

Agritourism in Johnson County

Johnson County Food Policy Council Recommendation 2018

Agritourism is the nexus where agriculture and tourism meet to provide consumers with educational and cultural experiences on working farms. Residents of Johnson County, just as our nation, have become more and more disconnected from our food system. Through agritourism, farms become a destination for the public to connect with farmers and agricultural operations for enjoyment, education, and active participation in the local food system.

Why should Johnson County support Agritourism?

- **Keep agriculture land in production**

Supporting diverse rural economic development empowers current and future farmers to maintain their on-farm businesses instead of converting the land use and eliminating the agricultural production.¹ Across the United States, agritourism has been shown to bolster farm profitability. In Iowa, agritourism and recreational services income per farm more than doubled between 2002 and 2007.²

- **Increase the amount of local food consumed in the region.**

Agritourism can help support local efforts to connect more eaters to the land on which their food is grown, how it is grown, and who is growing it--enhancing the appeal of local foods.³

- **Enhance the viability of small and intermediate scale farms**

Agritourism can help supplement income for farmers, serving as an important strategy to overcome economic disparity when facing constrained market access.⁴ In our neighboring state of Missouri, a survey found that 64.4 percent of farmers saw an increase in profits after developing agritourism on their land.⁵ In addition, Missouri farm size and location did not contribute to profitability. This suggests that agritourism can benefit a variety of farm size operations and closeness to urban centers.⁶

- **Support rural economic development and community retention**

Agritourism creates jobs, increases the tax base, gives tourists another reason to visit Johnson County, and residents another reason to stay in Iowa. For every dollar in agritourism sales generated on New Jersey farms, another \$.50 of sales were generated in other businesses creating an additional \$33.3 million in revenue in other businesses.⁷

- **Johnson County Community Feedback and Public Demand**

On March 22, 2018, the Johnson County Food Policy Council held a forum to provide education and space for discussion on agritourism in Johnson County. Over 60 people participated creating a lot of positive and thoughtful discussion on the topic.⁸ There is public demand to see more agritourism type businesses in our community, as more businesses are created across the country.

What do you want to see more of in Johnson County? (top ranked)

1 Farm stands	7 (tie) Vineyard tours/tasting	12 (tie) Bike Tours
2 On-farm Restaurants	9 Pick your own fruit/veg	16 (tie) Corn Maze
3 Event venues	10 Cut your own trees	16 (tie) Hay Rides
4 Farm tours	11 On farm petting zoo	16 (tie) Cookouts
5 (tie) Orchards (not pick your own)	12 (tie) Bike Tours	16 (tie) Small housing development built around CSA operation
5 (tie) On farm food trucks/carts	12 (tie) Educational Opportunities	
7 (tie) Overnight stays	12 (tie) Community Gardens	

Additional On-Farm activities

Gathered from potential customers, farmers, and business owners at events and agritourism roundtable:

Yoga or meditation with farm animals, Farm shops, glamping, breweries, distilleries, nature walks, dinner theater, barn or country dance, on farm bakery, snowshoe or cross country ski trails, ice skating

Using Zoning to Support Agritourism

In the 2018 Comprehensive Plan, Johnson County Board of Supervisors voted to “foster a diverse and resilient local economy” by “develop[ing] agritourism zoning regulations to allow greater flexibility for value-added agriculture activities.”⁹ While redrafting the Unified Development Ordinance, Johnson County has the opportunity and ability to adopt zoning codes that enable agritourism enterprises.

All agritourism policies should:

- Attract, rather than deter, new agritourism enterprises
- Include site planning requirements that are realistic and achievable for the intended uses
- Allow for innovation and creativity while remaining connected to agriculture
- Provide farmers and entrepreneurs more regulatory predictability before making large investments

Enable More Opportunities for Accessible, Small to Medium Scale Agritourism

Even at a small-scale, these enterprises can create a marketing boost for a farm. Special event and Seasonal Ag Event permits allow for more variety of activities but are limited in timeframe and currently require annual application, fees, and public hearing before the Board of Adjustment. Home business permits allow for some agritourism-type activities, but they are currently limited to two employees, which is not always compatible with agritourism business models. Adding these uses will create opportunities for smaller agritourism enterprises.

