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# PRESERVING OUR BIKING TREASURES

## *Everyone Benefits from the Work of the Montgomery Countryside Alliance*

by **BRENDA RUBY**

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Cyclists know it as a pedaling paradise, but Montgomery County's Agriculture Reserve should be famous for another important reason – it's the Nation's most successful Ag protection effort and it's only 20 miles from the White House.

Photo by Lee Langstaff.



Photo by Carol Linden

**AN AREA FAVORITE** for local cyclists, Poolesville, MD and the surrounding hamlets of Seneca, Dickerson, Beallsville, and Boyds in upper Montgomery County comprise some of the sweetest riding around. Here suburban sprawl finds an end in the rolling farmlands and fragrant orchards that seem to pop up around every turn.

Because of its location and varied terrain, the Poolesville area is an ideal starting point for many different rides and types of riders; you can plan an orchard-to-orchard tour, ride to (and up!) Sugarloaf Mountain, visit a winery, access the C&O Towpath, take a ferry ride to Virginia, or pose in a field of sunflowers (the McKee Beshers sunflower fields off of River Road have certainly gotten a lot of attention recently!). Poolesville itself was established in 1867 and sits right in the middle of the 90,000 plus acre Reserve. Once upon a time, in the mid-19th century, with the construction of the C&O Canal and the extension of the B&O Railroad, this charming, blink-and-you'll-miss-it town was once Montgomery County's second largest.

The swath of land between I-270 and the Potomac River remains protected and largely undeveloped as part of the Agricultural Reserve, a nationally acclaimed land-use plan established in 1980 by Montgomery County in response to the rapid disappearance of farmland. The result is an abundance of low-traffic, small country roads which wind through centuries-old pastures. In this biker's paradise often the number of cyclists you see will outnumber the cars. It's not uncommon to realize the impeccable stone wall you've decided to take a break next to was built in the mid-19th century.

But cyclists aren't the only ones who benefit from the Ag Reserve. Caroline Taylor, the Executive Director of the Alliance says, "one million Montgomery County residents benefit, but truly the Washington metro



Top photo by Martin Radigan; middle and bottom photos by Peter Klosky.



region as a whole does because nearly 100,000 acres 25 miles from the White House is carefully preserved to grow our food and fiber, cleanse our water and air, and provide nearby recreation."

Visit on any weekend and you'll find the many orchards in the Reserve teeming with people eager to forgo the grocery store in favor of the fresh fruit and produce available for sale (and picking!). These orchards supply many of the area farmer's markets and grocery stores as well, so even if you can't get out to the area, you're likely benefitting from the products of the protected farmland.

There's no denying the rural and natural beauty a visit to the Ag Reserve offers, but the benefits go far beyond a "nice day in the country." The Ag Reserve serves as a "green lung" that cools and cleans the air while protecting our drinking water and the threatened Chesapeake Bay watershed. The land also supplies critical habitat for mammals, birds, trees and other wildlife.

The recent news about a renewed interest for an outer Potomac River crossing and ten lane highway which would cut through the Reserve and rural communities highlights the never-ending work of the Montgomery Countryside Alliance (MCA). Taylor says, "The Reserve was created through master plan and zoning, by forward thinking planners in 1980 such as Royce Hanson who knew that we, as a region, needed to get smart, innovate and live within our budget — water, airshed, and productive farmland. They knew that we could not, dare not, ignore that ultimate budgetary responsibility."

With persistent threats to the Reserve, the MCA works to educate about the benefits and need for continued preservation. Taylor says, "Outreach is key to ensuring it's long-term survival. As Wendell Berry notes, 'We must first love something to protect it.' That connection is different for different people — foodies want to know their farmers, historians find a rich tapestry of culture and landmarks, artists find an endless array of subject matter, naturalists find a vast collection of plant and animal species and fascinating geology."

And, of course, cyclists have long loved the special sanctity of the Ag Reserve. Denise Cohen, an MCA Board Member, got involved because of her love of cycling in the Reserve and realized how fragile its existence is. Cohen says, "I grew up in Fairfax in a rural area. What surrounded us was farmland, but very rapidly all the open space collapsed as fast food joints, gas stations, and strip malls took over. It degraded the quality of life, the utter lack of planning with no



Top photo courtesy of Rocklands Farm; middle photo courtesy of Montgomery Countryside Alliance; bottom photo by Caroline Taylor.

thought of preserving the natural environment." Cohen believes without a doubt that it will also happen to the Ag Reserve if there isn't a constant vigilance and local officials aren't held accountable.

Cohen was so moved to try to do something to help raise awareness, she created the Fall Farm Tour — a cycling event for everyone which would showcase the abundance of the area and help the general public understand why they should care — why they needed to pay attention. Cohen herself had ridden in the area for years and says, "we'd never actually stop at any of these places, we just rode past them!" She created the Farm Tour to give people a reason to stop, to appreciate all they'd been missing.

That was 2007, and this year, October 8 will mark the tenth anniversary of the Fall Farm Tour Cohen created. Each year the event has grown — the early years had less than a hundred cyclists, in 2009 they added a picnic at one of the orchards and 150-200 people rode. Last year the event maxed out at 650 riders. The event is no longer just about education, but with so much interest from the cycling community, it also serves as a fundraiser for the Alliance. As Cohen says, "the cycling community spends a lot of time out there and we're the natural voice to advocate to preserve it."

Taylor underscores the importance for continued outreach saying, "There are conflicting land uses that are regularly thrust upon the Reserve by those who see it as empty or undeveloped — awaiting their improvement like a ten lane highway or a mega-church. We and partners work to keep local government's feet to the fire by properly enforcing zoning and adding acreage to easement programs and sometimes find ourselves in court challenging poor decisions." While the Ag Reserve has been in existence for over 30 years, it's only through the stewardship of the MCA and concerned and aware citizens that it will continue to be the haven it is now. So post those Instagram worthy sunflower selfies and spread the word that paradise exists.

For more information on the Montgomery Countryside Alliance, the work they do to protect the Ag Reserve, and the Fall Farm Tour, visit: <http://www.mocoalliance.org>.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Brenda Ruby has been a writer for *Spokes Magazine* for the past ten years. She is an American Bike League certified instructor and teaches bicycle safety and education classes. She is also the Communications Director for Potomac Pedalers.

