

Belward Farm, an educational, agricultural, health and wellness community

In the past five years the metropolitan MD-DC-VA commercial office market has changed considerably:

- Montgomery County has [11 million sq ft of vacant commercial office space](#) with little hope that it will once again be filled at equivalent or higher per-sq-ft rates.
- The suburban office complex has been declared [a relic](#).
- GSA's policy is to locate federal offices within [a 1/2-mile walkable distance to Metrorail Stations](#) and Belward Farm is 5 miles from the nearest Metro station.
- "A more sustainable mix of uses" was recommended in a study for the Planning Board by [Partners for Economic Solutions](#) for the single-use office complex proposed on Johns Hopkins Research Campus.

Based on these factors, the proposed development on Belward Farm needs an update. We are recommending a concept that would be a win-win for everyone and we urge Johns Hopkins to consider having an "agrihood" built on Belward Farm. An agrihood is a community built around, and integral to, a working farm. Depending on the size of the working farm it would produce the fruits and vegetables which would be made available to the residents and the community at large. It could also be a hub for locally sourced food from the Ag Reserve. Presently there are about 200 agrihoods across the country and Belward Farm would make an absolutely perfect agrihood.

Belward Farm could reflect a new vision for Johns Hopkins with fresh organic food along with sociability, exercise, education and an emphasis on wellness through positive change. A Health and Wellness Center would fit beautifully under the educational, agricultural, health and wellness umbrella for Belward Farm. In addition to integrative medical services, the center could serve as a place where Hopkins' doctors could see local patients. Classes in healthy eating/living and food preparation, exercise, yoga and tai chi for all ages would fit the mission of the agrihood and community walking and biking groups could be formed. Classes and field trips to the farm would be an ideal way to teach children the importance of fresh healthy food as well as where their food comes from.

[The Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future](#) sounds like a perfect fit for the agrihood: The website describes the Center:

- The Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future works with students, educators, researchers, policymakers, advocacy organizations and communities to build a healthier, more equitable, and resilient food system."
- Center for a Livable Future - Food System Policy Program - The Center's Food System Policy program includes a diverse portfolio of projects and activities that aim to advance federal, state and local agriculture and food policies that protect the public's health and the environment by supporting a healthy, equitable, and sustainable food system.
- The Food System Policy program harnesses available expertise across the Center and throughout Johns Hopkins University and builds upon the many comparative advantages of the university to: provide technical assistance; generate resource materials; develop and implement strategic communication and outreach initiatives; conduct interdisciplinary research; translate science to support policy efforts; convene key food system stakeholders; and engage advocates and policymakers at all levels. In addition, **this program collaborates with multiple organizations that complement the Center's resources and expertise to improve our food system and strengthen local and regional capacity.**

- Just north of Baltimore City, in Baltimore County, are farmlands with highly productive soils. The county lost about 15% of its farms between 1997 and 2007, but, as of August 2007, **it had also protected from development more than 53,000 acres of farmland through agricultural easements and zoning laws.**

Farm-to-table restaurants and an artisan food village would be great additions to share in the organic fruits and vegetables grown on the farm and nearby farms in the Ag Reserve. "[The foodie generation has come of age](#)," Ed McMahon of the Urban Land Institute told Bloomberg this year. "The mainstream development community has come to think of working farms as a pretty good way to build a low-cost amenity that people seem to like and that also adds authenticity." "The opportunity to locate a restaurant next to a farm gives a direct visual connection to its source of food, and can be a very powerful marketing opportunity." The farmers' market and other retail/educational/restaurants could have ample bike racks to encourage biking.

There are [many different models](#) regarding the organic farm – who owns it, who runs it and how it is financed. Prairie Crossing, north of Chicago, is one of the pioneers in building an agrihood. "At Prairie Crossing, we realized the potential of the farm early; feature articles about the new local food farm helped to drive sales more effectively than ads in the real estate section of the Chicago Tribune. We were eventually able to recoup a portion of this investment by selling the equipment to the farm operation as the business reached a level of profitability." The organic farm component on Belward Farm could provide educational opportunities in sustainable farming, landscaping and gardening based on native plants for community members and county school children.

["Community Supported Agriculture"](#) consists of a community of individuals who pledge support to a farm operation so that the farmland becomes, either legally or spiritually, the community's farm, with the growers and consumers providing mutual support and sharing the risks and benefits of food production. Typically, members or "share-holders" of the farm or garden pledge in advance to cover the anticipated costs of the farm operation and farmer's salary. In return, they receive shares in the farm's bounty throughout the growing season, as well as satisfaction gained from reconnecting to the land and participating directly in food production."

Community Supported Agriculture would contribute to the support for the farm. However, in many agricultural communities a portion of each home sale goes to support the farm. A professional farmer generally runs farm and plans the activities which make the farm the center of the community.

