

Maryland Horse Industry Strategic Plan

Steering Committee Meeting #1 – Meeting Notes

December 19, 2025, 10:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m.

Annapolis, Maryland

Attendees

The following individuals were in attendance, representing stakeholder organizations or horse industry interests: Kathleen Anderson, DVM, **Health and Welfare**; Billy Boniface, **Breeding, Farm, Agriculture and Land Use**; Trish Brown, **Maryland Department of Natural Resources**; Amy Burk, PhD, **Academic Representative**; Sheila Curry, **Economic Development Representative**; Michelle Jennings, **At Large**; Bill Knauf, **Thoroughbred**; Alexandria Liu, **Office of the Secretary of State**; Connie Sawyer, **Sport, Competition & Recreation Representative**; Judy Smith, **Office of the Secretary of Commerce**; Jennifer Trout, DVM, **Department of Agriculture**; Laura Lane-Unsworth, **Therapeutic, Aftercare & Equine-Assisted Services Representative**; and Lisa Watts, **Standardbred**.

Also in attendance were Anne Litz, executive director, Maryland Horse Industry Board, and Chris Merz, Executive Director, Maryland Racing Commission.

Additionally, Secretary of Agriculture Kevin Atticks attended and provided introductory remarks and gave the Strategic Planning Committee its charge.

The meeting was facilitated by L. Preston Bryant, Jr., of McGuireWoods Consulting (Richmond, Virginia).

The first meeting of the Maryland Horse Industry Strategic Plan Steering Committee marked the formal launch of a statewide, industry-wide effort to develop a comprehensive strategic plan for Maryland's horse industry. The initiative is authorized by Executive Order and is intended to promote growth, financial sustainability, and a thriving ecosystem across all sectors of the horse industry, including racing, breeding, sport, recreation, education, and therapeutic programs.

The Strategic Plan will provide a coordinated framework to strengthen and promote the horse industry, advance policies and partnerships, and ensure long-term viability. The final Strategic Plan will be submitted by the Maryland Department of Agriculture to Governor Moore no later than September 1, 2026.

This initial meeting focused on establishing shared expectations, outlining the facilitation and consensus-building process, and beginning substantive discussions on:

1. Advocacy, Public Awareness, and Promotion
2. Education and Workforce Development

Welcome and Opening Remarks

Opening remarks were provided by Secretary Atticks, Secretary Lee, Anne Litz (Executive Director, Maryland Horse Industry Board), and Chris Merz (Executive Director, Maryland Racing Commission). The focus was the importance of viewing the horse industry as a unified ecosystem rather than a collection of isolated sectors, and highlighted the opportunity for this process to align state agencies, industry stakeholders, and the General Assembly around a shared long-term vision.

The importance of collaboration, transparency, and consensus was emphasized, along with the expectation that Steering Committee members would think beyond individual sector interests and contribute to solutions that benefit the whole Maryland horse industry.

Facilitation, Authority, and Ground Rules

McGuireWoods Consulting LLC, part of the McGuireWoods LLP law firm, was introduced as the neutral facilitator for the Strategic Plan process. The facilitators clarified that their role is to manage processes, encourage balanced participation, clarify issues, and help the group work toward consensus, not to advocate policy positions or provide legal advice.

The committee reviewed the Executive Order establishing the Strategic Plan initiative and the scope of work, which includes developing recommendations related to: - Strategic planning policy guidance - Economic development - Advocacy, public awareness, and promotion - Education and workforce development - Sustainability and land use - Health and welfare - Collaboration and communication

Ground rules were adopted to guide participation and decision-making. These included commitments to collegial engagement, equal voice, constructive disagreement, and a strong preference for consensus (“no dissent”) whenever possible.

Participants were asked to consider the horse industry broadly, encompassing racing, sport horses, breeding, recreation, therapeutic riding, youth programs, agriculture, and supporting businesses. A question posed to the group was:

What unifies—or should unify—the Maryland horse industry?

This question helped frame the discussions around the following topics.

