



# Maryland Horse Council



## Save The Horse Farms Campaign

*Guide to Organizing in Your County*

*November 16, 2010*

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### **Background**

In 2009, the Maryland State Assembly passed legislation (HB 955) stipulating that equestrian activities taking place on horse farms are agriculture, yet county laws often consider these activities to be non-agricultural. As a result, horse farms struggle with restrictions that make it difficult to stay in business. The mission of the Save The Horse Farms campaign is to preserve Maryland's horse farms by organizing horse people at the county level to draft and lobby for reasonable zoning and permitting laws and regulations that allow our farms to thrive.

### **Why Definitions and Legislation Matter**

Many counties in Maryland have refused building permits for barns and indoor arenas because they say that the activities that take place in them are "commercial" rather than "agricultural." Commercial zoning and permitting requirements add costs that horse farms can rarely afford.

Some counties have laws on the books regulating the operation and maintenance of horse farms in ways that, if enforced, would put most of us out of business. Most of those laws were written without input from horse owners.

### **Steps To Success:**

#### **1. Search County Code**

Most counties have all of their laws online, and word searches are a good way to find all references to what concerns us. Start with the following words: horse, equine, equestrian, barn, arena, riding, pasture, agricultural building, etc.

To find the online source for your county code, go to the following: [http://www.mdhorsecouncil.org/save\\_horse\\_farms.htm](http://www.mdhorsecouncil.org/save_horse_farms.htm), and select Zoning Ordinance Links.

## **2. Collect Anecdotal Evidence**

Try to identify as many cases as possible that illustrate how your county laws have been interpreted and enforced by county officials. Anyone who has applied for a building or excavation permit may have a story about what they were told or what they experienced. Call and ask the farm owners who have done construction in recent years. Take notes on what they say, or if they are willing, ask them to write down what they were told. Keep in mind that most of us would rather keep this kind of information private. Don't publicize anything without permission.

## **3. Organize A County Meeting**

When you get past the research phase it is essential that you start to organize likeminded horse people in your county. Start by asking Margaret Rizzo, the Maryland Horse Council administrator, to email you the list of members who live in your county. The lists are sorted by zip code, so boundaries may not be exact.

Set a meeting time and place, either at a home, a barn, or a public place. Don't expect a big crowd and you won't be disappointed.

Contact any and all horse-related groups that operate in your county, including 4H, Pony Club, Farm Bureau chapter, breed and discipline clubs, etc. Also get a list from The Equiery or from the MD Horse Industry Board of stables in your county. Contact them all and invite them. Leave nobody out. Most will not attend, but the ones who care the most will.

The agenda for your first meeting might include:

- Opportunity for everyone to introduce themselves and say why they chose to attend.
- Overview of the purpose of the MHC Save The Horse Farms Campaign and how it has succeeded in other counties (having a guest from another county can help with this; contact Margaret Rizzo for suggestions).
- Review of any research that has been completed and assignment of additional research tasks.
- Set up a committee to meet with staff from planning department to discuss problem areas in the law.
- Identify county supervisors or council who have personal relationships with horse people and set times and people to meet with them.
- Identify any obvious changes needed in county laws or practices.

- Discuss a timeline to a) complete research and exploratory meetings, b) to have new legislation drafted, and c) to have new legislation introduced to county council.
- Decide whether and how to name your group (it's ok to use (Blank) County Horse Council).
- Select/Elect temporary chair and any other leadership positions that you desire.
- Set a date for a follow-up meeting.

#### 4. **Meet With Planning and Zoning Office Staff**

Once you have done some research and have the beginnings of a group organized, it makes sense to ask for a meeting with the head of Planning and Zoning, or whatever county staff person you believe has the best understanding of how the laws are implemented. Another good possible contact is the person assigned to agriculture in your county's Economic Development Department, if any.

The purpose of this meeting is to educate this person or persons about how existing laws may be problematic for horse farms, and to inform them of your goal of having equestrian activities treated as agriculture, pursuant to the new state horses as agriculture law. You want these bureaucrats to be your allies moving forward. If they support the legislation that you propose, passage by the county council will be much easier. They will also be able to help you understand the reasons why the laws are written as they are and how they are implemented.

Take good notes at this meeting, ask lots of questions, and establish a point of contact between your group and their office for additional communication.

Questions might include:

- How have their staff interpreted and enforced the laws that concern you?
- Do they believe that the laws that concern you are justifiable, and if so why?
- Do they support horse farms as a way of maintaining open space in their Master Plan?
- If they are supportive, can they identify other organizations in the county that share our concerns?
- Are they aware of any recent or upcoming issues or projects concerning horse farm zoning or preservation?
- Are they willing to work with us to amend county definitions of agriculture to include equestrian activities on horse farms, as the state legislature did in 2009?
- Is there anything the Save The Horse Farms Committee can do for you?

## **5. Meet with County Council Members**

It is essential that you have some elected county officials sympathetic to your mission. They need to hear how all county residents benefit from horse farms, and how existing laws are restricting the industry. You can meet in their offices, but getting them to a farm is much better. You can do a farm tour with multiple council members and make friends of them, or handle them one at a time.

It is the relationship that you develop with the elected officials that will get your legislation introduced and eventually passed. If county bureaucrats are reluctant to be helpful, that will change if they are prodded by an elected official who likes you and is sympathetic to your cause.

Remember that bureaucrats want their jobs to be made easier. Elected politicians want to be your friend. Give both what they want.

