

Maryland At Large Sector Advisory Committee Public Meeting Summary – March 4, 2026

The At Large Sector Advisory Committee met virtually on March 4, 2026, to provide input to the Maryland Horse Industry Strategic Plan authorized by the Governor’s Executive Order. Participants included representatives from lesson and training barns, recreational and western riding, land preservation, conservation, racing, state agencies (Agriculture, Commerce, Natural Resources, Secretary of State), and Horse Industry Partners. The discussion focused on how Maryland’s At Large horse industry connects to the wider horse ecosystem, how to communicate its value, and priority needs and ideas for the Strategic Plan.

Maryland’s horse ecosystem and shared messages

Committee members agreed that Maryland’s horse industry should present itself as one interconnected ecosystem rather than a set of competing niches. They emphasized that racing is only one of the important segments of Maryland’s overall horse population, while lesson barns, show barns, recreational riders, trail users, foxhunters, breed and discipline groups, boarding farms, and therapeutic and wellness programs represent a large share of daily horse activity in the state.

Several participants noted that policy makers often see only racing—especially the Preakness and Pimlico-related issues—because that is what attracts media coverage and involves large budgets. They felt this distorts perceptions and contributes to a narrative of internal conflict among “breeders, trainers, and racetracks,” which can discourage investment. Members stressed the need for unified messaging that recognizes different needs across sectors but underscores common ground: caring for land and animals, providing education and youth development, and supporting rural economies.

Land and open space emerged as a unifying theme. The group highlighted that all equine disciplines depend on access to land for farms, turnout, and trails. The Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation (MALPF) has permanently protected nearly 400,000 acres of farmland statewide, with approximately 26,500 acres on 235 preserved farms identified as having horses at the time of application—nearly 10% of easement properties. Members felt that positioning horses clearly as agriculture, not just recreation or “for rich people,” is essential to shared messaging and policy support.

Participants also felt that stewardship of the Chesapeake Bay watershed and conservation practices could serve as a shared narrative across the industry. Manure and pasture management challenges—such as mud control and overgrazing—are common issues on horse farms, and many operators are implementing best

management practices that could be showcased as environmental success stories rather than perceived liabilities.

Key Discussion Points:

- The industry includes lesson barns, racing, recreation, land preservation, education, and community outreach
- Strong overlap between agriculture, conservation, and equestrian operations
- Messaging challenge: public sees racing as the dominant identity and needs to see the whole ecosystem

Specific Examples:

- “Racing is a small percentage of the horse industry... but gets disproportionate coverage”
- Horses contribute to:
 - Chesapeake Bay stewardship (manure, pasture management)
 - Agricultural land preservation programs (~26,000+ acres tied to equestrian use)
- Misperception: “horses are for rich people” vs. reality of working farms and businesses

Why the horse industry matters to Maryland

Committee members described Maryland’s horse industry as important economically, culturally, historically, and for land use and community character. Economically, the industry supports a range of small businesses—lesson barns, boarding stables, veterinary practices, feed and tack suppliers, farriers, trainers, show and race venues—and a broad set of jobs, both direct and indirect. While the group did not dwell on specific dollar figures, they repeatedly framed horses as an “economic engine” for rural and exurban communities.

From a land use perspective, horses were described as a critical tool for preserving open space close to urban and suburban areas. MALPF’s equine-related easements and other preserved farms help maintain working landscapes that might otherwise be developed. Committee members viewed this as vital for the Chesapeake Bay, for climate and conservation goals, and for maintaining scenic byways and rural viewsheds. Anecdotes about local zoning hearings illustrated that even non-horse neighbors often support horse farms as part of a desired “scenic byway” character, while also raising concerns about odors, flies, and manure management—reinforcing the need for good practices and proactive communication.

Culturally and historically, participants pointed to Maryland’s long-standing traditions in foxhunting, steeplechase, standardbred and thoroughbred racing, western and rodeo events, and local shows and 4-H programs. They emphasized that horses contribute to community identity, tourism, and major events such as the Preakness and Fair Hill, but also to everyday community life through summer camps, after-school programs, and local trail riding. Several members highlighted the developmental benefits for youth—responsibility, work ethic, physical and mental wellness, and “staying out of trouble”—as a key part of the industry’s value proposition.

