

Public Meeting Summary — Standardbred Sector Advisory Committee

February 4th, 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.

Summary:

The Standardbred Sector Advisory Committee met to discuss the role of Maryland's Standardbred industry as a core part of the state's broader horse ecosystem, emphasizing its economic, cultural, outreach, and land-preservation value. Members highlighted the need for a more unified statewide narrative that better connects racing to breeding farms, workforce, aftercare, and local businesses, while addressing fragmentation between disciplines. Challenges were identified around financial sustainability, workforce recruitment, and the visibility of the Standardbred sector, particularly for smaller farms and training operations. The committee agreed that improved statewide coordination, clearer economic and workforce data, and stronger entry pathways into the industry should be reflected in the Maryland Horse Industry Strategic Plan

Maryland's horse ecosystem and shared messages

Committee members emphasized that Maryland's Standardbred industry is an integral part of a broader, interconnected horse ecosystem that includes breeding farms, training operations, racetracks, aftercare organizations, youth programs, and recreational riding. Participants described Maryland as a state with deep equestrian heritage, strong agricultural roots, and a reputation for producing durable, competitive Standardbreds while also valuing horse welfare and stewardship of open land. The Standardbred community is unique as they all train off their own farms.

The industry should communicate a unified identity centered on tradition, responsible horsemanship, and economic contribution to rural communities. There are opportunities to better tell the story of how racing supports breeding farms, local feed suppliers, veterinarians, farriers, and small businesses, rather than portraying racing as separate from the rest of the horse world.

Why the horse industry matters to Maryland

The committee framed the Standardbred and broader horse industry as important to Maryland economically, culturally, and environmentally. Members noted that the industry supports jobs in rural areas, contributes to the agricultural tax base, attracts visitors to fairs and racetracks, and helps preserve open space that might otherwise be lost to development.

Participants highlighted that breeding and training farms maintain farmland and scenic landscapes, which benefit local communities beyond the racing sector. Several members pointed to multigenerational family involvement in Standardbreds as part of Maryland's living heritage and community identity.

Connection and fragmentation within the industry

Members acknowledged that Maryland's horse industry often feels segmented — between racing disciplines, between tracks and farms, and between racing and recreational horse communities. The Standardbred sector, in particular, was described as feeling less visible than other segments of the industry.

To reduce fragmentation, participants suggested more cross-discipline events, joint marketing efforts, and shared educational programming. Ideas included statewide horse showcases that invite the public, collaborative youth programs, and better communication between racetracks, breeders, and community riding organizations.

Coordination and statewide leadership

The Standardbred Advisory Committee discussed that Maryland would benefit from clearer statewide coordination for the horse industry. The possibility of housing or coordinating marketing and communications efforts under a broader statewide framework, such as the Maryland Horse Park System was raised. While participants acknowledged that dedicated funding does not currently exist for this purpose, they felt that a centralized structure could strengthen visibility, reduce duplication, and support future investment. Positioning marketing as a shared resource benefiting all sectors was seen as a way to build long-term support. While members did not settle on a single existing entity, they felt that a designated coordinating body or role should be responsible for convening stakeholders, sharing data, and promoting the industry collectively.

Participants suggested that such a role should include: facilitating regular communication across disciplines, gathering economic and workforce data, supporting statewide marketing, and helping align policy priorities that affect farms, racetracks, and training facilities.

There was strong interest in reviving Horse Industry Day in Annapolis as a high-impact marketing and advocacy effort, paired with a more sustainable funding approach. Past events were widely viewed as valuable, but reliance on a small number of organizations to cover costs had led to burnout. Participants suggested a shared cost model, potentially using sponsorships, scaled contributions, or alternative venues, to ensure that the event could continue without placing an undue burden on any one sector.

Information needs for decision-makers

Committee members stressed that state and local leaders need clearer, accessible information about the economic and community value of the horse industry. They felt that concise, visually compelling reports - such as infographics - would be more effective than lengthy studies.

Suggested materials included economic impact summaries, workforce snapshots, maps showing farmland preservation tied to horse farms, and human stories highlighting careers and family businesses in the Standardbred sector and the horse ecosystem. Data on jobs, tax contributions, and land use would be persuasive to policymakers. Participants discussed the potential to reinstate or modify racing license fees as a reasonable, industry-supported source of funding for horse industry marketing and outreach. Maryland was noted as an outlier in not charging such fees, and there was general agreement that modest licensing costs would likely be accepted by horsemen if the revenue was clearly reinvested into industry support, visibility, and coordination. This approach was viewed as a way for the industry to help fund its own promotion, rather than relying on new or uncertain state appropriations.

Financial sustainability of operations

Members described significant financial pressures on Standardbred facilities, including rising costs for feed, labor, insurance, utilities, and maintenance of aging infrastructure. Smaller farms and training operations were seen as particularly vulnerable.

The financial sustainability emerged as a central concern for Standardbred operations across Maryland, driven by rising costs for feed, labor, insurance, utilities, transportation, and facility maintenance, particularly for smaller and mid-sized farms and training operations. Participants noted that regulatory compliance requirements add additional financial and administrative strain, while uncertainty around racing schedules, purse structures, and long-term program commitments discourages breeding, investment, and reinvestment in the state. The committee emphasized that maintaining stable funding mechanisms and providing greater predictability are essential to sustaining operations, supporting workforce retention, and ensuring confidence in Maryland's Standardbred and broader horse industry ecosystem.

Regulatory compliance costs and limited revenue streams were also identified as challenges, especially for smaller barns and aftercare programs that support the broader ecosystem. Participants noted that without new business models or additional support, some operations may struggle to remain viable.

Entry points and pathways into the industry

The committee highlighted local stables, farm tours, youth programs, 4-H, pony clubs, and aftercare organizations as critical entry points for introducing people to horses. Members emphasized that these programs need a unified effort to help with outreach, as many are under funded and under staffed.

Committee members pointed to event-based outreach programs as a promising model for supporting marketing efforts while managing costs. Experiences such as track tours, double-seated carts riding with a driver events, behind-the-scenes programs, and interactive opportunities had proven popular, and participants observed that attendees were often willing to pay modest fees. These fees helped offset expenses such as horse use, transportation, and staff time, making outreach efforts more sustainable while also increasing public engagement with the industry.

Participants saw potential to create clearer pathways by working with established youth and educational groups to create entry points into racing-related careers, such as groom, trainer, driver, farm manager, or veterinary technician. Mentorship programs and internships through professionals, farms and organizations were suggested as ways to strengthen this pipeline.

Workforce and careers in the horse industry:

Recruiting and retaining workers was a major concern. Members cited challenges including physically demanding work, limited housing near farms, transportation barriers, and competition with other industries for skilled labor.

Participants emphasized the importance of partnerships with existing institutions—such as 4-H, vocational programs, universities, and national or state governing bodies—to extend the reach of marketing and education efforts to attract new people to the industry. These organizations often have insurance, transportation, or administrative structures already in place, which could reduce expenses for the horse industry while expanding access to new audiences, particularly youth and workforce entrants.

Participants felt that better career awareness, formal training programs, and clearer credentialing pathways could make horse industry careers more attractive and

sustainable. Several members also noted that immigration and licensing issues affect workforce stability in some sectors.

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

Chris Merz

Executive Director of the Maryland Racing Commission

christopher.merz@maryland.gov

Anne Litz

Executive Director of the Maryland Horse Industry Board

anne.litz@maryland.gov