#1: Advocacy, Public Awareness, and Promotion

Public Perception and Awareness

Committee members discussed that public awareness of the Maryland horse industry is generally low and often narrowly focused on marquee events such as the Preakness Stakes. Many Marylanders, particularly in urban and suburban areas, are unaware of the industry’s breadth, economic impact, or its role in agriculture, land preservation, and community development. The industry is sometimes perceived as elitist, rural, or declining, rather than diverse and economically significant.

Participants noted a disconnect between heavily populated areas—such as Baltimore City, Prince George’s County, and Montgomery County—and nearby equine facilities and programs. Despite geographic proximity, many residents have little exposure to horses or horse-related careers.

Fragmentation and Messaging Challenges

A recurring theme was the fragmented nature of the industry. Racing, sport horses, breeding, recreation, and therapeutic sectors often advocate independently, resulting in inconsistent messaging to the public and policymakers. This fragmentation weakens overall advocacy efforts and contributes to legislative fatigue, where lawmakers receive multiple, sometimes competing, requests rather than a cohesive message.

The committee emphasized the need to adopt a unified “horse ecosystem” narrative that presents all sectors as interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

Transparency, Welfare, and Social License

Participants discussed the importance of proactively telling the industry’s story around horse welfare, safety, aftercare, and lifecycle. While many programs and standards exist, the industry does not consistently communicate these efforts, leaving space for misinformation or negative assumptions. Transparency around funding mechanisms, regulatory oversight, and capital investments—such as the Pimlico redevelopment—was identified as essential to maintaining public trust and social license to operate.

Legislative Engagement

The discussion addressed how the General Assembly currently views the horse industry, including its perceived strengths, vulnerabilities, and “existential threats.” Members noted that legislators are more likely to support initiatives when the benefits are clearly articulated in terms of statewide economic impact and community benefit, rather than sector-specific needs.

Participants emphasized the importance of coordinated advocacy, development of legislative champions, and clearer alignment between the work of the horse ecosystem.

Emerging Strategies

Developing a unified statewide brand for Maryland’s horse industry that encompasses all sectors

- Leveraging the Maryland Horse Park System as a visible, statewide platform for engagement and discovery
- Integrating horse industry messaging into broader state marketing, tourism, and economic development campaigns
- Expanding outreach through farm tours, urban programs, school partnerships, and community events
- Using storytelling to highlight careers, youth engagement, diversity, land preservation, and successful horse transitions across disciplines.

#2: Education and Workforce Development

Workforce Challenges

The committee identified workforce shortages as a critical, cross-sector issue. Labor gaps exist in roles such as grooms, trainers, veterinarians, farriers, farm managers, exercise riders, and support staff. These shortages are compounded by an aging ownership and operator base, limited succession planning, and importance of engaging young adults aged 18–25.

Many people do not view the horse industry as a viable career pathway. Career pathways, credentials, and wage expectations are often unclear or poorly communicated.

Education Pipeline and Coordination

The existing education ecosystem, including 4-H, FFA, Pony Club, Career and Technical Education programs, community colleges, universities, and University of Maryland Extension. While many programs exist, efforts are often fragmented and not consistently aligned with employer needs.

The group identified a need for better coordination, shared career pathways, and clearer connections between education programs and real-world jobs.

Data and Planning Gaps

A significant gap identified was the lack of Maryland-specific labor market data for the horse industry. Without a defensible skills gap or labor market analysis, it is difficult to prioritize investments, design credentials, or scale effective workforce programs.

Emerging Strategies

Developing visible, statewide equine career pathways from K–12 through postsecondary education - Creating industry-recognized credentials and micro-credentials tied directly to employer needs - Expanding apprenticeships and paid internships using existing state workforce tools such as EARN Maryland - Conducting a comprehensive Maryland horse industry labor market and skills gap analysis - Improving career storytelling to show job diversity, wages, and non-college pathways - Retaining young participants through collegiate programs, internships, and early-career employment opportunities - Leveraging Maryland's diversity to broaden access and participation across communities

Next Steps

The Steering Committee will continue its work through additional meetings and advisory workgroups in January and February 2026.