

May 28, 2010

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Patricia O'Neil

President, Montgomery County Board of Education

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Dear Ms. O'Neil and Board Members,

First, I can't say enough about how positive and collegial a process the Monocacy Roundtable has been. I have served as a representative of the Agricultural Reserve, and hope that I have been able to bring to the table some measure of the history and purpose of Montgomery County's Agricultural and Open Space Reserve. The approaches that were developed by the group were rightly geared toward immediate, mid-term and long term needs of the County's rural school district. That is how I see the Board approaching this issue: establish concrete policy first, and use the policy to incorporate additional programs that ensure enrollment within the rural school cluster remains healthy and appropriate to the needs of students, and within the budgetary framework of the County. Make no mistake, this collective of representatives from several school clusters, schools, towns and the Reserve itself took this task very seriously, and was at all times mindful of the dire budgetary situation we currently face.

By way of background, The Montgomery Countryside Alliance was formed in 2001 by a small group of passionate and dedicated Montgomery County residents, seeking to protect our nationally recognized model of conservation, the Montgomery County Agricultural Reserve. Originally formed to oppose a bridge crossing that would destroy the protected area, the group has since expanded to represent the Reserve's needs more extensively, including protection from unanticipated development threats and increasing support and awareness of its local Ag communities. MCA's board consists of community members from all over the county. Their enthusiasm and commitment to preserving and protecting our county's rural areas is unwavering. Please take a moment to tour our website, and learn more about the history of the Reserve and our current projects.

I have attached my position paper. The length reflects a desire to provide as much in the way of background and rationale as reasonably possible. This is such a wonderful opportunity to provide needed policy supporting rural schools and their long-term preservation, success and vitality in the highly valued Ag Reserve. Please let me know if there are any questions, and if the Board would like to visit the Ag Reserve to see, firsthand, why so many consider it "*Montgomery County's Best Idea!*"

Warm regards,



Caroline Taylor  
Executive Director

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## Monocacy Roundtable Position Paper

Submitted by Caroline Taylor  
Montgomery County's Agricultural Reserve  
May, 2010

### Introduction:

When the Superintendent's proposal to close Monocacy Elementary School first hit the airwaves most residents in the County's Agricultural Reserve were not alarmed, including me. Our initially calm response stemmed from tangible experience of the County's commitment to the Ag Reserve, and its community schools, demonstrated in the mid-1990s. At that time developers were seeking land for large scale projects outside Poolesville, and proposed annexing hundreds of acres of farmland and forest into the Town, effectively removing them from the protection of the Rural Density Transfer (RDT) zone. The developers' central argument, which they still trumpet today, was that unless more subdivisions are built and population is increased the County will close our rural schools.

The farming community and civic leaders, recognizing that the threat of losing our rural schools would begin a process that would unravel the preservation of the Ag Reserve, went to the County Council and Executive with their concerns. Both assured the community that our rural schools were never meant to be held to the same enrollment standards as elsewhere in the County. Armed with this crucial promise, the annexation was defeated and the land remains in active farming and preserved forest. However, *this important pledge was never committed to official policy.*

Now, in the Reserve's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, we have an opportunity to put stated policy to paper, and to apply it. This approach, labeled "option 0", emerged from the roundtable group as the unanimously preferred *first step, or foundation*, in a process aimed at ensuring that Montgomery County's rural schools thrive and continue to provide high caliber education, serving as critical support for the communities located wholly within the boundaries of the Ag Reserve. This position paper provides the supporting background and rationale for this written policy, and for supplemental programs (MC BOE "*approaches*" – see Conclusion) that will keep enrollment numbers healthy within a formally established, rural school policy framework.

## History:

- Created in 1981 by the County Council, the nationally-recognized Agricultural Reserve encompasses one-third of Montgomery County, and was set aside under special zoning rules created with the intention of preserving agriculture. Covering more than 93,000 acres, about 70,000 acres of which are west of I-270, with 23,000 more on the east side. Development within its boundaries is limited to 1 home per 25 acres.
- Almost 30,000 acres of parkland anchor the Reserve's open space, but the Reserve's true purpose is to preserve agriculture in the County. The designation of large areas of parkland within the Reserve further suppressed the potential for future development.
- About 12,000 acres of open land have been perpetually preserved for agriculture and resource conservation through private conservation easements and sale of development rights to private land trusts, Montgomery County and the State of Maryland.



## A Place With Purpose!

**The County's Master Plan for the Preservation of Farmland and Open Space provides ample rationale for policies that support continued preservation, including:**

- **Locally, sustainably grown food**  
American Farmland Trust's latest statistics are sobering: **The Nation is 13 million acres short of farmland needed to produce food for its citizens!** The good news here in Montgomery County is that table crop production is on the rise. Young families are establishing diverse farm operations that are being supported by the County's Office of Economic Development. Today fruits, vegetables, dairy, wine, wool and more are available to area residents at pick-your-own farms and orchards, as well as restaurants, grocery stores and farm markets in nearby cities and suburbs. MCA is working with USDA to facilitate increased livestock production in the Reserve.
- **Environmental Protection**  
The Ag Reserve serves as a "green lung" that cools and cleans the air while protecting our drinking water and the threatened Chesapeake Bay watershed. The land also supplies critical habitat for mammals, birds, trees and other wildlife.

