

Maryland Horse Industry Strategic Plan:

January, 26th 2026:Virtual Meeting

Economic Development Advisory Committee:

Open discussion was encouraged from a horse industry wide perspective and perspective given within that Advisory Committee. Notes from the Steering Committee prior meetings were distributed prior to the Advisory Meeting.

Meeting Summary

The Economic Development Advisory Committee met to discuss how Maryland's horse industry can be more effectively positioned as a driver of economic activity, workforce development, land preservation, and community vitality across the State. The discussion focused on shared messaging, coordination challenges, financial sustainability, workforce needs, and the types of information decision-makers require to support strategic investment in the industry.

Maryland's Horse Ecosystem and Shared Messages

Committee members emphasized the importance of presenting Maryland's horse industry as a unified, statewide ecosystem rather than a collection of separate disciplines or activities. Participants described the industry as encompassing agriculture, sport, recreation, youth engagement, tourism, events, and related small businesses, all of which contribute to local and regional economies.

Members agreed that industry coordinated messaging should highlight the industry's accessibility, its role in supporting communities across rural, suburban, and urban areas, and its value as an agricultural and economic sector. The group identified an opportunity to better communicate Maryland's strengths, including its geographic location, diverse facilities, experienced workforce, and long-standing equine heritage. Why horses matter to families and communities—not just competitors or professionals - Horses as tools for youth development, responsibility, education, and connection.

Why the Horse Industry Matters to Maryland

The committee discussed the horse industry's broad economic and public value to the State. The industry supports thousands of jobs, generates tourism and visitor spending, and contributes to local tax bases. Major events (Washington International, Capital Challenge, Preakness) fill hotels, restaurants, and support local businesses. Events provide faster ROI than long-term economic development projects. Jobs and workforce: Direct employment: grooms, trainers, veterinarians, farriers, event staff. Indirect employment: hospitality, feed, transportation, services Beyond direct economic impact, participants highlighted the industry's role in preserving farmland, maintaining open space, and sustaining rural communities. Horses keep land in agricultural use and preserve open space & quality of life.

It was emphasized that the horse industry also contributes to Maryland's identity and quality of life, offering educational, recreational, and cultural opportunities that extend well beyond those directly involved with horses.

Connection and Fragmentation Within the Industry

A consistent theme was the disconnect that exists across sectors, disciplines, geography, and organizations within the horse industry. Committee members noted that economic development efforts are often uncoordinated, with counties, agencies, and industry groups working independently rather than as part of a shared strategy. Counties often do not recognize horse assets within their own jurisdictions

Participants discussed how this makes it difficult to communicate the industry's full value, pursuing funding opportunities, or guide businesses and communities toward available resources. The need for more coordinated communication, shared branding, and cross-sector collaboration would strengthen the industry's overall economic impact.

Coordination and Statewide Leadership

The committee discussed the need for clearer statewide coordination of horse industry economic development. Members generally agreed that while many organizations engage in valuable work, no single entity is currently responsible for aligning messaging, data, outreach, and economic development initiatives across the State. Maryland Horse Industry Board was noted as the statewide umbrella, but: Cannot do so without staff capacity. County Economic Development Corporations (EDCs) should be implementation partners. Each county has different strengths and needs. Need for a dedicated statewide equine economic development coordinator. Modeled after Commerce regional offices or county ag business roles. Responsibilities discussed: Coordinating county EDCs, Collecting and standardizing data, Supporting facilities, events, and marketing, Acting as a liaison across agencies

Participants described an ideal coordinating role as one focused on convening stakeholders, connecting state and county economic development efforts, centralizing information on facilities and services, and helping translate industry needs into actionable recommendations for policymakers.

Information Needs for Decision-Makers

The state and local decision-makers need clearer, more consistent information to understand the horse industry's economic and community value. Clear economic impact numbers, Jobs, visitor spending, tax revenue, sector breakdowns. Return-on-investment framing. Example: how facility upgrades translate into increased events, barns, and spending. Participants identified a need for updated economic impact data, county-level and regional insights, workforce statistics, and information that demonstrates return on public investment.

In addition to data, the importance of clear narratives and practical examples that show how horse-related activities support jobs, tourism, land preservation, and community use. Participants suggested organized and clear materials would be most effective in supporting policy and funding decisions. Visual, on-site exposure. Site visits during major events were repeatedly cited as the most persuasive tool. Family and youth impact narratives. Facilities as safe, enriching places for kids and communities.

Financial Sustainability of Operations

The discussion highlighted the financial challenges facing many horse-related operations, including events, facilities, farms, lesson barns, and small businesses. Members cited rising costs for labor, insurance, feed, land, and compliance as ongoing pressures that threaten long-term sustainability. Challenges raised: Aging, non-turnkey facilities increase costs for event producers. Regulatory burden (licensing, camps, nutrient management) is costly for small operations. Racing purses impact farm viability, breeding decisions, and participation.

Participants also noted that many facilities and operations rely on inconsistent revenue streams and face difficulty accessing capital for maintenance or improvement, despite their value as economic and community assets. Stabilization ideas discussed: Invest in turnkey, horse-ready facilities to attract more events. Reduce setup costs by providing: Permanent infrastructure, power, water, footing, stalls, camper hookups etc. Link funding requests directly to: revenue retention, event growth and measurable ROI

Entry Points and Pathways Into the Industry

The committee identified lesson barns, youth programs, camps, and training operations as essential entry points into the horse industry. County fairs and pony rides as underused recruitment moments. Demonstration areas at major shows/ events such as horse care, anatomy, riding basics, tacking u, etc would engage audiences. Partnerships with: 4-H, Pony Club, Schools would increase pathways.

Community organizationsMembers expressed concern that these gateways are often under-resourced, even though they play a critical role in introducing new participants and future workers to the industry.

Participants discussed the importance of strengthening connections between these entry points and education, workforce training, and career opportunities to ensure long-term industry vitality and accessibility.

Workforce and Careers in the Horse Industry

Workforce availability and retention emerged as a significant economic development challenge. Members described shortages across a range of roles, including farm labor, event staff, instructors, veterinarians, and support personnel.

The committee noted that many careers within the horse industry are not well understood by the broader public and that barriers such as housing, transportation, training pathways, and regulatory requirements complicate recruitment and retention. Participants emphasized the need for clearer career pathways, better coordination with workforce agencies, and improved support systems for workers.

The committee broadly agreed that the Maryland Horse Industry Strategic Plan should prioritize improved coordination, stronger economic messaging, better data collection, Job diversity (vet techs, facility managers, marketers, event staff), align youth programs with real career outcomes., and intentional workforce and entry-point development to support sustainable economic growth across the State's horse industry.

Questions, or interest in joining an Advisory Committee please contact:

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