The barns on Belward plus an "artisan food village" could offer the produce from the farm on Belward but also the products and a portion of the harvest from nearby farms for fruits, vegetables, cheese, meats and flowers. In November, 2014 a small group of neighbors organized a one-day farmers' and artists' market that attracted over 2,000 people to the Maple Springs barn across the road from Belward Farm.

The "new house" on Belward appears to be suitable for classes in farm-to-table cooking and canning, as well as a place to sell goods produced locally like pottery, woven goods, jewelry and art.

The homes that would surround the organic farm could be sited take advantages of the contours of the land and to contribute to the concept of community. Single-family homes, town homes and condos would promote inter-generational living. Homes oriented toward a grid pattern of streets with wide shared use pathways would promote walking, biking and sociability.

The houses, built to blend with the homes in adjacent neighborhoods, could be built with an emphasis on energy efficiency, sustainability and green building practices and materials. Landscaping could be sustainable,

low maintenance and deer resistant. The last family-friendly homes built in the area were in Fallsgrove in 2002 so the demand is there. Every mention of the homes in the proposed agrihood on Belward elicits the response, “I want to live there.”

Green spaces bring people together. If possible, the environmentally sensitive areas could include walking/running areas with boardwalks or pervious trails around them. This would provide an ideal area for walking, running and bird-watching. A recreation area with playgrounds and a pool would accommodate children through seniors with programming for all ages and may work in conjunction with one of the barns. A clubhouse with a kiosk with seating on a green space near the center of the community would provide a gathering place and a place to sit outside and interact with neighbors.

An excellent plan for stormwater management is essential because the area behind the historic farmstead is 50 feet above the intersection at Muddy Branch and Darnestown Road. The water runoff could be harnessed for irrigation for the agricultural area and plantings in the common areas.

“Today’s developers have access to a small but growing [body of knowledge and professionals](#) experienced in the structuring and operation of master-planned communities with farms.”

Articles about agrihoods:

BUILDING COMMUNITIES WITH FARMS

Insights from developers, architects and farmers on integrating agriculture and development,
<http://www.prairiecrossing.com/libertyprairiefoundation/LPF-Publication9-10.pdf>

Growing Sociability: Integrating Communal Spaces with Development,
<http://urbanland.uli.org/development-business/growing-sociability-integrating-communal-spaces-development/>

Examples of successful agrihoods:



Serenbe, Atlanta, Georgia.



South Village, Vermont



Willowsford, Loudoun County, Virginia

“Community of the Year 2012, 2013, 2014” – “Willowsford, a naturally planned new home community in Loudoun County, Va. inspired by the county's farming heritage and a commitment to natural community design, was named Community of the Year by the National Association of Home Builders...at the NAHB International Builders Show in Las Vegas.”

October 9, 2015 --- “Willowsford was proud to take home numerous awards at [Great American Living Awards](#) as well as support our builders in the community.

Mike Snow – Farm Manager at Willowsford in Loudoun County

Brian Cullen - Head of the Development Team at Willowsford



Agritopia, Gilbert, Arizona



Prairie Crossing, Grayslake, Illinois



Hidden Springs, Boise, Idaho

From the website for [Hidden Springs](#):

The town is built by its founders and residents upon [eight principles](#):

- 1. Rural character and farming traditions:** We will maintain the rural traditions of the property by incorporating older out buildings into our landscape designs where practical, and allowing some of our open space for appropriate agricultural uses.
 - 2. Small town:** Traditional neighborhood design will be the foundation for the small-town lifestyle.
 - 3. Natural environment:** We will respect the natural environment.
 - 4. Traditional homes:** We will encourage the design and construction of homes that are comfortable and long-lasting; homes that will use energy and resources efficiently and responsibly.
 - 5. Quality of life and healthy living:** We have set aside, and will care for, large and diverse areas for outdoor living and recreation.
 - 6. Education:** We believe quality education starts at home, and we will support neighborhood schools and lifelong learning opportunities.
 - 7. Diversity:** We will offer a variety of homes so that people of many ages, incomes, and backgrounds can live at Hidden Springs.
 - 8. Value and values:** We will create a community that will provide enrichment, enjoyment, and value for many generations to come; a place where you will be proud to watch your grandchildren grow up.
- In 2000, our efforts were recognized when Hidden Springs received the prestigious Best Smart Growth Award from the National Association of Home Builders.

While Agritopia was among the very first agrihood developments, many others have sprouted up. These include Serenbe in Chattahoochee Hills, Ga., Prairie Crossing in Grayslake, Ill., South Village in South Burlington, Vt., and Hidden Springs in Boise, Idaho. [Most of these were being built just as the market collapsed in 2008, but have emerged intact with strong home values and low turnover.](#)

Belward Farm: an agrihood that would be a win-win solution for everyone.

Donna Baron

Coordinator, The Gaithersburg – North Potomac – Rockville Coalition