

Comments Regarding Bill 7-26, Farm Offices  
Link Hoewing, Chair  
Fair Access Committee for the Western County

I am Link Hoewing with the Fair Access Committee for the Western County. Our committee was formed in 2018 to work towards ensuring that the County treats our area equitably when it comes to county investments in facilities, programming and services.

I am here on behalf of Fair Access and the Town of Poolesville to support Bill 7-26. Montgomery County has required some farmers to meet more complex commercial permitting standards for spaces like offices used to manage their farm businesses or buildings to process agricultural products. This adds to the costs and complexities of operating farms, an already difficult business. The legislation would exempt these offices on farms alone from these more extensive rules. Fair standards help protect family farms, support local production, and strengthen our county's economy.

At Fair Access, we not only support this legislation, but we can also identify with the motivation and purpose behind it. For decades, our area was treated inequitably and our nearly century old high school was never modernized. We did not have a community center nearby like most other parts of the county. The county offers almost no recreation programs out here as it does elsewhere. The county tried to close Monocacy Elementary School because it did not meet average size standards for the rest of the urbanized county. Our public transportation is inadequate and does not serve the needs of our citizens.

All of these actions are a result in part of the county applying metrics that are meant for populated areas of the county. They do not fit our area and are inequitable. Farmers are highly skilled at a wide range of activities from managing their equipment to maintaining their farm buildings and fences. This legislation does not exempt farms from common sense rules but rather standards designed for offices built for use in densely populated urban areas with many other offices, people or buildings nearby. The metrics used down county simply don't fit the Ag Reserve.

To help farmers survive and thrive in what is a very tough business, the County has always instituted policies regarding farming operations so as to ease and simplify the management of these businesses. The legislation only applies to offices built to manage farming operations or process agricultural products for market. It does not apply to buildings for consumers and outside visitors.

The legislation is measured and is common sense. It will provide more support to help our farms grow and thrive and we support it. We urge passage by the Council.