Add Accessory Uses to the Ag District

Farm Stays or agriculture/nature camping: temporary, primitive, tent camping

Add or Expand Conditional Uses to the Ag District

Opportunities for “glamping” (i.e. campers or trailers used to house overnight guests)

Campground

Enclosed Roadside stand or similar small fruit and vegetable or farm shop

Expand wineries to include cideries, microbreweries, distilleries and other fermented beverages

Add Home Industry as a Conditional Use

Adding this higher intensity home business permit would enable agritourism in keeping with these suggestions:

Home Industry should not be limited by number of uses or permits

Agritourism related home industries need flexibility and the ability to diversify their business revenue. Limits should be defined by the overall intensity or impact, not by a set number of uses.

Threshold criteria should be flexible enough to accommodate a variety of enterprises

Setting one threshold too low could eliminate an enterprise even if the overall impact is equivalent to others. If one or a set number of criteria factors are above threshold limits, an appeal should be possible through the Board of Adjustment to show the overall intensity of impact is found consistent with other businesses.

Employees should be assessed by full-time equivalent

Criteria levels should count the number of full-time equivalent employees instead of physical number of employees. Many agritourism operations depend on seasonal, infrequent, or very part-time employees.

Home Industry should be allowed on parcels regardless of residency

Some property owners have a house on one parcel and own the adjacent parcel. They are currently limited to only conduct activities permitted by a home based business on the parcel of land on which they reside and not their adjacent parcel of land. All parcels of land should be eligible for home industry as a conditional use.

Support Agriculture Events

In general, special events are temporary gatherings of people for a specific purpose. Agriculture enterprises provide many opportunities to gather community members for education, cultural experience, and celebration or enjoyment of our Iowa countryside. These gatherings could include: retreats, celebrations, fundraisers, performances, dances, festivals, fairs, concerts, shows, meetings, etc.

Stakeholder Feedback from Johnson County Agritourism Roundtable hosted on October 8, 2018:¹⁰

- Events help sustain agriculture and agritourism businesses
- Requiring dates at time of application for special event permits creates significant barriers
- Allowing only twelve special events per year is too restrictive
- Weddings on a farm are agricultural experiences

Special events are currently regulated by the type of event and permitted with criteria set by the Board of Adjustment. Some event types are currently listed in the code while others are not listed. Because there is not an exhaustive list of events types, there is concern and confusion among constituents about what constitutes a special event (i.e. when you need to get a permit). A new structure to event regulation could provide more clarity, address stakeholder feedback, and help meet community interest.

Regulate and permit special events based on a tiered system of impact

Criteria for impact could include: number of attendees, hours of event, noise levels, space rental fee vs donation, road level and condition, frequency of events, and consent of neighbors.

A tiered system could feature levels based on criteria elements:

Level 1: Low impact or donated-space, always permitted

Level 2: Moderate impact, cap on the number or frequency, administrative/ staff permit

Level 3: High impact, cap on the number or frequency, Board of Adjustment approve application and set criteria if necessary

Create an option of administrative permits for events

Administrative or staff permits are recommended with the intention to reduce barriers of time and expense for the applicants. Events requiring administrative permits would necessitate a standardized set of expectations. Higher impact events, or events with any non-standardized elements, would need to be approved with any necessary criteria set by the Board of Adjustment. All events are expected to follow all Iowa State Code public health guidelines and permitting processes with Johnson County Public Health, regardless of zoning code.

Establish Zoning Options for Higher Intensity Agritourism

A new agritourism zoning district should allow more diverse and higher intensity uses, beyond those currently allowed in the agricultural district. Rezoning to an agritourism district would be dependent on a demonstrated agricultural use of the land. A new zoning district has the potential to provide predictable and clear expectations before farmer entrepreneurs make large business investments. The approval process of rezoning to a new agritourism district needs to accommodate the connection to agriculture and working farms. If the rezoning process restricts all but a very select few to participate, adding a higher intensity conditional use permit for agritourism may be a direction to explore. Agritourism needs to be accessible for it to be successful.