## **A Place With Purpose! (continued):**

- **Recreation and Rural Beauty**

Hiking, biking and birding are among the many activities available in the 93,000 acres of farmland within an hour's drive of Washington, D.C. The Ag Reserve provides inspiration and resources to many artists, artisans, writers and historians.

- **Historic Preservation**

The Ag Reserve also preserves historic Civil War sites, Underground Railroad routes and 18th and 19th century homes, barns, mills, and schools.

- **Economic Advantages**

The Ag Reserve offers many economic benefits by employing thousands of people and contributing millions of dollars to the economy through its 577 farms and 350 horticultural enterprises. Farmland contributes more money to the community than the cost of the services they require. 2006 figures indicate that for every tax dollar collected in revenue from residents in the Reserve - \$.53 is spent on their services. In the growth centers, for every dollar collected - \$1.17 is spent on services.

- **Quality of Life**

The Ag Reserve contributes to the overall quality of life in the region and serves as a model for farmland preservation that has informed and motivated communities across the country.



## Examples of County policies that support the Reserve

- The County's Department of Transportation (DOT) created different policy areas based upon population density. For example, the policy area in which the Poolesville school cluster is located, called the "Rural Policy Area" has, according to DOT's 2010 data, an average of 157 people per square mile. The roadway requirements for that population clearly differ from the other "urban" and "suburban" policy areas, where population density may exceed 5000 per square mile. In the Reserve DOT provides for special classifications of roadways that do not have same width, alignment and other requirements as elsewhere in the County as part of the successful Rural and Rustic Roadways Program. The policy supports the goals of the master plan by ensuring that roadways promote preservation of historic setting, vistas and are safe for the conduct of farm equipment and vehicular traffic. They do not impose the standards set for roadways in more densely populated areas of the County.
- The County's Solid Waste and Public Facilities' Master Plan sets the Reserve outside the WSSC water / sewer envelope. This means that rural residents, farms and businesses are served solely by groundwater wells and septic systems. In other words, the Reserve can not be hooked to public/water sewer. The policy was made in support of the aim towards preservation: limited septic capacity and groundwater help to hold development within the Reserve down. Moreover, the policy saves in the cost of providing services. In 1995, the United States Environmental Protection Agency designated the portion of the Piedmont Aquifer that serves the Reserve as a protected Sole Source Aquifer, recognizing formally the importance to the rural community of this resource.
- Land Uses are severely restricted in the Reserve in order to promote the primary purposes of farming and open space preservation. For example, private schools are not allowed in the RDT, either by right or special exception. The Barnesville School is the Reserve's only existing private school and its construction permit was grandfathered in when the RDT zone was established in 1981. The County has gone to great lengths to ensure that land uses are compatible with the primary goal of its master plan for the Reserve, further restricting institutional uses throughout the RDT zone in 2007.
- In 2007, the County passed legislation that requires sellers of real property in agricultural zones to notify potential buyers that state and county laws protect owners and operators of agricultural uses from certain lawsuits, and generally amends the law covering real estate disclosures.

## Conclusion:

On behalf of the greater Ag Reserve community, I respectfully ask that the Board to adopt a rural school district enrollment policy that acknowledges that the County's rural schools are located in a protected area, and should be afforded appropriate and fair consideration. There is precedent for protecting schools in preserved areas within Federal parklands; perhaps the Board can look to those Federal policies as guidance. Approach "1" could serve as a short term method as the policy is being crafted. Looking forward, and over time, it is recommended that the Board review and employ a combination of these additional approaches:

- Approach #7: Provide choice for elementary and middle school students to enroll in Poolesville Cluster schools by establishing a transfer policy that will support healthy enrollment in area clusters.
- Approach #13: Allowing Frederick County students, just across the line, to enroll in MES, for a reduced, yet sustainable tuition (with their own transportation).
- Approach #4: Add a pre-kindergarten program at MES, with appropriate tuition to help fund the program.
- Approach #9: The County is now establishing a sustainable farm "incubator" that will be located at the historic Darby Store and equestrian facility on route 28 – in the very center of the school cluster. This provides an excellent opportunity to join schools with a learning center that can provide enhanced Ag and natural science curriculum.  
(For more on the model for the incubator farm please visit [www.mocoalliance.org](http://www.mocoalliance.org).)
- Approach #10: Similar to #9, and following the success of Poolesville High School's math/science magnet program, the group favored this as an opportunity to connect to both the existing magnet program and the sustainable farm incubator.
- Approach # 11: The Poolesville High School humanities magnet program could serve as a good model for this curriculum enhancement, and it is a natural tie-in to a large and talented group of artisans and performers who make the Reserve their home as a source of creative inspiration. The Reserve hosts artists from around the County, including Yellow Barn Painters. Students would clearly benefit from this type of enhanced curriculum.

Many thanks for your consideration and action on this important issue!

Respectfully,



Caroline Taylor  
Executive Director  
Montgomery Countryside Alliance