

# LEAVE NO FARMER BEHIND

*Nurturing diverse next generation farmers in Montgomery County*

BY CAROLINE TAYLOR

Let's face it, the vast majority of Americans are consumers. We are not self-sufficient when it comes to filling our fridges and cupboards... not remotely. We depend on an ever-dwindling number of farmers growing on ever decreasing farm acreage. If we are to strengthen this fragile system in the future we must be intentional about cultivating next generation producers. Take a look at some numbers. The average American, according to the US Food and Drug Administration, consumes 1885 pounds of food a year, nearly 1 ton! Add to that the sobering statistic that nationally, and in Maryland, the average age of our farmers is just over 59. The nation lost more than 100,00 farms between 2011 and 2018. And though we are fortunate to have family run farms in Montgomery County that will be passed along to the next generation, these do not number nearly enough to address the growing need for local food production. Moreover, we must provide equitable access to land

and resources for skilled diverse new farm businesses. The Agricultural Reserve, at over 90,000 acres, has plenty of room for more farms, and we will all thrive with greater inclusiveness.

## **Giving Voice to Challenges**

Last June a group of diverse producers, all growing in Montgomery County, met at Dodo Farms in Brookeville with Councilmember Gabe Albornoz to share concerns about the difficulties new farm businesses encounter. Uplifting news of the growing diversity of local producers and products, especially culturally relevant crops, was tempered by the universal frustration about the myriad barriers to getting started. Access to affordable land and resources such as wells, fencing, equipment, affordable close by housing options, equitable access to capital, clearer guidance to navigate various requirements for farm start-ups were cited as needed if we



PHOTO: WJB MIDDLETON

are to build a more just and resilient local food system. Citing challenges of the historic choice to push black farmers off their land and intergenerational wealth, Nia Nyamweya, owner operator of Beauty Blooms Farm, nonetheless shared “I am energized and excited by the possibilities and creativity around potential policies and funding to build equity for farmers of color here.” Montgomery Countryside Alliance launched a program in 2011 to help address the challenge of affordable farmland access. Landlink Montgomery has been somewhat successful in matching aspiring farmers with farmland, connecting them with over 400 acres. But as the program’s director Kristina Bostick notes, “Just this month we added five new farmers seeking land—that’s more than one per week in addition to the 25 producers enrolled already that are still looking. The demand for land is heartening—people wanting to step up and grow for their communities, contribute to the food system—but our network of landowners in the program is just not robust enough to keep up. We hear from Montgomery County Community Garden staff that the same is true for them: waiting lists of many seasons for an open plot to grow.”

### **A 2010 Farm Incubator Plan**

*The greatest challenge for the Agricultural Reserve in the next forty years will be to keep it a working landscape. That will require a new and more diverse generation of farmers. A farm incubator could provide critical assistance to young and new farmers seeking entry as producers by helping them develop local land, management, and market knowledge, provide mentoring in agronomy, and an opportunity to join the local farming community.*

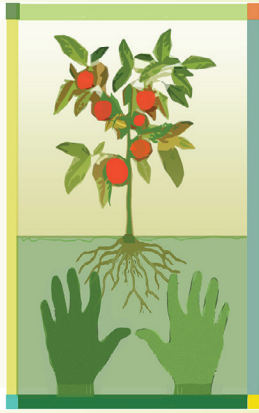
— DR. ROYCE HANSON

In March of 2010, the Green Economy Task Force, a stakeholder group appointed by then Montgomery County Executive Ike Leggett, released a report that included a recommendation to establish a small farm incubator program on county parkland with emphasis on promoting sustainable growing practices. The

report concluded the program would be consistent with the ongoing practice of leasing over 900 acres of parkland to commodity producers and other incubator programs for start-up companies specializing in advanced technology and life sciences. In addition to providing aspiring farmers access to land, the program would offer technical, legal, and marketing guidance, as well as access to shared farm equipment and start-up cost assistance. Then Montgomery County Planning Board Chair Dr. Royce Hanson directed the parks department to devise the plan that would provide for potential host sites. The proposal, a result of collaboration between park staff and stakeholders, was released in May of 2010. And... that plan, whether for lack of funding or shift in political winds, has for 13 years remained largely unfulfilled. Yet the need to advance the small farm incubator grows with each passing year. Land and infrastructure costs have skyrocketed while interest in local farming, particularly from diverse producers, has greatly expanded.