Key Themes:

- Land preservation and environmental impact
- Youth development and life skills
- Community value beyond economics

Examples:

- Horses:
 - Keep land from development (“ag use vs housing”)
 - Support Chesapeake Bay conservation practices
- Youth benefits:
 - “Keeps kids out of trouble... teaches responsibility”
 - Builds discipline, work ethic, and life skills
- Community perception:
 - “Horses are part of scenic byways... part of Maryland tradition”
- Therapeutic & wellness benefits:
 - Mental health, trauma recovery, physical activity

Connection and fragmentation within the industry

Participants agreed that the industry often appears fragmented, both internally and to policy makers. Within racing, relationships among breeders, trainers, horsemen’s groups, and racetracks were cited as a visible source of conflict. Outside racing, divisions arise along discipline lines (e.g., English vs. western, hunters vs. jumpers, show vs. trail) and around different business models (commercial lesson barns vs. small private operations). Members noted that, in practice, many farm communities are “fairly cohesive” locally, but this cohesion does not translate into a unified statewide voice.

Several reasons for fragmentation were identified:

- Different disciplines and sectors have different needs, making it hard to craft a single, simple statewide “ask.”
- Many operators are overextended running their own businesses and have limited capacity to engage in broader advocacy or coordination efforts.
- Existing organizations and publications, such as the Maryland Horse Council and its publication The Equiery, are well-respected within the horse community but primarily reach people already “inside” the industry, not external audiences.

At the same time, members identified numerous ideas for working as one system:

- Elevate horses-as-agriculture and horses-as-open-space as shared themes that cut across disciplines.
- Showcase conservation and Chesapeake Bay stewardship successes on horse farms, highlighting farms that excel at best management practices.
- Use large racing events (especially Preakness Week) as platforms to promote lesson barns, discovery centers, trail facilities, and other non-racing opportunities, including through track-based advertising and public-facing activations.

Participants also suggested more deliberate cross-pollination between horse events and broader community activities, such as “fun runs” on cross-country courses, dog-friendly events, and partnerships with youth sports and arts communities, to attract non-horse audiences into horse spaces.

Key Themes:

- Strong fragmentation across:
 - Disciplines (racing vs sport vs recreation)
 - English vs Western
 - Breeders vs trainers

Examples:

- “Everyone has their own niches instead of one voice”
- Racing conflicts influence perception of entire industry
- Even within sectors:
 - Lesson barns compete for limited clients
 - Different disciplines have different needs → hard to unify messaging

Coordination and statewide leadership

The group did not identify a single entity that currently serves as the universally recognized statewide coordinator for the horse ecosystem, but they discussed several organizations and roles that could be part of a more coherent leadership structure. The Maryland Horse Industry Board (within MDA) and the Maryland Horse Council were both acknowledged as important players with different strengths and audiences, along with tourism and commerce partners that have supported marketing efforts such as the horse park system website.

Participants suggested that a strengthened coordinating role—whether housed in an existing body or shared across entities—should realistically include:

- Convening stakeholders across sectors and regions to develop and maintain common messages, priorities, and initiatives.
- Leading communications and marketing, including a unified statewide voice, social media strategy, and media outreach that highlights the full spectrum of horse activities.
- Serving as a connector between farms and community opportunities, helping match local stables to schools, libraries, community events, and media requests.
- Working with tourism and commerce agencies to secure grants and leverage platforms such as Maryland Farm & Harvest and broader destination marketing.
- Helping coordinate data collection on land use, participation, and economic activity to support advocacy.

Committee members also discussed the potential for The Equiery, in partnership with tourism and other funders, to evolve some of its content toward external audiences—for example, beginner-friendly inserts or special issues distributed in libraries, schools, and visitor centers—without losing its core role as a voice for Horse Council members.

Key Themes:

- Need for a **trusted central voice/entity**
- Existing organizations (MHIB, Horse Council) seen as valuable but limited

Examples:

- Question raised:
 - “Who can people trust as the central voice?”
- Maryland Horse Council + *The Equiery*:
 - Strong internally
 - Limited reach externally
- Suggestion:

- Expand partnerships with **Tourism, Commerce, media, and education systems**

Information needs for decision-makers

The committee spent substantial time reflecting on what information key decision-makers—such as the Governor’s Office, legislators, local officials, and state agencies—most need to understand the industry’s value. They emphasized that many decision-makers underestimate both the scale and diversity of the horse industry.