## **6. Draft New or Amended Laws**

Once you have identified the changes that make sense in your county code and paved the way by befriending all the powerful people, it is time to get the legislation drafted. Every county has people who do this work, and they will do it for free if somebody in county government asks them to.

An outside person who is good with legislative drafting can take a crack at it, but eventually the people on the inside will get their say anyway. Either way, the drafts must be made available to your group for review. It is rare for the intent of the new law to actually be reflected in the drafting on the first try. When you get the draft, share it not only within your group, but with the rest of the Maryland Horse Council. We have lawyers and non-lawyers from other counties who have worked on these same bills and can help you to tighten the language.

## **7. Pass Legislation**

If you have been successful in meetings with county staff and county elected officials so far, the actual passage of your new legislation is unlikely to be difficult. Unless there is a battle going on between a horse farm and its neighbors, very few people are likely to oppose the kinds of legislative fixes we seek.

You know by now whether you have opposition and where your support lies. You must develop the political strategy to usher your bills through the necessary votes by your county council. In some cases high publicity tactics such as farm tours and large crowds at meetings are useful. In others you may be better off quietly ushering your bills through the process without opposition.

Letters of support can never hurt. Think about whom your natural allies are and ask those organizations to write or sign on to letters endorsing your bills. In addition to equestrian organizations, approach agricultural groups, open space advocates, chambers of commerce, elected officials at town, state, or federal levels, and of course the Maryland Horse Council.

## **8. Follow-Up**

Be sure to thank everyone who helps along the way, especially those in high places. Also make sure that every horse person in the county knows what you have accomplished. Many of us don't believe that a group of citizens can influence government when we organize. People are drawn to success. Spread the word far and wide using Internet tools, press releases, The Equiery, a one-time newsletter from your new organization, and thank-you letters. Your victory can be the beginning of a permanent organization, or it can pave the way for future efforts. People in government like to have organized constituencies like us to work through. Offer them that united voice and you will be surprised what comes of it.

### **Working With Other County Coordinators**

If you are stuck at any point, visit the MHC web site for other counties' ideas. Please share any useful information or lessons learned with other counties via the "Save The Horse Farms" page. It's easy: just send information you would like included to [admin@mdhorsecouncil.org](mailto:admin@mdhorsecouncil.org).

### **2010 Equine Census**

The 2010 Maryland Equine Census is due to be released before the end of the year and will include estimates of numbers of horses, acres of farmland dedicated to horses, employment in the horse industry and other useful information separated by county. The release of this data creates a perfect opportunity to draw attention to the importance of horse farms in your county.

### **Sample Victories from Across the State**

The **Prince George's County** Save The Horse Farms Committee was instrumental in passing legislation in 2010 ensuring equine activities were considered agricultural at the county level, and clearly defining equine activities and equine facilities in terms friendly to horse farms. For a full report, see the following: [http://www.mdhorsecouncil.org/save\\_horse\\_farms.htm](http://www.mdhorsecouncil.org/save_horse_farms.htm), and select Prince George's County Save The Horse Farms November 2010 Report.

**Frederick County**, led by the Frederick County Equine Alliance, participated in a successful working session in 2010 by meeting with the County Planning & Zoning Administrators and the Board of County Commissioners. Working with the County Office of Economic Development Ag Specialist, the Frederick County Equine Alliance

helped enlighten these people on the workings of a horse farm and explained problems with existing regulations. Partnering with organizations such as the Farmers Coop of Frederick, the Frederick County Save The Horse Farms Campaign helped rewrite laws and is moving forward to pass farm-friendly legislation.

**Montgomery County** established what could be considered the first Save The Horse Farms Campaign years before MHC began its current initiative. In 2003-2004, in response to county residents' concerns and horse enthusiasts' reaction to those concerns, a Montgomery County Task Force for Horses stood up with the objective of updating arcane equine laws. During this process, the Montgomery County group partnered with the county Department of Economic Development, County Council, county officials, and agricultural groups creating a synergy and forming alliances that stand to date. The overhauled code can be found at [www.mdhorsecouncil.org/save\\_horse\\_farms.htm](http://www.mdhorsecouncil.org/save_horse_farms.htm), select Montgomery County Ordinances. As originally drafted, a tax exemption did NOT exist for agritourism activities. But the Montgomery County horse group, working with the County's Agriculture Advisory Committee and the County Farm Bureau, requested the exemption be added. The Council obliged, and now equine activities such as pony rides fall under this tax exemption.

**Queen Anne County**, following Montgomery County's efforts, took a different tack. Starting at the top, Queen Anne County's leaders for horse issues began with the County Commissioners' office, discussed current issues, showed them Montgomery County's rewritten laws, and received direction to go to county planning and zoning for assistance in drafting something applicable to Queen Anne County. Although much less complicated than Montgomery County's legislation, the definitions apply to the county in which they exist. Specifically, the language defines horse activities and events at the county level as agricultural.

## **Conclusion**

MHC launched the Save The Horse Farms Campaign in response to concerns voiced during the 2009 Maryland Horse Forum. Lack of organization at the county level by horse people has cost our industry dearly in the past. The Maryland Horse Council wants to help you organize. Getting out and letting your local officials know who you are, and that you care about horses in your county, are steps in the right direction towards reminding folks that "Maryland Is For Horses."

For further assistance, contact Save The Horse Farms Campaign Chairperson, Valerie Ormond via email at [valerieormond@aol.com](mailto:valerieormond@aol.com).