



For Maryland's Horse Industry, the Future is Now



by J. Robert Burk
Executive Director

Have you ever thought, "What is the future of the Maryland horse industry and what can I do to assure that my interests and those of the thousands of horse industry members are protected?" If you haven't, other people, including the Maryland Horse Industry Board (MHIB), have.

At the end of the 2003 legislative session, the Maryland Horse Council hosted a meeting entitled "Slots Hot Then Not." At that meeting of almost 100 horse people, legislators and horse racing and breeding representatives voiced their thoughts on the successes and failures of the legislative session in relation to the horse industry in Maryland. After hearing them talk, a gentleman from the audience asked whether the Maryland horse industry had ever developed a plan on how to strengthen all sectors of the industry.

The idea, while a good one, has often been regarded by members inside and outside of our horse industry as impossible. Why? Because it was once believed that leaders in the Maryland horse industry couldn't work together, couldn't come to an agreement on anything, and certainly couldn't produce a plan for preserving and enhancing Maryland's rich equine heritage. Those beliefs are misplaced, overused, and anything but the truth.

In the summer of 2003, Governor Robert L. Ehrlich, Jr. tasked the Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA), and thus the MHIB, to identify challenges facing the Maryland horse industry and to make recommendations to address these obstacles. With the leadership of MDA Secretary Lewis R. Riley and Deputy Secretary Dr. John R. Brooks, a committee was established by the MHIB to develop a plan of action for the Maryland horse industry and to organize a Maryland Horse Symposium.

The committee represents the entire horse industry including: racing, breeding, recreational riding, competitive, working, education, promotion, land preservation and land use interests, to name a few. All activities were reviewed by the MHIB. Over the past several months, this 11-member committee has worked to develop an executive summary of the status of the industry and recommendations for the governor. This executive summary documents steps to make the Maryland horse industry even more successful and strengthen its leadership at the national and international level. But the summary is not the end of this committee's work.

Upon completion of the initial report, the committee, in coordination with the governor's office is organizing the Maryland Horse Symposium. Prince George's Equestrian Center and the Showplace Arena will host the symposium later this summer. Organizational leaders from all sectors of the Maryland horse industry will be invited.

The symposium aims to provide a forum for discussion on important topics such as:

- Defining the role of horses in agriculture
- Outlining the economic shift out of state of the racing and breeding sectors
- Enhancing and supporting equine educational programs
- Improving horse operation labor availability and qualification
- Increasing availability of land for use by equestrians
- Improving land preservation programs through the inclusion of horse farms
- Supporting and developing marketing and promotions for the Maryland horse industry

Those in attendance will be expected to actively participate in these discussions and to help complete the comprehensive plan for strengthening the Maryland horse industry. Once the symposium ends, all information compiled from the discussions will be included in a final report for the governor, and all those interested in the future of the Maryland horse industry. Not only will this document provide the framework for the future of our industry, but it will demonstrate the unity of the horse industry and its supporters in Maryland.

Regardless of your background or focus in the Maryland horse industry, it is important that your voice is heard. Whether you ride casually or competitively, keep a single horse at home or own a large horse operation, ride English or Western style, breed horses of one type or another, we NEED your input.

For one of the first times in recent Maryland history, the governor has requested not only our input on the status of our horse industry, but also our insight on how our industry can best be supported by the state government. Perhaps another byproduct of this event will be that the naysayers are proven incorrect through the public unification of the entire Maryland horse industry.

Now is the time to make sure that your concerns are represented at this meeting. The MHIB and the Maryland Horse Council (MHC), an umbrella organization of all Maryland horse organizations, are currently working together to organize the list of invitees.

If you are a member of an organization that has not yet joined the MHC, please contact president LuAnne Levens (301-421-1252 or levensLK@aol.com) so that your representative can be invited. Our goal is to include representation from all aspects of the Maryland horse industry.

Together we can help our horse industry grow and have Maryland recognized for what it is...one of the best places in the world to own, ride, breed or compete horses. ■