

# Close to Home

*Close to Home welcomes pieces on the local community. Submissions should be sent to Close to Home, The Washington Post Editorial Page, 1150 15th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20071.*



THE WASHINGTON POST

## Down on the Farm —In Montgomery

When most people hear the words Montgomery County, they picture a thickly populated urban and suburban community next to the nation's capital. What sometimes goes unrecognized is that Montgomery County has a large, lush green expanse surrounding it—90,000 acres set aside by the county in 1980 as the Montgomery County Agricultural Reserve.

This reserve is vital to Montgomery's economic, environmental and social well-being, and it must not be neglected. Farms in this area once grew tobacco. Then many converted to dairy farming. Today, cows, in turn, are being replaced by horses, nurseries and operations that produce fruits and vegetables for area consumption. Even grain and livestock farmers are doing custom farming to remain competitive.

This shift is a natural evolution to meet the needs of a growing urban and suburban area in which hundreds of restaurants and thousands of citizens are clamoring for fresh locally grown produce. For example, Ben Allnut, a farmer in Poolesville, recently agreed to supply a Bethesda restaurant with fresh tomatoes and other vegetables, and Jim Evans, an organic farmer in Dickerson, who grows red, yellow and purple peppers, is supplying a local grocery chain. The store's produce manager says he never smelled peppers so sweet—but then maybe he never sold peppers only an hour off the vine.

Some day I hope restaurants all over the area will serve locally grown produce or locally raised beef. However, this won't happen, and the county won't retain pick-your-own farms or other out-

standing farm enterprises, unless it supports its agricultural industry.

The authors of the 1980 legislation had the foresight to recognize the need to limit urban and suburban sprawl by preserving the green ring around the county. But according to a recent report, only 17 percent of farmers in Montgomery County reported a profit in each of the past five years. Many farmers are getting older too, and younger ones often can't afford to buy a farm, because even agriculturally zoned land is expensive. For this reason, farmers have often been forced to take on a second job. Agriculture must be profitable if it is to survive.

The county must be diligent in promoting local agricultural products, cultivating links between grocery stores, restaurants and other markets for the county's produce and preserving support services needed by farmers. It must balance environmental, health and zoning regulations against the economic needs of the agricultural community. Finally, it must unequivocally draw the line on industrial and institutional incursions into the agricultural reserve.

Farming has contributed to the economic well-being of Montgomery County for hundreds of years. If the county continues to pay attention to the needs of its farmers, farming will have a big future in Montgomery County—to the benefit of all.

—Nancy H. Dacek  
a Republican, represents District 2 on the Montgomery County Council.