

# Celebrating the Agricultural Reserve

Area helps protect 93,000 acres upcounty from development.

[By Ken Millstone/The Almanac](#)

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It's pumpkin season upcounty.

All week, school groups and families with children will stream through pick-your-own farms like Butler's Orchard and Homestead Farm to pick potential Jack-o-Lanterns and stock up on fall treats like apple cider.

Not many will stop to consider why there is so much productive farmland so close to a major city. But good luck trying to pick pumpkins 45 minutes from Manhattan or Sunset Boulevard.

THAT'S THE message Melanie Choukas-Bradley hopes her organization, Celebrate Rural Montgomery, can convey at its event Oct. 30 celebrating the 25th anniversary of Montgomery County's agricultural reserve.

The organization was formed a year ago to promote and protect the 93,000-acre area upcounty that planners worked to preserve from development a quarter century ago. "People who take their children out to the pumpkin patch at Butler's may not realize that Butler's Orchard is in the ag reserve," Choukas-Bradley said. In fact, many visitors don't even know that the agricultural reserve exists.

In 1980, the Montgomery County Council approved a master plan that created the agricultural reserve that now makes up almost one-third of the county. Development rules established in the 1970s had created a rural zoning of one house per five acres. The 1980 plan further limited that to one house per 25 acres and compensated land-owners who would no longer be able to develop their properties through a pioneering program of "Transferable Development Rights" (TDRs). The landowners were awarded one TDR for each five undeveloped acres, and the TDRs could be sold to developers working in "TDR receiving zones" in denser downcounty areas, mostly around Metro and the I-270 corridor.

The event Sunday at Butler's will recognize the prescience of the planners responsible for the reserve, now considered a national model for open space preservation. "It's really been an inspiration to communities across the country. It is something that's such an asset to this region," Choukas-Bradley said. "We think it's just really time to recognize how forward-thinking the 1980 planning board and county council was."

But while overdue accolades have been part of the anniversary celebration, so has a sharp undercurrent of concern about the ag reserve's future. In a county that remains thirsty for land to develop, can so much valuable land remain untouched? While high-rise apartments haven't been proposed yet, threats have begun to crop up. Next month, the County Council will hear testimony on a proposal to allow certain institutions —predominantly churches—to expand in the reserve. Some of the churches envision large campuses with parking lots, school buildings, and sanctuaries for 1,000 people.

"I think [the reserve] has some very serious challenges right now," said Royce Hanson, who was Planning Board chair from 1972-1981, and will be among the honorees Sunday. "The institutional users seem to be eyeing it with a great deal of affection." Hanson said that another threat comes from large-tract houses. He and others pointed out that individual threats that might be dismissed by themselves could quickly add up to a critical mass that would destroy the reserve.

"WE'RE DOWN to as few acres as you can have and still have a viable farming community," said Bob Raver, who farms corn, soybeans, and wheat near Sugarloaf Mountain. "Everybody's got their eye on this lush green area out here. ...[But] it was set up for agriculture. If you start giving special exceptions here and there, pretty soon you don't have one."

But with traditional farms struggling to remain viable throughout the country, critics wonder whether agriculture is the best use for so much land in a suburban county with robust commercial growth. Choukas-Bradley argues that the agricultural reserve's farms employ 10,000 people and contribute \$252 million to the county's economy.

Hanson pointed out that the number of farmers has grown, not dwindled in recent years. While traditional dairy, wheat and soybean farms have dwindled in Montgomery County, they have been replaced by an increasing number of equestrian farms as well as newer concepts such as organic and community-based farms. The reserve is now home to at least one winery as well.

Those changes should be no surprise, said Hanson, now a research professor at the George Washington Institute for Public Policy at George Washington University. Agriculture has long been a dynamic industry, adapting to market changes and new technologies, he said. Hanson added that residents should remember that establishing the reserve required tradeoffs. Residents in several sections of the county, including Potomac, have accepted higher densities in exchange for protecting the reserve, so "there's a kind of social contract with the county involved here," he said.

That observation may be part of the fun-but-purposeful atmosphere at Sunday's event. Saving the reserve, Hanson said, will require "less praise for it and more efforts to protect it."

#### Celebrate Rural Montgomery Fall Festival

The public is invited to a fall celebration of Montgomery County's Agricultural Reserve in the pumpkin patch at Butler's Orchard in Germantown.

Free activities will include live music with the Mill Run Bluegrass Band, hayrides and a pumpkin coach, a pumpkin maze, an inflatable farm train, face painting, jumping in the hayloft, a bonfire and marshmallow roast, a raffle with prizes and an anniversary cake. Food, beverages and pumpkins will be sold at the event. Pony rides will be offered for a small charge. Families participating in Butler's Orchard's Pumpkin Festival earlier in the day are invited to stay for the afternoon festivities.

A program honoring the 93,000-acre Agricultural Reserve and its founders will be held and members of the Montgomery County Council, Planning Board and the farming community will share thoughts on farmland preservation. In case of rain, visit the Web site, [www.ruralmontgomery.org](http://www.ruralmontgomery.org), for updates. (This event was rescheduled because of heavy rain Oct. 8.)

What: Fall Festival with free admission (free parking and handicap accessible)  
When: Sunday, Oct. 30, 2-5:30 p.m. Program and award ceremony at 4 p.m.  
Speakers: County Councilmembers Mike Knapp and Marilyn Praisner, Planning Board Chairman Derick Berlage, Bob Raver and the Butler Family and former Planning Board Chairman Royce Hanson.  
Where: Butler's Orchard, 22200 Davis Mill Road, Germantown.

For more information and directions, call 301-972-3299 or visit [www.butlersorchard.com](http://www.butlersorchard.com).



*Photos by Carole Dell/The Almanac*

The 16th Annual Montgomery County Farm Tour & Harvest Sale held last July to celebrate the Agricultural Reserve.



Two baby goats take time for a snack at Poplar Spring Animal Sanctuary near Poolesville.