



*Regal Vineyards*

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My family purchased a 52 acre farm located in Ashtabula County in 2005. This farm was home to one of the oldest wineries in Ashtabula County and the farm had sat vacant for over 40 years when we purchased the property. The costs of farming with weather considerations, equipment and the ever increasing cost of materials make it very difficult for the farm to sustain itself. We also knew that bringing in this type of business to our community in Ashtabula County could be good for not only us but for our county and township. We have successfully operated our agritourism business for the last 3 years but the difficulties and obstacles we have had to manage could certainly have given us cause to stop.

The passage of SB 75 will help ensure that some of the challenges we have faced and continue to face as farmers trying to sustain our farm and business could be averted. We have faced challenges in working with our auditor's office in achieving an understanding from them that our farm is first and foremost a farm. We have had to repeatedly meet with, submit pictures and information to the auditor's office to maintain our CAUV tax status. Our farm produces corn, pumpkins and grapes and we raise sheep as well. The auditor's office has tried to measure portions of our farm that they say is not agricultural. It has been a continual struggle since purchasing our farm. We are hopeful that this bill will help our auditor's office gain a better understanding of the importance of agritourism in being able to sustain our farm and understand it's role in our farming activities.

In operating our agritourism business the portion of SB 75 regarding liability in a civil action for any harm as a result of risk inherent in an agritourism activity is extremely important to us. Guests on our farm come from all walks of life and they come to the farm because they want to experience farm activities. The uneven paths of a corn maze, the random branch that may fall from a tree and a customer putting their hand in the way of a donkey's mouth (despite signs warning that animals are unpredictable and don't put your hands on them!) are all cause for concern and raise our insurance rates to operate our events. To have legislation that can reduce our liability would greatly help us and also allow us to offer more opportunities to customers than we currently do for fear of civil actions.

The clarification of zoning and limiting the authority of county and township zoning laws on the farm would allow us to continue to expand our farming and agritourism business. When initially starting our business we had some difficulties with zoning in our township, but with good communication and support from some on the zoning board we have been able to establish our agritourism business. A priority for us has been and always will be the safety in our parking area and on our farm. So we understand that the need for some regulatory authority in these areas is appropriate and necessary.

Please support SB 75 which will help support the continued efforts to maintain the local farms in our state by supporting the agritourism business which in our case has allowed us to continue to farm.

*Debbie Mihalik*

Debbie Mihalik

Owner / Regal Vineyards