

Memo to the Centerville Township Planning Commission
Subject: Agricultural Tourism and Ordinance Revisions
From Cary (Carolyn) Weed
February 16, 2024

Agritourism can be very detrimental to the rural environment as described in the examples in: <https://ecori.org/2017-1-25-agricultural-tourism-dividing-some-rhode-island-communities/> Agricultural lands (even with conservation easements) can start off as wedding venues and then turn into concert venues with parking lots and loud noise (and, I would add, traffic). This type of scenario is playing out in many parts of the country where agritourism results in corn mazes that turn into full-time, big-business carnivals with acres of land devoted to parking lots instead of agricultural production. As noted in the article, agritourism is best handled by proactive, not reactive regulation. When disputes occur, as we know, lawsuits can bring in high-power lawyers representing big-money and corporate interests.

However, in Italy, a study shows that Italian agritourism tends to develop more environmentally friendly agricultural methods (than regular farming), and that has a positive impact on biodiversity, landscape and natural resources. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4627998/> This is possible because of the way Italian agritourism is regulated. To paraphrase the study, agritourism in Italy is defined as an agricultural activity that only can be performed by the farmer, who, by national law must be dedicated mainly to traditional farming. It seems like such a simple starting point for agritourism regulations aimed at preserving our rural character and natural resources as well as making it possible for farmers to make a reasonable living.

These two references point to the problems we would like to avoid and the benefits we would like to achieve through a proactive revision of the Agricultural Tourism Ordinance. But the devil still is in the details. Scale seems to be an important variable. Restricting agritourism to a farm owner may not be protective if, for example, the owner is a non-local corporate entity who is buying up properties to mine for profits using agritourism businesses.

Given that the Zoning Ordinance is based on the Master Plan, it is appropriate to start with the Master Plan when considering the use of agricultural land both in *Section 4.24 Agricultural Tourism* and in *Article IX AGRICULTURAL DISTRICT, Section 9.1 Agricultural District: Uses Permitted*.

From *Chapter 7: Community Goals and Objectives April 2014 Centerville Township Master Plan*:

7.2.2 Agricultural Support Goal

Support continued agricultural activities consistent with the character of the township and the vision statement of this Master Plan.

Objectives and Action Steps

- Objective 1: Preserve the scenic and rural character of the agricultural landscape.
 - Identify farmland appropriate for agricultural preservation.
 - Support the use of conservation easements.
 - Support the purchase of or transfer of development rights.
 - Encourage cluster developments to preserve open space.
 - Maintain a 1.5 acre minimum lot size, but manage overall density.
 - Develop zoning for large scale animal agriculture.
- Objective 2: Provide broader economic opportunities related to agriculture.
 - Promote value-added agriculture.
 - Promote agri-tourism.
 - Promote agricultural support services.
 - Promote public and/or private facilities in which local products can be sold.

Implications for Agricultural Tourism Ordinance

Since the Master Plan's agricultural goals include preserving the scenic rural character and increasing economic opportunities for farmers, the Italian model can provide guidance when revising the Agricultural Tourism Ordinance. The list of goals in the Ordinance could include an additional goal to encourage environmentally friendly agricultural methods that have a positive impact on biodiversity, landscape, and natural resources. Also, *The Limits of these Provisions* section could specify right up front that agritourism uses must support and be based on traditional farming activities and uses. In Italy, as stated in the article linked, "the agricultural activity of the farm and not its tourism activities, must be predominant. This predominance of agricultural activity is fixed in terms of working hours and not in terms of income." Such a provision could also be added. In addition, only resident farmers (-owners?) and family members should be allowed to engage in agritourism uses.

Elsewhere in the Agricultural Tourism Ordinance, events that are not related to agriculture might be eliminated altogether with only agricultural-related events being allowed. In Section 4.24.3, inns and restaurants probably should be removed. Farm experiences still might include food and lodging, but the scale should be constrained so that the number of small (size?), independent, non-permanent housing/camping units is less than five, based on the definition of campground in the Zoning Ordinance as five or more campsites.

Implications for Article IX AGRICULTURAL DISTRICT

For consistency, *Section 9.1 Agricultural District: Uses Permitted* should also be reviewed and revised since agricultural tourism occurs in agricultural districts. For consistency, trailer park and mobile home park (and perhaps KAFOs) should be eliminated from the list of special land uses. Also, agricultural preservation land, which is shown along with agricultural land on the Centerville Future Land Use map of the Master Plan, should be defined and differentiated from land zoned as agricultural.