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Montgomery Countryside Alliance (MCA) is tasked with defending the County's 41-year commitment to local farms, the Agricultural Reserve. Though outside the boundaries of the Reserve, I'm writing on behalf of our 10,000+ supporters across the county to strongly endorse the Briggs Chaney – Fairland draft Master Plan—specifically its focus on infrastructure and opportunity that increase food equity in the Eastern County and the county as a whole.

When we talk about food equity, one thing that gets lost is not just who gets access to quality food for consumption – but who gets the access to food growing opportunities. Broadening food production access has benefits for the whole community in the areas of equity, public health, economic development and more. Plans for an Agriculture Technical Hub (recommendation 3.D.2) in this draft are a great step toward food equity and food access in the Eastern County and beyond.

As part of our organization's commitment to the County's ag sector, MCA nurtures new and expanding farms into thriving small businesses. Since 2011 we've run a Land Link program that connects new farmers with local landowners offering long term leases in an effort to overcome astronomical land prices and get farmers growing. We've made 500 acres of matches to date.

Here are a few gleanings we have had in working with the next generation producers seeking access to grow our region's food:

-In a recent demographic shift the typical land seeker is most likely a female Person of Color seeking to grow culturally appropriate food for their community. A majority of land seekers are immigrants. This new crop of land seekers each has decades of growing experience, often from home countries where, unlike here, agriculture remains an intrinsic part of community life. Among our longest tenured land matches, most are African women supplying many tons of food per year to county food banks.

-Having drive and experience does not make a farm or garden a reality. What land seekers lack is the capital to buy land as high property values go even higher.

-These land seekers are more likely to live in the Eastern County and want to seek land there to be close to day job(s) and family care responsibilities. Community gardens are one avenue, but the long wait list for these small plots only underscores the need for more urban/suburban growing space.

-The Ag Reserve is the site of many possible land leases, but the commute to properly care for a farm is a dealbreaker for these aspiring farmers.

-The pandemic has increased food insecurity 50% in Montgomery County. The county's Farm to Food Bank program has helped – showing investing in local farmers is a win-win-win for farmers, food banks and their clients.

-A new focus on food equity has sprouted new avenues for this important work. The Food Council, Office of Agriculture, newly formed Office of Food System Resilience and our own activities at MCA show the potential for collaboration around gardens, farms and food.

For these reasons, the time is ripe to collaborate on solutions that get more residents growing. This draft plan's focus on a sustainable local food system plan and Agriculture Technical Hub is the right step forward and the Eastern County is the idea place to take this step. With partners, we are envisioning a further step – a fully featured small farm incubator program that brings together land, equipment and mentoring to create thriving small farms on hubs throughout the County. We stand ready to partner to make this pilot project a reality in the Eastern County and scale up to other parts of the county.

Like a playground or soccer field, space to grow food is a recreational benefit that many people want - an amenity that welcomes many cultures and builds community connections. Because food is so central and culturally linked in us humans, increased garden infrastructure and opportunity builds the self-determination and agency of a community the way few others measures can. It is our hope that this Master Plan's focus on food infrastructure – not just for food access but garden and farm access – becomes a standard piece of all master plans going forward.

Thank You

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