

## **Sport, Competition & Recreation Sector Advisory Committee Meeting Summary**

### **February 18th 2026, Virtual Meeting**

The Sport, Competition & Recreation Sector Advisory Committee met virtually to discuss Maryland's horse industry strategic plan. Participants shared insights on shared messaging, economic value, industry challenges, and pathways for growth, emphasizing collaboration across disciplines.

### **Maryland's Horse Ecosystem and Shared Messages**

Committee members agreed the industry should promote Maryland as a unified "horse park" and "gateway to horses," highlighting its heritage as the birthplace of American racing and a hub for diverse disciplines like show jumping, eventing, and rodeo. They stressed consistent branding, such as "Maryland is for Horses," to counter fragmentation in horse sectors, while fostering shared resources like land, vets, and feed suppliers.

Opportunities exist to align sport, racing, and recreation through joint storytelling, such as agritourism campaigns linking facilities like Prince George's Equestrian Center and Fair Hill.

- The sport, competition, and recreation sector emphasized that Maryland's horse industry is both agriculture and a tourism-driven sports and entertainment economy.
- Horses were described as a shared ecosystem across disciplines—hunter/jumper, eventing, racing, western, rodeo, trail riding, driving—sharing land, feed, veterinarians, labor, and infrastructure.
- Strong call for unified branding and messaging, with repeated examples:
  - "Maryland is for Horses"
  - "All of Maryland is a Horse Park"
  - A billboard-scale slogan similar to *Pure Michigan* or *Virginia Horse Country*.
  - Participants emphasized the need for one trusted entity to consistently deliver this message statewide.

### **Why the Horse Industry Matters to Maryland**

The sector drives economic impact through events generating millions—e.g., one show alone brings \$10 million—via tourism, jobs, and spending on hotels and vendors. Culturally, it preserves open spaces, supports rural communities, and offers self-sufficient agritourism as the "original" bridge between urban and farm life.

Members referenced the American Horse Council's Maryland-specific economic study, showing hundreds of millions in statewide value, and urged updated reports to demonstrate jobs, tax revenue, and community identity beyond stereotypes of wealth.

- Economic impact was cited repeatedly as the most persuasive tool for legislators and local governments:
- Washington International Horse Show cited ~\$10 million in economic impact in one week.
- High end events bring \$300–\$500 per day per horse, with each horse traveling with 2–3 people.

The industry was framed as:

- A driver of tourism, hospitality, and local business spending
- The original form of agritourism in Maryland

### **Connection and Fragmentation**

Fragmentation persists due to discipline-specific focus (e.g., Western vs. English) and poor cross-communication, limiting collective advocacy on shared pains like regulations and land use. Ideas included quarterly "Maryland Horse Days" at venues, featuring diverse demos, pony rides, and legislator outreach to build unity.

Widespread agreement that the sector is highly fragmented:

- Disciplines operate in silos (English, western, racing, trail, rodeo).
- Small farms, events, and venues often lack communication channels.

No single place to:

- Share regulatory updates
- Flag common challenges (insurance, land use, pesticides, zoning)
- Coordinate calendars or public engagement.

Participants emphasized the need for cross-discipline gatherings to reduce duplication and isolation.

### **Coordination and Statewide Leadership**

Participants favored a trusted entity like the Maryland Horse Industry Board or Horse Council to lead, handling marketing, grant navigation, economic studies, and quarterly

convenings. This role should include data collection, policy advocacy, workforce development, and promoting the "horse park system" of excellence centers.

- Repeated questions raised:
  - Who is the trusted statewide leader for sport and recreation?
  - How do MHIB, Maryland Horse Council, MDA, Tourism, Commerce, and counties align?
- Strong support for:
  - Quarterly, rotating Maryland Horse Industry Days at facilities across the state (PGEC, Fair Hill, Eastern Shore, Western MD).
  - A coordinating role that connects horse people to existing state and county programs, not new bureaucracy.
- Participants noted that funding and programs already exist, but information does not reach horse businesses.

### **Information Needs for Decision-Makers**

Decision-makers need economic impact reports, infographics, and stories showing tourism revenue, job creation, and rural preservation to grasp the sector's value. Updated American Horse Council-style studies, plus event-specific data, were seen as most persuasive for the Governor's Office, legislators, and agencies.

Legislators and counties need:

- Clear, credible economic impact data (event-level and statewide).
- Better understanding that equestrian events are professional sporting events, not hobby activities.

Participants cited confusion among officials about:

- How horse events differ from traveling entertainment (e.g., "not Disney on Ice").
- The scale and permanence of equestrian economic contributions.

Strong interest in:

- State-supported economic impact reporting tools
- Infographics and accessible data summaries.

## **Financial Sustainability**

Rising costs, restrictive county vendor lists (e.g., mandated feed stores or Ticketmaster), facility disrepair (e.g., PG stables), and weather risks challenge events, lesson barns, and operations. Regulatory hurdles like insurance and helmet laws deter trail rides and public access, while limited grants go untapped due to poor awareness.

- Rising costs were cited across the board:
  - Feed, bedding, labor, insurance, facility maintenance.
- Event organizers emphasized:
  - Events take on significant debt to get established.
  - Sustainability is often threatened by weather risk and lack of facility protections.
- Examples raised:
  - Texas cities that rebate event organizers based on documented local spending.
  - Need for Maryland to actively recruit and retain equestrian events, not wait until they threaten to leave.
- Small operators highlighted difficulty accessing grants due to time, complexity, and lack of guidance.

## **Entry Points and Pathways**

Lesson barns, youth field trips (e.g., Black Stallion Project touching 4,000 kids), pony rides, and Discovery Centers introduce newcomers, needing insurance support, helmets, and school partnerships like Misty of Chincoteague readings. Pipelines to lifelong participation involve career awareness via curricula, vocational training (e.g., stall cleaning to event management), and agritourism trails.

Strong emphasis on youth exposure and early touchpoints:

- School partnerships

- Field trips
- Pony rides
- Reading programs (e.g., *Misty of Chincoteague*, *The Black Stallion*).

Support for:

- Horse Discovery Centers
- “Ride a Pony Day”
- Public, non-riding experiences (photos, scavenger hunts, facts, demonstrations).

Recognition that insurance and helmet laws have reduced trail riding and some youth participation, particularly in western disciplines.

### **Workforce and Careers**

Attracting youth and retaining workers is tough due to low entry wages (uncompetitive with retail), aging staff, and unclear paths beyond vets/trainers. Solutions include vocational programs, realistic career messaging (e.g., broadcasting, organizing), housing/transport aid, and county ag offices as grant/education hubs.

Workforce shortages repeatedly cited:

- Event staff
- Facility operators
- Grooms and barn labor
- Technical event roles.

Major challenge:

- Entry-level equine jobs cannot compete with retail wages

Concern raised about:

- Over-promising career earnings to young people.
- Burnout and attrition when expectations don't match reality.

Strong interest in:

- Vocational and apprenticeship pathways
- Clear skill ladders

- Training that reflects real working conditions, not idealized versions.

Acknowledgement that equine work may increasingly be:

- Transitional
- Seasonal
- A second or add-on career.

### **Major Takeaways and Next Steps**

Consensus emerged on unified branding, economic studies, workforce development, and facility upgrades (e.g., arena sides, rodeo footings at Rosecroft). Key concerns: silos, low visibility, wage gaps. Recommendations for the strategic plan: fund marketing/horse park system, create complaint channels, develop school curricula and pony ride networks, pursue agritourism grants.

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

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