

To: Centerville Township Planning Commission
From: Kristen Underhill Welch, 5541 E. Hohnke Rd. Cedar, MI 49621
Re: Zoning Ordinance revision for Agricultural Tourism
Date: February 18, 2024

Dear Commissioners:

The recent Amoritas/UnderCanvas/KSL Capital Partners proposal to develop a luxury, commercial resort using the agricultural tourism provisions of the Zoning Ordinance clearly spoke to the need to revise this section of the Zoning Ordinance with care and specificity. I applaud the action the Township Board and Planning Commission made to place a moratorium on further reviews in order to do this work.

The Master Plan for the Township states a vision to maintain the rural and agricultural character of the area and support local farmers. The Agricultural Tourism section of the Zoning Ordinance seems to be uniquely important in fleshing out what this vision means in practice. Agricultural tourism can be a way for farmers to augment their earnings from farming and a way to educate the non-farming members of the community about agriculture. Key to agricultural tourism is the preservation of working farms not the destruction of farms to make tourist attractions. I would propose that the section on Agricultural tourism in the zoning code clearly specify the size of agricultural tourism ventures and clearly specify that these ventures must not dwarf the farming operations in size or scope of practice. For instance the code could specify that greater than 51% of a farm must be actively farmed throughout the growing season to have a venture considered as agricultural tourism and that the agricultural tourism venture must not interfere with farming operations. Or, it could be specified that more than 51% of a farm's revenue must come from active farming and not from an agricultural tourism venture. Or, both could be specified.

The type of activity permitted must also be clearly defined so that the ventures support the Master Plan vision of supporting farmers and maintaining the rural character of the township. Activities such as farm stands, CSAs, U-Pick operations, the sale of products made on the farm (exception alcohol), pop-up farm-to-table dinners, lectures or classes about agriculturally related topics, bed and breakfast farm stays (5 rooms or less) all seem in keeping with the intent of the Master Plan. Things that do not fit with this and should be clearly called out are camping/glamping/ RV operations and ATV/ORV trails that are covered by other parts of the zoning code.

I also would propose that the agricultural tourism venture must be owned by the farmer applying for it. This would allow for farmers to hire a manager of the operation if they wished, but not lease land for another party to build and operate a venture on their farm. Further, I would recommend that ventures that allow for overnight stays must only be allowed on farms where the farmer resides. Each of these provisions would put the supervision of the agricultural tourism venture directly under the farmer making the application who has an interest in maintaining the character of their farm and not some outside entity.

There will continue to be pressures to develop the land in Centerville Township. The township is a uniquely beautiful place with farms and open space. I believe the Planning Commission can both support farmers and preserve the beauty of the place through the thoughtful revision of the Zoning Code. Thank you for reading and considering my suggestions.

Respectfully,
Kristen Underhill Welch