

May 2014 Newsletter

Montgomery County Zoning Code Rewrite:

First, Do No Harm

The several-year process of overhauling the County's Zoning Code has yielded a simplified and modernized document – in many ways an improvement over the previously cumbersome and perplexing Code. But a funny (and troubling) thing happened on the way to this streamlined document – entirely new uses have been inserted in the Ag Reserve without full stakeholder discussion and with potential loopholes that open the door for conflict with the AgReserve's Master Plan and with existing historic rural communities.

A broad new use category called AgTourism and Education has been added despite repeated and fact-based calls by stakeholders such as Sugarloaf, MCA and the MC Food Council to convene a working group to evaluate how best to ensure that the new uses support agriculture and are in harmony with the AgReserve's rural communities. In addition, imported food waste composting on individual properties has also been inserted into the revised Code.

Could this AgTourism and Education category provide for non-agricultural institutional uses and a rise of per acre cost of farmland thus making it harder for small farming businesses to locate in the AgReserve? Are open air concerts considered AgTourism?

While the goals of both new uses may be laudable, many questions and concerns arise. So far the County Council has only set up an informal discussion group to address Sugarloaf's concerns. Some kind of "legislative guidance" will be crafted. However, the County Council has not been willing to convene a working group for appropriate and inclusive discussions.

Sugarloaf maintains that the regulations governing these additional uses need to be re-visited and tightened before the Code goes into effect on October 30, 2014. There is still an opportunity for the County Council to get this right. The AgReserve and its residents and businesses deserve better. Sugarloaf is working closely with the other stakeholders mentioned above to get the County Council to address these issues.

Last but not least: On Saturday, May 10, SCA was delighted to host "A Celebration of Rural Montgomery" at the Linden Farm, the first ever combined SCA Plant Swap and Monocacy Garden Club's bi-annual Flower Show. The gothic dairy barn proved an especially appropriate venue for the beautiful horticultural specimens and arrangements in the Flower Show, and the bank barn hosted over ten area vendors who shared their wares with an estimated 200-300 attendees.

Hopefully, there will be more collaboration between the two groups, who share many members. Our enduring thanks to Linda Pepe from SCA and Kerri Morningstar and Lisa Hilton of the Monocacy Garden Club, who together recruited, managed, and led a delightful horde of volunteers, way too many to mention here.

Sincerely,

Dick Hill, President

Sugarloaf Citizens' Association