



Protect Montgomery County's Agricultural Reserve: Fix ZTA 20-01

Right now, the Montgomery County Council is poised to vote on Zoning Text Amendment 20-01, a bill to open the Agricultural Reserve to industrial solar development.

We [submitted testimony](#) to the Council about our concerns about this bill four months ago - but the most important of our concerns are still being ignored. The full County Council will hold its vote on this bill in the next two weeks, and they need to hear from you today: they must not support the bill as written, and they must support the Stakeholders' Conditional Use Amendments. [Download those amendments here.](#)

What's Conditional Use? Conditional Use is a zoning category that allows someone to apply to do certain things with their land, but requires them to go through an application process first. That's in contrast to Permitted Use, which are land uses automatically allowed in an area.

Why is this important? In the Agricultural Reserve, right now, all industrial uses that might be in the public interest - think cell phone towers, transmission lines, and energy infrastructure - are Conditional Use. Only agricultural land uses are Permitted Use. This isn't the first time that developers have tried to exploit the Agricultural Reserve, but this consistency, within the zoning code and with the County's Master Plan, provides the county's land use decisions with legal backing and makes them more defensible. Without it, the state could begin to override the County's decisions around land use ([as is currently happening in Frederick](#)), and forty years of work to protect the Agricultural Reserve will be lost.

But don't we need to develop solar power? Yes - but not at the expense of smart planning for the Ag Reserve and the farmers who depend on it. There are lots of options for large scale solar projects, like parking lots, warehouse rooftops, brownfields, even the recently-decommissioned coal plant at Dickerson. But the Agricultural Reserve is attractive

to the solar industry because it's easy and cheap: the land is flat and clear, and Montgomery County's foresight in creating this state of the art Ag Reserve to save space for local agriculture has kept land prices below market and affordable. Farmers rely on these protected land prices to break even, and 40 years of promised land have given farmers the security to make the investment in improved soil practices, cover crops, and the other practices that have allowed the Ag Reserve to maintain the cleanest water in the county.

Farmers rely on these protected land prices to break even - and 57% of all farmland in the Ag Reserve is rented, not farmed by its owner. Right now, just based on the speculation that they might be able to rent to the solar industry (which can outbid farmers 20 times over), farmers' landlords are raising their rents and changing the terms of their leases, and there's a 40-person waiting list for the Lease Link program to connect new farmers with land to rent. If solar does become a Permitted Use, lease prices will continue to rise, pushing farmers out. **Displacing renting farmers for corporate convenience and profit is not climate justice.**

The Conditional Use amendments will still allow appropriate solar development in the Agricultural Reserve, but while reducing financial speculation and maintaining the zoning protections that are necessary to protect the Agricultural Reserve. [Send your message to the County Council below](#) - and if you're part of an organization that could support this effort, [click here](#) to add your voice to the coalition of farmers, preservationists, environmentalists, and climate activists standing up for the Ag Reserve.