

## Board of Directors

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Bob Wilbur\*

\*Executive Committee

Dr. Royce Hanson  
*Advisory Committee  
Chair*

## Staff

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Senior Conservation  
Associate  
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PSC Case No. 9726, Chaberton Sugarloaf Chaberton Solar Ramier, LLC - Case No. 9733

Dear Leaders of the Planning Department,

July 1, 2024

*We the undersigned reaffirm our commitment to the balanced approach to solar siting in the county's nationally renowned Agricultural Reserve represented by the passage of ZTA 20-01 as detailed in the attached letter of support from 60+ local and state organizations in 2021.*

*We are asking for a strong defense of our county's zoning and master plan in communications to the Public Service Commission.*

Respectfully,

Montgomery Countryside Alliance  
Clean Water Action Maryland  
Sugarloaf Citizens Association  
Montgomery County Farm Bureau  
Nature Forward  
Conservation Montgomery  
Montgomery County Women's Democratic Club  
Montgomery County League of Women Voters  
ACQ (Ask the Climate Question)  
Land and Nature Discoveries  
Transit Alternatives to Midcounty Highway Extended (TAME) Coalition  
Friends of Ten Mile Creek and Little Seneca Reservoir  
Sugarland Ethno History Project, Inc  
Safe Healthy Playing Fields Inc  
West Montgomery County Citizens Association  
Citizens Coordinating Committee on Friendship Heights  
Policy Foundation of Maryland  
Gardens by Garth  
Food Resilience Working Group  
Divergence, LLC  
Biodiversity for a Livable Climate  
Green Plate Catering  
Cinnamon Hill Apiary  
Shepherd's Hey Farm  
Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Environmental Justice Ministry



Cc: County Councilmembers, County Executive, staff

Individuals Signing On:

Royce Hanson	Tanya Spandhla	Sylvia S Tognetti	Karen Metchis
Diane Cameron	Susan Eisendrath	Ginny Barnes	Matthew Gimbrere
Karen S. Ryan	Jim Spicher	Tom Devine	Anne Ambler
Jean S. Findlay	Peter Ensign	Maureen S. Baltay	Jim Brown
Robert Wilbur	Marie Sheppard	Cynthia Jennings	Gerard Byam
Anne Cinque	Maj-Britt Dohlie	Jaime Field	Eileen Magee
Lee McNasir	E. Anne Riley	Bev Thoms	Keren Korman Cabral
Lee Langstaff	Daniel S. Koch	Patty McGrath	Kathleen Holmay
Catherine Wood	Charlotte Vogel	Thomas Rojas	Michele Albornoz
Holly Larisch	Tom Devine	Savva Brown	Connor Ransom
David S. Forman	Marcia Nass	Francoise Andre	Nelia Anne Davies
Fran Rothstein	John Parrish	Tina Schneider	James G. Ryan
Molly Hauck	Alfred Wurglitz	Stephen Vogel	Roberta G (rg) Steinman
Johanna Wermers	Glenn Miles	Linda J Davis	Audrey Morris
Geo Kidd	Marguerite Cyr	Sharon Steinberg	Susan Spock
Claire Gittleman	Marc C Petrequin	Michael Rubin	Maureen Fine
Maggie Bartlett	Mary Pat Wilson	Barbara Hoover	

**MAINTAIN AGRICULTURE AS THE PRIMARY USE OF LAND IN THE  
AGRICULTURAL RESERVE IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND**

**SUPPORT THE CONDITIONAL USE PROPOSAL FROM AGRICULTURAL  
STAKEHOLDERS TO ALLOW SOLAR ON A CASE-BY-CASE BASIS**

**OUR CLIMATE DECISIONS CAN AND MUST REINFORCE – NOT DESTROY – OUR  
FOOD AND WATER SECURITY**

January 2021

Dear Councilmembers,

Montgomery County is home to the nation's most celebrated farmland. Our County's Agricultural Reserve – a forty-year effort and model of farming on the edge of a metropolis – is 93,000 acres of land preserved for farming. Led by a coalition of farmers and advocates for local agriculture, food justice, climate justice, and clean water, the undersigned request your support to maintain agriculture as the sole primary land use in the Agricultural Reserve. This means rejecting ZTA 20-01 as written, and voting “Yes” on the Agricultural Stakeholders’ Conditional Use proposal for reviewing and permitting solar installations in the Agricultural Reserve.

**A well-protected Agricultural Reserve is key to food security, human health, and environmental sustainability for all residents in Montgomery County and the Chesapeake region now and in the years to come.** Its 562 farms supply food and fiber, along with clean drinking water and clean air, to the Greater Washington D.C. region. The ability to grow food locally has been critical during the pandemic, while 100,000 people in Montgomery County are food-insecure. The Farm to Food Bank Program is helping farmers ramp-up the supply of healthy table crops to families in need. And local food production will become even more critical as the climate crisis worsens. At present, 5% or less of the table crops eaten in our region are grown in our region; as fuel prices increase and food supplies are disrupted, Montgomery County's need for the Ag Reserve, for the food security of its residents, will increase. All Montgomery County residents have been part of and paid for the Agricultural Reserve, and all Montgomery County residents benefit from preserving it for agriculture.

