

# OUTLOOK CLOSE TO HOME

## Let's Keep The Country In Montgomery

Imagine country as scenic as Provence or Tuscany at your back door — a patchwork of orchards and vineyards, pastures of sheep, cattle, horses and llamas, and steep hillsides with barrel-shaped hay bales perched in golden evening light. Driving down a rustic road lined with Queen Anne's lace, you pass farms with red barns and ivy-clad silos, and villages that look much like they did a century ago.

Only a delightful fantasy or remembrance of the past? No, real life — close to home. The place is Montgomery County's 93,000-acre agricultural reserve, less than an hour's drive from Washington, and bordered by the Potomac and Patuxent rivers and Sugarloaf Mountain. What does the agricultural reserve have to offer other than rural scenery?

- Fresh produce, available at pick-your-own farms in the reserve and at farmers markets throughout the Washington area.
- Landscape plants for the home gardener.
- Recreational opportunities, including hiking, cycling, paddling and horseback riding.
- A close-up look at the history of the Civil War, the Underground Railroad, the War of 1812, the Revolution and American Indian life.
- And most important, a thriving farm community that adds \$252 million to the local economy and employs 10,000 people.

Twenty-five years ago, Montgomery County had the wisdom to ask: Do we want to lose every farm to commercial and residential development? In 1980, the county adopted an innovative master plan for the preservation of agriculture and rural open space, establishing the agricultural reserve in the northwestern third of the county. Today, a county best known for its suburbs has one of the most acclaimed farmland and open-space preservation plans in the nation. Communities across the country are trying to stanch their farmland losses, and they are studying how Montgomery has succeeded in doing so — through a program of zoning (one house per 25 acres) and transferable development rights that compensate landowners.

On the silver anniversary of the agricultural reserve, many are asking: What will the next 25 years bring? Will development pressures burst the seams of this charming rural landscape or will the wisdom of the plan hold, ensuring that Washingtonians can continue to enjoy an agriculturally productive backyard?

Last week my husband and I flew over the Grand Canyon on a trip to California. We flew past Yosemite, still glazed with winter snows. Later, on the ground in our rented car, we sat in stopped traffic in California's gold rush country. Outside our windows we watched butterflies alight on wildflowers along an oak-lined creek. In a nearby pasture, cattle grazed.

The cause of the gridlock? Bulldozing for roadwidening. Warrens of housing developments hugged the hilltops, stretching, it seemed, all the way to Sacramento on the distant horizon. Clearly the creek bed outside our windows and its oaks and wildflowers were doomed. And how long until the last cow in the adjoining pasture would be shipped to market?

The Grand Canyon and Yosemite will survive. The grand gesture that creates a national park is a surer thing than the will and know-how to save the most fragile ground of all: the farmland close to our cities. And yet how rich our cities and their people are for that nearby farmland, and how much the poorer they would be — we would be — without it.

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