

Maryland Horse Industry Strategic Plan:

Steering Committee Meeting #5 – Meeting Notes

April 15, 2026, 10:00 a.m - 2:00 p.m.

Annapolis, Maryland

The following individuals were in attendance, representing stakeholder organizations or horse industry interests: 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*, Jennifer Trout, DVM – *Department of Agriculture*, Laura Lane-Unsworth – *Therapeutic, Aftercare, and Equine-Assisted Services Representative*, Lisa Watts – *Standardbred*

Also in attendance were Anne Litz, Executive Director, Maryland Horse Industry Board, Chris Merz, Executive Director, Maryland Racing Commission, and Preston Bryant, McGuireWoods Consulting LLC

Summary:

The meeting brought together industry leaders, agency representatives, and stakeholders to discuss the future of Maryland's horse industry and the development of a strategic plan. The conversation focused broadly on how to strengthen the industry through better coordination, clearer priorities, and a more unified approach to economic development, workforce needs, public visibility, and long-term sustainability.

The main purpose was to identify shared goals and begin shaping a plan that can guide the industry forward as one connected ecosystem rather than separate sectors.

Governance and capacity

The strongest consensus was that the Maryland Horse Industry Board should be strengthened as the industry's central coordinating hub, with dedicated funding and additional staff capacity. Participants agreed that the current model depends too heavily on one staff lead and a volunteer board structure that cannot consistently carry implementation responsibilities on its own. The group also emphasized that recommendations should not simply sit on a shelf; they should be assigned, tracked, and advanced through a real implementation framework with timelines and accountability.

A related theme was sustainability. If direct funding for additional staffing is not approved, participants discussed a Plan B in which existing staff across Agriculture,

Commerce, DNR, and other agencies would be assigned clearer coordination roles. Even with that fallback, the group stressed that someone must be responsible for driving the work forward, connecting partners, and keeping the strategic plan moving beyond discussion.

Momentum and success

There was clear recognition that the industry already has important assets and promising momentum. The Maryland Horse Industry Board, despite limited capacity, is already functioning as a connector across segments of the industry and between industry stakeholders and state leadership. The Maryland Horse Park System, the Maryland Horse Career Program, and current cross-sector convenings were all cited as existing foundations that can be expanded rather than reinvented.

Participants also pointed to successful models from Virginia and elsewhere as proof that a coordinated, one-voice approach can work when the industry stays aligned and speaks with shared priorities. The group viewed those examples as evidence that Maryland can build a stronger, more organized structure if it commits to common goals, steady funding, and consistent collaboration.

Main challenges

The most frequently discussed challenge was fragmentation. The industry was described as too siloed by discipline, geography, and organization, with limited communication across sectors and too little shared planning. Related to that fragmentation is a lack of public visibility: participants said Maryland does not yet have a strong, unified marketing presence that clearly communicates the scale, value, and diversity of the horse economy.

Another major pain point was the absence of Maryland-specific data. The group said current economic impact information is useful but too general, and that policymakers need more defensible, Maryland-focused data on jobs, supply chain activity, workforce shortages, and labor demand. The industry also faces persistent insurance and liability barriers, especially in trail riding and public access activities, which make it difficult for some businesses to operate or expand.

Workforce and education

Workforce development was treated as a major long-term need, not a side issue. The group discussed the need for a statewide workforce pipeline that begins with entry-level labor and continues through credentialing, internships, apprenticeships, and professional careers. Several participants emphasized that the industry must be intentional about retaining Maryland youth and creating visible pathways that make Maryland a place where equine careers can begin and stay rooted.

The University of Maryland was a focal point in that discussion. Participants urged stronger equine programming, including expansion of the current effort toward an equine science minor and, longer term, more robust degree and research opportunities tied to the flagship university. The conversation also recognized that many entry-level workers come from Hispanic communities and that any meaningful workforce strategy must be culturally appropriate, practical, and designed with trusted community partners.

Data and economic impact

The group supported developing a Maryland-specific economic impact study and, separately, baseline labor market data. Participants discussed using the American Horse Council's national methodology as a useful reference, but many felt that Maryland needs deeper, state-specific analysis that captures the full supply chain, tax contribution, and broader economic footprint of the industry. The need for a companion labor study was also raised, especially to document shortages in veterinary services, skilled labor, and other critical areas.

There was broad agreement that this work should be done in a way that is practical, recurring, and capable of supporting future policy decisions. The group discussed leveraging existing state research capacity, ideally through agencies such as Commerce or the Comptroller's office, and formalizing expectations through a strong MOU so data collection is reliable and usable over time.

Marketing and public awareness

Public awareness emerged as another major priority. Participants called for a more coordinated marketing approach that promotes the industry's venues, events, career opportunities, and overall economic value. The discussion repeatedly returned to the idea that Maryland should present itself as a unified horse state, not a set of disconnected pieces, with clearer messaging at gateways, airports, and public-facing venues.

The Maryland Horse Park System was framed as one possible platform for that public-facing work. Even though it currently has no staff or funding, the group saw

potential to expand it into a broader navigation and marketing hub that includes farms, trails, events, and licensed stables, and that connects the public to the full horse ecosystem. That idea was paired with support for tourism and agritourism as a way to drive both public engagement and new revenue for farms.

Tourism and access

Tourism was discussed as both an economic development tool and a way to broaden access. Participants pointed to examples such as Kentucky and Ireland, where horse tourism and farm tours are organized, visible, and part of the visitor economy. Maryland's horse tourism offerings were described as promising but underdeveloped, with farms unable to shoulder the work alone without a coordinated public or private partner.

“Access” was used in the meeting primarily to mean barrier to entry, not simply physical access. That included insurance affordability, public familiarity with horses, and the ability of newcomers to enter the industry through low-barrier experiences like trail riding, tours, internships, or introductory programs. The insurance issue was especially prominent, with participants noting that high liability costs are pushing trail riding barns and related activities out of Maryland.

Moving forward

The group appeared to land on a practical sequence for the final strategic plan. First, define the leadership structure and funding needed to execute the plan; second, build the data foundation; third, establish workforce pathways; fourth, strengthen marketing and public awareness; and fifth, expand tourism, access, and industry coordination. Participants also agreed the plan should include clear action items, not just broad ideas, with timelines and designated responsibility.

There was also a strong emphasis on collaboration as a governing principle. The repeated message was that Maryland's horse ecosystem must operate with a “one voice” mindset, even while different sectors retain their own interests. The goal is not to erase those differences, but to organize them under a shared structure so the industry can advocate, plan, and grow as a single, interdependent whole.