**ZTA 20-01, if passed as written, will break the legal tools that have protected the Agricultural Reserve so far.** The bill's current language would allow a non-agricultural industry to be considered a “permitted use”, the same category as farming. **This will destroy the legal protections that have allowed the County to preserve this land for agriculture.** The fact that Montgomery County has maintained farming as the sole primary land use in the Ag Reserve for forty years supports the case for adhering to the Master Plan and maintaining this crucial land use commitment to agriculture. If Montgomery County now establishes large-scale solar as a co-equal permitted use for land in the Ag Reserve through this ZTA, its strongest argument against State siting of large industrial facilities will be lost, and the County will lose its control of land use in the Ag Reserve. Making solar power a conditional use instead, as proposed by the Stakeholders, will allow appropriate solar projects to move forward in the Ag Reserve while retaining the County's local control over land use. This is the legal framework Howard County and Baltimore County have used, and Montgomery County must follow suit.

**Smart solar siting does not require Montgomery County to rush to displace renting farmers.** A sound climate response should not pit energy producers against farmers; we can choose to expand the solar industry in places where it won't have such negative effects (including brownfields, parking lots, industrial roofs, and more) and there are many more effective methods we can use in the Agricultural Reserve that can assist the County in meeting their climate action goals - including using regenerative agriculture practices on our lands to pull carbon back into the soil. Neither Montgomery County nor the state of Maryland have completed a comprehensive study to determine where solar can and should be optimally placed;

communities that have done so [found more than enough appropriate sites to build solar without taking prime farmland.](#)

**If the Ag Reserve is opened to non-conditional solar development, this land use change will displace farmers from their land.** Farmers rely on access to affordable land to rent: that's why Montgomery County residents have invested for decades in easements, Transfers of Development Rights, and other tools to keep this valuable land affordable for farmers. But land rents being offered by the solar industry are more than 20 times higher than what many land-leasing farmers currently pay. Some of Montgomery's tenant farmers are already losing their long-term leases, due to solar speculators' offers to landowners. ZTA 20-01 would open 2% (1800 acres) of the land in the Ag Reserve to solar, but industry representatives have said this is only the beginning of the land they wish to access, with their aim being solar conversion of anywhere between 13,000 and 18,000 acres in the Ag Reserve. *[Reimer, Hans. Statement during July 22, 2020 Joint Planning, Housing, & Economic Development and Transportation & Environmental Committees worksession, minutes 8 to 11.]* Through the "[Land Link](#)" program of [Montgomery Countryside Alliance](#), 40 new farmers - many of them immigrants, people of color, women, and veterans - are now seeking suitable land in the Ag Reserve, with 15 landowners offering farmland; the more landlords are able to raise rents and speculate on solar development, the fewer farmers will be able to afford and access land. [Fifty-seven percent of land in the Ag Reserve is rented, not farmed by its owner](#) – so renting farmers and new farmers searching for land to rent will lose out if forced to compete for land access with the deep-pocketed solar industry.

**Montgomery County should not base its zoning decisions solely on private corporations' profit and convenience.** Solar industry speculators and owners are seeking to profit from converting "cheap farmland" to energy production, but that inexpensive farmland is not a happenstance - it is the result of the forty-year effort to create and protect the Ag Reserve to benefit farming, because producers need affordable, stable land access. By developing on this publicly-subsidized farmland instead of on available, more appropriate sites, the solar firms can increase their profits – but increasing corporate profits is not why Montgomery County has invested in preserving the Agricultural Reserve. The industry objects to the Conditional Use process because they claim it will take too much time – but that is the same process that other industrial uses that may be in the public interest, like cell phone towers or transmission lines, follow in order to use land in the Ag Reserve. Giving the solar industry a special dispensation that other industries do not have is not necessary to build solar power in Montgomery County.

**We ask you to support the compromise Conditional Use amendment to the ZTA.** The undersigned organizations and individuals ask you to work with the Stakeholder community to:

- Reject ZTA 20-01 as written.
- Support the compromise Conditional Use proposal instead

Montgomery County already has the [second-most solar installations in the state](#); we don't need to destroy the Agricultural Reserve to create solar power. The County can keep fighting climate change and working for environmental justice by expanding the Farm to Food Bank program, instituting a regenerative agriculture pilot program in the Agricultural Reserve, conducting a

solar siting study and Smart Solar location policy, and prioritizing solar development on degraded land, brownfield, built surfaces, and industrial zones (like the 500-acre former coal plant site in Dickerson). Let's build a harmonious food and climate justice strategy that honors complementary roles for agriculture and appropriately-scaled and sited solar facilities.