

Speak up now or south Anne Arundel County may not be rural for long



MIKE LOFTON GUEST COLUMNIST

For generations, the southern part of Anne Arundel County has been different. Home to tens of thousands of acres of agricultural lands and bayside communities linked to sport and commercial fishing. Farms produced tobacco while watermen harvested oysters, crabs and finfish in abundance.

Times change. Tobacco is virtually non-existent, replaced principally by corn and soybeans while newer enterprises produce wine, nursery plants, vegetables, livestock, horses and surprisingly aquaculture. These industrious souls have relentlessly adapted products and techniques to earn a living from the land and water.

Unfortunately, the continuing downward agricultural performance documented in the [U.S. Agriculture Census 2002-2017](#) is alarming. The decline — number of farms (down 432 to 390), farm sales (down \$25.4 million to \$18.1 million), and land in farms (down 35,000 acres to 27,000 acres) — threatens the continued viability of much of south county's treasured rural character.

Significant non-agricultural commercial uses are being considered. The re-introduction of mobile homes outside licensed mobile home parks, event venues for large groups up to 30

times a year and temporary lodging facilities for groups up to 50 persons are before the County Council and could be approved within two weeks.

One might expect such radical land-use policy changes to be carefully considered in the context of the General Development Plan currently being crafted. Not so. Citizens attending live and virtual townhalls; completing surveys, and making thoughtful comments on draft goals are largely unaware that controversial zoning changes are very close to adoption.

These new uses could fundamentally alter the character of the countryside. The mobile home change (Bill 57-20) is a reversal of 50-plus years of county land-use policy, that solved a serious problem. It's an invitation to accelerate the conversion of agricultural lands to residential. Although well-intended to help a single constituent, it will enable enormous change in the county's rural area.

The bill would open more than 900 properties to development; several hundred are 2 acres or less in size. See a map and more information at growthaction.net.

The event and temporary lodging bill (69-20), would add significant commercial uses to Rural Agricultural, Residential Low Density and R1 residential zones on farms as small as 10 acres and historic sites as small as five acres. Ostensibly intended to assist the viability of the agriculture industry, there is no analysis that quantifies expected impacts.

Most R1 and RLD properties of qualifying size lie in the northern portion of the county, and few actual farms contain parcels zoned in these categories. Many of these R1 and RLD properties are adjacent to medium density residential areas. Including these zoning categories in agritourism bills is unlikely to improve agricultural sustainability but opens the door to many unintended commercial uses in residential areas.

Agricultural land in all parts of the county is intermingled with residential properties, but the proposed bills do little to assure that the new agritourism activities will not adversely affect the ambiance and quality of life of the local neighborhood.

These legislative proposals do not appear to be based on an analysis that links them to industry trends or forecasts their effect on individual businesses, the industry as a whole or the interests and needs of the communities within the County. Absent such analysis, there is no reason to expect these proposals to alter the long-term industry decline.

It is unacceptable to see such unexamined ideas advance this far. They serve as a compelling testimony to the inadequacy of Anne Arundel's due diligence on land use policy and legislation.

The evidence of agricultural industry decline is overwhelming. Remedies ought to be based on a thorough analysis of its characteristics and causes. Goals and benchmarks should be established to evaluate impacts and guide future policy adjustments. Absent an assessment of industry conditions and trends and a forecast of the effects of the proposals, enactment of substantial land-use changes is unwise.

Land-use changes of this consequence ought to derive from the General Development Plan/Regional Small Area Plan. The opportunity to speak up is now.

Let County Executive Steuart Pittman, expittman99@aacounty.org, and your [County Council member](#), know what you think.

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