Participants recommended several types of information and products:

- Clear, simple metrics on land, such as acres of farmland preserved that support horse operations, the share of MALPF easements with equine uses (about 235 farms and 26,500 acres), and the relationship between horses, open space, and Chesapeake Bay goals.
- Data on the number and geographic spread of licensed stables, lesson barns, discovery centers, and trail facilities, to illustrate how widely horses intersect with communities statewide.
- Accessible economic snapshots, including jobs, small businesses served (feed stores, vets, farriers, haulers), and tourism draw from major events and local shows.
- Youth, education, and wellness stories that demonstrate how horses contribute to social outcomes, such as after-school engagement, service-learning opportunities, inclusivity programs (e.g., programs welcoming LGBTQ youth and special needs students), and mental and physical health.

Members indicated that short, visually clear reports; maps; and story-rich case studies would be more persuasive than long technical documents. They also saw value in concise talking points that emphasize that horses are a form of agriculture, not just a recreational luxury, and in documenting the evolution of state policy that now explicitly recognizes equine operations as agriculture.

Key Gaps Identified:

- Lack of awareness of:
 - Industry diversity
 - Youth and education impact
 - Environmental contributions
- Need to translate:

- Acreage is a public benefit
- Horses contribute to economic and community value

Examples:

- Decision-makers compare:
 - “25,000 acres for horses vs housing” need better framing of the importance
- Need to show:
 - Youth engagement impact
 - Workforce pipeline
 - Conservation success stories

Financial sustainability of operations

The committee discussed several factors that make it difficult for lesson barns, event venues, small farms, and other At Large operations to remain financially sustainable. Participants noted that maintaining safe, compliant facilities—arenas, barns, fencing, footing, parking, and restrooms—requires significant capital and ongoing maintenance, often for slim margins.

Key cost and structural pressures mentioned included:

- Rising costs for feed, bedding, labor, insurance, and utilities, which are hard to pass on fully to customers without pricing out families.
- Land and infrastructure costs, including the challenges of acquiring or retaining enough acreage close to population centers to support boarding, turnout, and access to trails.
- Regulatory and liability concerns that can limit school partnerships, transportation, and on-site programs, particularly for higher-risk activities.
- Reliance on volunteer labor for outreach activities (school visits, library programs, community demonstrations), which can lead to burnout and limits the scale of sustained engagement.

Members emphasized that even operations that are deeply committed to community outreach—such as those that rarely decline a request to bring a pony to a school or event—need external support, coordination, and sometimes modest funding to sustain that role over time.

Key Challenges:

- Lesson barns and small operations struggle with:
 - Inconsistent income (monthly vs seasonal participation)
 - Competition with other youth activities (sports, dance)
- High cost barriers:
 - “Need a third job to afford participation”

Examples:

- Lesson barn issue:
 - Parents resist long-term commitments
 - Creates unstable revenue model
- Facilities:
 - High cost of maintenance (horses, infrastructure, land)
- Industry-wide:
 - Heavy reliance on volunteers for outreach programs

Entry points and pathways into the industry

Committee members saw lesson barns, youth programs, aftercare facilities, discovery centers, and inclusive educational partnerships as vital entry points into the horse world. They stressed that these are often the places where lifelong horse people and future industry workers first encounter horses.

Examples shared included:

- Lesson programs that partner with public school systems to provide service hours and vocational experiences for students, including special needs youth who learn workplace skills such as punctuality, task completion, and appropriate workplace behavior.
- Horse Discovery Centers that welcome beginners and are willing to bring miniature horses and other animals into libraries and schools.
- Volunteer-based programs that take horses into elementary schools during reading units or summer programs, and that offer donated “prizes” such as free lessons for summer reading challenges.

Participants agreed that these entry points need better support to be accessible and sustainable, including:

- Help navigating school system requirements, risk management, and approvals.
- Stronger connections between discovery centers, school boards, and parks and recreation departments to make “rec horseback riding” as visible as other recreational sports.
- Modest financial support or stipends for outreach activities, and recognition that outreach has value beyond immediate lesson revenue.
- Public-facing educational materials (e.g., beginner-friendly Equiery inserts, youth-focused magazines) that demystify horses and show that participation is not only for wealthy families.

Members also highlighted the need to build clearer pathways from these entry experiences into racing-related and other equine careers, for example by connecting youth from discovery centers or school programs with internships, barn jobs, and educational programs at racetracks, veterinary practices, and training operations.

