support agritourism. While the role of the committee was initially envisioned as providing input at key intervals and decision points, this role evolved throughout the study to ultimately craft the study’s themes, goals and menu of potential solutions.

In addition to the involvement of the Agritourism Study Advisory Committee, Planning Staff also engaged a consultant team to conduct a study of agritourism policies and regulations in Montgomery County, comparable jurisdictions within the Washington, DC metropolitan region and across the United States to identify strategies for managing, regulating and promoting agritourism. The consultant team conducted initial research to understand regulatory issues and best practices as well as evaluated the practices of national and regional leaders in agritourism. The resulting Comparative Review of Agritourism Policies and Code Assessment, included in the study as Appendix D, were used as a technical resource to inform the study.

To develop the draft Agritourism Study, staff built on relevant plans and studies, historic and current data on farming, the dialogue of the Agritourism Study Advisory Committee and findings of the Comparative Review of Agritourism Policies and Code Assessment. In addition to relying on these resources and dialogue to develop the framework of the study, staff and the committee worked collaboratively to develop themes and goals as well as the menu of potential solutions.

STUDY CONTENT

Existing Conditions

Farming and farmland have evolved since the establishment of the Agricultural Reserve nearly four decades ago. In 1978, just prior to the establishment of the “Ag Reserve,” Montgomery County had 667 farms. This number remained relatively stable until 1992, when the number of farms decreased to 561. The number of farms has remained stable since the 1990s, with 558 farms identified in the 2017 Census of Agriculture produced by the United States Department of Agriculture.

While the number of farms has remained stable over the past 25 years, the average size of each farm has decreased from 178 acres in 1978 to 117 acres in 2017. During that same period, the amount of land devoted to farming decreased by nearly half, from 115,316 acres of farmland to 65,537 acres of farmland in 2017. Traditional agricultural activities, including grain farms and livestock operations have been sustained, while tabletop food production as well as the horticultural and equestrian industries have increased.

In addition to the growing prevalence of tabletop food production, nurseries, sod farms, landscape companies, horse farms and equestrian facilities, interest in agricultural and cultural education and tourism is on the rise. The evolution of farming and farmland in the county paired with growing interest in agritourism prompted the Planning Department to initiate the Agritourism Study and establish the Agritourism Study Advisory Committee.

Themes and Goals

The Agritourism Study themes and goals were developed in collaboration with the Agritourism Study Advisory Committee to establish common ground among a diverse group of stakeholders, provide a foundation for the study and guide the menu of potential solutions. The committee developed the themes and goals over a series of meetings and ultimately voted on the language included in each.

The study themes, goals and menu of potential solutions are representative of the Committee's dialogue, which primarily focused on the following:

- Agritourism must be clearly defined and have a direct nexus to farming.
- The permitting process for agritourism must be consistent, equitable and transparent.
- Agritourism events and venues should celebrate the Agricultural Reserve without negatively impacting the character.
- Assistance is needed to promote and support agritourism, including assistance with restroom facilities, parking and other accommodations for visitors.

While the study was also originally envisioned as an opportunity to evaluate the intersection between agritourism and heritage tourism, the committee's dialogue was largely focused on agritourism. Several committee members expressed their support for preservation and stewardship of historic and heritage assets and acknowledged that these assets can provide a context for agritourism, but a majority of the committee opposed reference to historic and heritage assets in the study themes and goals. Rather, the majority of the committee suggested a companion study specifically focused on heritage tourism.

While the Agritourism Study themes and goals do not reference historic and heritage assets, the content of the study references the role of the 2002 *Montgomery County Heritage Area Management Plan* in agricultural preservation, evolution of the Agricultural Reserve and opportunities to sustain the county's agricultural and cultural heritage.

Menu of Potential Solutions

There is no single solution to advance attainment of the study goals. For this reason, the study identifies several potential solutions to promote, support and facilitate agritourism in Montgomery County. Each of the potential solutions recognizes the importance of maintaining the integrity of the natural, cultural and historic character of the Agricultural Reserve, as well as sustaining the economic viability of farming.

Staff, in collaboration with the Agritourism Study Advisory Committee, developed a menu of potential solutions organized by the study goals. The study includes over 30 potential solutions, as well as potential mechanisms to implement the solutions and prospective partners in implementation. The potential solutions were discussed, refined and endorsed by a majority of the Committee members. They range from establishing programs and procedures to address current challenges associated with agritourism to opportunities to promote and support agritourism businesses.

While the Agritourism Study Advisory Committee largely achieved consensus on the menu of potential solutions, there were potential solutions that were not included because the majority of the committee did not support the solutions. These include:

- Establish a monitoring and enforcement program for agritourism initiatives to ensure that agritourism activities are permitted and accessory to agriculture.
- A Zoning Text Amendment to establish standards and a tiered approach for agricultural education and tourism activities, similar to the standards established for Equestrian Events in the Montgomery County Zoning Ordinance (Section 3.2.4), that distinguishes those that can occur as a matter of right from those that require discretionary approval (including limited or conditional use).
- A Zoning Text Amendment to establish an overlay zone for the Agricultural Reserve (AR) Zone to identify permitted agritourism uses and establish standards and a tiered approach for new agritourism venues that distinguishes those that can occur as a matter of right from those that require discretionary approval (including limited or conditional use).
- Identify opportunities to offer “pre-event” ticketing of agritourism events to maintain appropriate event sizes.

These solutions were included in initial drafts of the study because, as discussed in the Comparative Review of Agritourism Policies, several other communities in the region and across the nation have established standards and criteria to regulate events and activities for agritourism uses to provide a transparent process and limit potential adverse impacts associated with agritourism events and activities.

Several members of the Committee expressed concern with these potential solutions as they had the potential to regulate and restrict events and activities specifically tied to agriculture. While consistency, equity and transparency were desired in the permitting process, several members of the Committee indicated that flexibility was also critical to maintain economic viability in agriculture. Committee members were concerned that the standards and tiered approach for regulating agritourism activities and events would result in an onerous, costly review and approval process than would limit flexibility and economic viability. Likewise, “pre-event” ticketing was perceived as a limitation that would discourage attendance and return visits.

While the Committee disagreed on these specific potential solutions, they achieved consensus on the themes and goals as well as over 30 potential solutions to promote agricultural education and tourism activities while preserving farming, farmland and rural open space in the county’s Agricultural Reserve.

CONCLUSION

While this study establishes a framework and identifies several potential solutions to promote agritourism, the implementation of the identified solutions requires further coordination and collaboration between public agencies, private entities, advocacy organizations and residents. Successful implementation of the potential solutions requires leadership and investment from the public sector, as well as partnerships with public, private and non-profit agencies to pursue potential solutions in collaboration with all relevant stakeholders and in a manner consistent with the Agritourism Study goals.

ATTACHMENT: Draft Agritourism Study