Agritourism should be considered differently than commercial uses

Stakeholders from the Agritourism Roundtable presented the following requirements for commercial districts as currently incompatible or prohibitive to the viability of many agritourism businesses.¹¹

- **Parking requirements:** The size of parking lot needs more flexibility than is typically required for a commercial district, and dust-free parking should not be required in all cases.

- **Road paving requirements:** Options were discussed of a cost sharing system with the county if road improvements must be made; or, allowing in some circumstances businesses to determine the need for road improvements themselves.
- **Sensitive areas and stormwater ordinances:** Applicants want clarity about qualifications to have these waived, and several stakeholders asked that the county not require inputs or investments be made before a conditional use permit is approved.
- **Building codes:** One stakeholder commented that requiring sprinklers was especially burdensome and an uncommon requirement for their type of business.

In Summary

The Johnson County Food Policy Council asks the Johnson County Board of Supervisors to support agritourism by updating the Unified Development Ordinance:

- Add uses to the ag district to support agricultural events and on-farm purchases
- Add home industry as a conditional use to enable more businesses connected to farmland
- Regulate and permit special events based on a tiered, criteria driven system
- Create an option of administrative permits for events
- Establish zoning options for higher intensity agritourism through either a new zoning district or an additional conditional use

¹ "AN ORDINANCE ESTABLISHING AN AGRITOURISM OVERLAY DISTRICT AOD IN SPECIFIC PORTIONS OF THURSTON COUNTY AMENDING TITLE 20 OF THE THURSTON COUNTY CODE BY ADDING NEW CHAPTER 2008G AMENDING CHAPTER 2054 TABLE 1 AMENDING SECTION 200340 AND AMENDING THE OFFICIAL ZONING MAP THURSTON COUNTY WASHINGTON." (March 13, 2012).

<https://www.co.thurston.wa.us/permitting/agriculture/docs/AOD-Ordinance-14725.pdf>

² Thessen, Greg, Director, Iowa Field Office, USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, "Measuring the Economic Impact of Agritourism on Farms" (2009). PowerPoint presentation. http://www.agmrc.org/media/cms/Agritourism_Thessen_A812A9AE31310.pdf

³ Nasers, Melissa Sue, "Iowa agritourism consumer profile: demographics, preferences, and participation levels" (2009). Graduate Theses and Dissertations. 10647. <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd/10647>

⁴ Schilling, Brian J. "The Economic Impact of Agritourism in New Jersey" (2007). Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station http://foodpolicy.rutgers.edu/docs/pubs/Econ_Impact_AT_NJ_2006.pdf

<http://www.waeaonline.org/UserFiles/file/JAREApr20145Attavanichpp69-87Supplement.pdf>

⁵ Barbieri, Carla and Tew, Christine, "Perceived Impact of Agritourism on Farm Economic Standing, Sales and Profits" (2016). Travel and Tourism Research Association: Advancing Tourism Research Globally. 34. <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1606&context=ttra>

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Schilling, Brian J. and Witsanu Attavanich, "Does Agritourism Enhance Farm Profitability?" (2014). Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics 39(1):69-87. <http://www.waeaonline.org/UserFiles/file/JAREApr20145Attavanichpp69-87Supplement.pdf>

⁸ "Summary of Johnson County Food Policy Council's 2018 Annual Forum, Farm, Food, and Fun: Agritourism in Johnson County." (2018) <file:///C:/Users/idewald/Downloads/JCFPC%202018%20Agritourism%20Forum%20Report.pdf>

⁹ "Johnson County 2018 Comprehensive Plan Volume 1" (2018). https://www.johnson-county.com/dept_zoning.aspx?id=4811

¹⁰ "Johnson County Agritourism Roundtable Report" (2018).

¹⁰ Ibid