### **Eco City Farms’ Urban Farm Incubator...**

Located at Watkins Regional Park in Upper Marlboro in Prince Georges County, the Eco City Farms Urban Farm Incubator provides a training ground to help farmers gain access to up to half-acre plots for up to 5 years. The project resulted from collaboration by ECO City Farms, the Prince George’s Soil Conservation District (PGSCD), Prince George’s Food Equity Council (FEC) and the M-NCPPC Parks and Recreation Department. The aim is to provide access to land and resource support for beginning farmers to launch new farm-based businesses in Prince George’s County using regenerative, certified naturally-grown, and organically-grown agricultural best practices. “Urban farmers may need less land than traditional rural farmers, but urban land is far more costly and scarce. It takes persistence and collaboration to make it happen. ECO City Farms is a 13-year old teaching and learning farm that “grows great food, farms and farmers.” It took all thirteen of these years and many partners to create this first-ever incubator farm in our County. When it’s finally done, it seems simple. But no one should underestimate what it takes to get the land, infrastructure, capital, stakeholders and farmers all working together to make it happen,” says ECO City Farms CEO, Margaret Morgan-Hubbard.



## LAND LINK MONTGOMERY

*A program of Montgomery Countryside Alliance helping farmland and farmers find each other...*

Land Link has matched 33 new and expanding farmers with long term leases. Here are just a few of the farmers that are still seeking land through the program.

### FARMER SEEKING LAND

An African with 30+ years experience in farming back in my country and 4 years experience in gardening here in USA looking for one acre of land to produce vegetables, and if possible, poultry to give my community the best vegetables and chicken. I will soon complete Beginning Farmers Training Program 2023 with Eco City Farm and would like to apply my new knowledge learned.

### FARMER SEEKING LAND

I have 6 years of farming experience in Africa. I am looking for under 5 acres to sustainably grow African vegetables for my community.

### FARMER SEEKING LAND

Farmer with decades of experience looking for a piece of land to grow jicama, beans, corn varieties, radishes, cilantro, or other foods culturally appropriate for the Central American community. Open to smaller acreage.

### FARMER SEEKING LAND

I am a personal private chef with 10 years farming experience looking for land for lease to grow crops and plants for the ingredients I use for my customers. In addition, I also make specialty food products like cashew hummus, almond dips, flax pesto. I would like to grow garlic, herbs, paprika, and red bell peppers for making the products. Any land with easy access to water where I can use a greenhouse in cold seasons would be great.

### FARMER SEEKING LAND

Farmer with 10 years experience seeking to raise sheep and goats for meats for the greater Ethiopian, Eritrean and other communities, including restaurants. I would like maximum of 5 acres and a minimum of 2 acres.

Learn more: [www.mocolandlink.org](http://www.mocolandlink.org)

BETHESDA BEAT profiled The Faces of Land Link:  
[bit.ly/BBLandLink](https://bit.ly/BBLandLink)



PHOTO: JON BERGER

*Farmer Maiya Lay (right) of Love Bug Farm planting fall kale and collards with a volunteer in the shared high tunnel at the Urban Farm Incubator in Upper Marlboro, MD.*

## Food System Resilience—Not a Moment or New Farmer to Waste

In the intervening years since Montgomery County's farm incubator was proposed, further compelling rationale for the initiative has emerged. Tanya Spandhla of Passion to Seed Gardening notes that children involved in their local food system can, by visiting and volunteering with the incubator farms, "gain hand-on knowledge of where their food comes from and how it's grown which might trigger a desire to consider farming as a career path." She adds, "With so many challenges swirling around food security, the incubator could also play a role in locally feeding the supply chain of fresh produce to our communities and schools." The incubator is also poised to provide needed guidance to advance innovative regenerative growing practices. Moreover, with the creation of the County's new Office of Food Systems Resilience last fall, there will be additional opportunities to advance the incubator project, including identifying funding through various federal, state, and private grants. Montgomery County is fortunate to have a number of sturdy non-profits that can help collaborate to advance the incubator. And as Kristina Bostick rightly observes, "planting farmers together just makes sense—shared resources and the opportunity to support and learn from each other."

To learn more or how to help visit:  
[mocoalliance.org/incubator](http://mocoalliance.org/incubator)

*Caroline Taylor is the executive director of Montgomery Countryside Alliance and lives with her family on beloved small acreage in the Agricultural Reserve.*