Entry Points & Pathways Into the Industry

Key Themes:

- Access is limited and often unclear
- Need to “go to the people,” not wait for them\

Strong Examples:

- Library outreach programs:
 - Mini horses brought to libraries
- School partnerships:
 - Career training programs
 - Service learning for students
- Community outreach:
 - Bringing horses to schools (e.g., reading programs)

Ideas Discussed:

- Horse Discovery Centers linked with schools
- Recreational horseback riding programs (like rec soccer/lacrosse)
- Beginner-friendly materials/publications

Workforce and careers in the horse industry

The committee noted that attracting and retaining workers in the horse industry remains a significant challenge across sectors, including racing-specific roles (backstretch workers, grooms, track maintenance) and farm-based roles (barn staff, instructors, farm managers). The conversation focused less on detailed workforce data and more on lived experience.

Members described several barriers:

- Long, physically demanding hours, often early mornings and weekends, combined with modest wages and limited benefits, make it difficult to compete with other sectors.
- Limited awareness among youth and parents about the range of equine careers and the skills they develop.
- Transportation and housing challenges, particularly in rural or exurban areas where barns are not accessible by public transit.
- Immigration and licensing issues that can affect some segments of the workforce, particularly in racing, though this was referenced more generally than in detail.

Participants felt that making equine careers easier to understand and access would require:

- Stronger career awareness and guidance, including integration into school-based career and technical education pathways and clearer information about training programs.
- Partnerships between barns and schools to create structured work-based learning opportunities, building on existing service-learning models.
- Framing horse work as part of a broader wellness and outdoor lifestyle that may appeal to younger generations interested in health, nature, and meaningful work.

Workforce & Careers in the Horse Industry

Key Challenges:

- Retention and recruitment issues
- Misunderstanding of career realities

Examples:

- “People don’t understand how much it takes every day”
- Barriers:
 - Physical demands, Long hours, Limited compensation perception, Lack of awareness of career paths beyond riding

Additional Insight:

- Workforce pipeline tied directly to:
 - Youth exposure
 - Early engagement
 - Accessible entry points

Major takeaways and suggested next steps

Across topics, several themes surfaced repeatedly:

- The need for a unified narrative: Maryland’s horse industry should consistently present itself as a diverse but interconnected ecosystem that supports agriculture, conservation, youth development, wellness, and rural economies—not just as “racing.”
- Horses as agriculture and open space: Recognizing and communicating horses as agriculture and as critical to preserved land and the Chesapeake Bay is central to gaining and maintaining public and political support.
- Youth, education, and wellness as core messages: Entry points for children and families—through schools, libraries, camps, inclusive programs, and discovery centers—are essential to the industry’s future and should be front-and-center in messaging and investment.
- Outreach capacity and burnout: Many of the most effective outreach efforts currently rely on a small number of motivated individuals and volunteers; any statewide strategy should include practical support and coordination to make this work sustainable.
- Communication infrastructure: Existing tools like the Equiery, the horse park system website, and Preakness-related outreach have strong potential if more deliberately aligned to reach external audiences and supported with tourism, commerce, and media partnerships.

Concrete ideas the At Large Committee suggested for inclusion in the Maryland Horse Industry Strategic Plan included:

- Developing a coordinated statewide communications plan that emphasizes horses as agriculture, land preservation, youth development, and wellness, supported by clear metrics and stories.
- Using major racing events and public television platforms such as Maryland Farm & Harvest to showcase a wide range of equine disciplines, breeds, and farm types.

- Creating or expanding youth- and beginner-focused communication products (e.g., educational inserts, simple “meet the breeds” materials, and wellness-themed content) for distribution in libraries, schools, and community centers.
- Strengthening connections between Horse Discovery Centers, school systems, and parks and recreation programs to create visible recreational riding options and clear pathways into deeper participation.
- Exploring funding and structural options to support a more formal coordinating role—potentially through existing entities—to convene stakeholders, steward shared messaging, connect farms with outreach opportunities, and leverage tourism and commerce resources.

Members concluded by acknowledging that this strategic plan is a modest but important first step, and noted that state leadership—including the Governor and First Lady—have expressed interest in hearing from the horse industry. The committee viewed this as an opportunity to present a clear, unified account of the industry’s contributions and needs, informed by the ideas and experiences shared in this meeting.