***Sugarloaf Citizens’ Association Annual Meeting***

By John Clayton

Upcounty supporters of the Agricultural Reserve and some local elected officials gathered at the Linden Farm Barn in Dickerson for the thirty-ninth annual meeting of the Sugarloaf Citizens’ Association (SCA). The meeting focused on a number of recent and pending land-use issues. The keynote speaker was District 2 County Council member Craig Rice of Germantown.

Two other members of the county council were present: Phil Andrews (District 3) and Marc Elrich (at-large). Poolesville Town Commission member Jerry Klobukowski, a regular at the meeting over the years, was also in attendance.

Outgoing president Ann Sturm opened the meeting and reviewed some of the issues that the SCA grappled with during her two-year tenure, including Zoning Text Amendments (ZTAs) that dealt with airstrips, Special Benefit Permits, and rules for breweries and wineries. She also commented on a continuing Upcounty complaint about the lack of code enforcement from the Department of Permitting Services (DPS). It was noted that DPS staffing was reduced from five to two inspectors due to budgetary constraints. Outgoing Vice President Ann Cinque closed Ms. Sturm’s address with heartfelt thanks for her contribution. The Bluebird Trail on the SCA’s Linden Farm grounds was dedicated to Ms. Sturm, and she was presented with a framed photograph—and if that weren’t enough, it was also her birthday.

The new slate of officers and board of directors was presented by Linda Pepe, and they were elected by acclamation. New president Jim Choukas-Bradley, a noted environmental and energy attorney, spoke and resolved to “sustain the preservation of the Ag Reserve.”

Craig Rice opened his remarks by describing what he called the dynamics of the county council—working together as a team, five members from districts and four at large, but with concern for all county residents. In a move that would have done Superman proud, Mr. Rice unbuttoned the front of his shirt and held it open to display a faded Sugarloaf Citizens’ Association T-shirt. He talked about his appreciation for agriculture from visiting his grandparents’ farm in South Carolina as a child where they were sharecroppers. He quickly moved to his basic theme—that he wants to see farming in the Ag Reserve: organic farming and commercial farming. He said that people who want to increase development will see “all this extra land up there, and why don’t we use that?” He added, “We need to do everything we can to protect the Ag Reserve.” He stressed the need for balance and described his desire to maintain an inclusive method of decision-making, giving “people a seat at the table” to provide input.

Melane Hoffman asked about the ever-present threat from Virginia and other proponents of an outer beltway, which would involve a second Montgomery County crossing over the Potomac River, possibly through the Ag Reserve. Ms. Hoffman called this the Truckway, admonishing those who would call it the Techway: “It has nothing to do with technology.” Her specific question was whether the county council would say “no way” with a strong resolution against it. Mr. Rice and his two colleagues indicated they would support such a move, and Mr. Rice also discussed how this related to transit options, referencing Mr. Elrich’s support of bus rapid transit.

Jerry Klobukowski offered another possible solution to Ag Reserve protection, citing as an example the Adirondack Reserve in upstate New York, where the protection of the land was written into the law, or codified, and not just written into a master plan. You “need to put something in law,” he said, “otherwise, you are dependent on the council’s will at any given point of time.” Mr. Rice discussed this point saying that it would have to be pursued at the state level and would have to gain the support of “people in Wheaton and Silver Spring.”

Caroline Taylor of the Montgomery Countryside Alliance spoke to the difficulty of working through the legislature, referencing the recent defeat of Right-to-Farm legislation, which involved bills seeking to protect farming from being prohibited in the Ag Reserve under homeowner covenants. She said that the initiative had the full support of the Montgomery County senate delegation, and she expressed appreciation for the assistance of Mr. Rice’s office.

Asked about how we can better sell the Ag Reserve to down-county residents, Mr. Rice responded, “Support farming. We lose land when it’s not being farmed.”

In what is always an enjoyable part of the meeting, board member Jim Brown discussed this year’s Piedmont Environmental Council Grant recipients. Schools with projects receiving funding this year included Lake Seneca Elementary, John School Middle School, and Kingsview Middle School. Laurie Jenkins of Montgomery County Public Schools did a presentation on Outdoor Environmental Education Programs, which all MCPS students know as Outdoor Ed.

The highlight of the day was a presentation by Dominic Johnson, a student at Gaithersburg Middle School, who received a grant for the Gaithersburg Middle School Horticultural Program, which has developed vegetable gardens in cooperation with residents of the Villages of Rockville retirement community. Mr. Brown praised the detailed costing information in Mr. Brown’s application. Mr. Johnson had special praise for his teacher, Sharon Alpert, who also discussed the program.