

Testimony of the Maryland Horse Council on
HB 116 - Agriculture - Right to Engage in Equine Activities: SUPPORT

The Maryland Horse Council (MHC) is a membership-based, umbrella trade association of the entire horse industry in Maryland. Our membership includes breed, interest and discipline associations, plus horse farms and stables, horse-related businesses, and horse owners representing all facets of the Maryland equestrian community, from the owners of race horses and race tracks, to the owners of international level competition horses, local sport horses, trail horses or just beloved retired companion horses. The owner of Pimlico, Laurel and Rosecroft racetracks is a member, as are vets, tack stores, and other farms, businesses and enthusiasts throughout the state. As such, we stand for over 30,000 Marylanders.



MHC supports this bill, which would establish the intent of the General Assembly that residents of Maryland have a right to engage in equine activities subject to regulations under laws enacted by the General Assembly. The bill is a formal legislative recognition of the vital role played by the state's equestrians in Maryland's cultural heritage, social fabric, recreational resources, and environmental and economic health. In addition, the bill will add the weight of legislative intent when questions arise at the state and local level concerning land use, resource allocation for parks and trails, etc.

Horses and horse sports have been a part of Maryland life since before this nation was created. The Maryland Jockey Club, founded in 1743, is the oldest sporting organization - of any type - in North America. Today, there are over 100,000 horses in Maryland (more per square mile than any state in the Union), and 51.8% of Maryland households contain horse enthusiasts. The majority of Maryland riders are trail riders. Each year, there are about 1500 equine 4H projects in the state, 55 high school equestrian teams, 22 pony clubs and 12 college teams. Maryland is also an international equestrian powerhouse, with the Preakness that dates to 1875, and the new Maryland 5* at Fair Hill, one of only seven such events in the world.

There are horses in every county in the state. There are 200 equine organizations and almost 800 licensed stables. As a result of the pandemic, Marylanders across the state have flocked to riding centers as a way to enjoy outdoor recreation in a naturally socially-distanced sport that provides both physical exercise and the mental health benefits that come from interaction with animals and the natural world. The equestrian community provides additional mental and physical health services through 40 therapeutic riding programs that serve those with mental, physical and developmental challenges, including wounded warriors and their families.

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Equine activities also offer environmental and quality of life benefits to the entire population, not just equestrians. A maintained pasture is second only to forest in its effectiveness in filtering runoff into local waterways and the Chesapeake Bay. And the equestrian community supports the conservation, preservation and management of open space and natural resources using primarily private dollars.

The Maryland horse industry represents \$2.1 billion in economic impact; 28,000 direct jobs; \$1 billion in annual spending by participants; \$78 million in tax revenue. At last count, there were 16,000 equine-related properties occupying over 705,000 acres (almost 10% of Maryland's total land area, and over 25% of Maryland's agricultural land). The racing and competition sectors support local economies by drawing in out-of-state dollars that are spent on food, lodging and transportation. The industry also supports local hay, grain, and straw farmers with \$80,000,000 in annual expenditures.

HB 116 recognizes the importance of the equestrian industry to Maryland life.

We urge the Committee to give HB 116 a favorable report.

Respectfully submitted,
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