

2022 Legislative Session Preview

by Kimberly K. Egan, MHC Co-President & Co-Chair of the MHC Government Relations Committee



Happy New Year! It's January! Which means the new session of the Maryland General Assembly is upon us. The 2022 session opens on January 12 and closes on April 11, and the Maryland Horse Council's Government Relations Committee will be following all the activity. We will publish updates in this column every month during session, and we will also report on breaking news in our twice-monthly membership newsletter. This work is the core mission of the Maryland Horse Council, and we take it seriously.

Unlike the federal Congress, the Maryland legislature meets for 90 days a year only. Also unlike the federal Congress, it gets a prodigious amount of work done while in session. In the 90 days between January and April last year, the General Assembly considered 2,347 bills and passed 817 of them. We have no reason to expect the 2022 session to be any different.

There are at least three bills this session that promise to be of particular benefit to our industry: the trail-head access bill; the right to ride bill; and the helmet law bill.

TRAIL-HEAD ACCESS BILL

Sen. Katie Fry Hester (D-Carroll & Howard) has pre-filed legislation to require anyone who leases DNR land to leave an access border sufficient in size to allow unobstructed access to trail heads by trail users and first responders. Too many of us have had an experience where first responders have been unable to reach public trails because the public access is obstructed by crops, debris, machinery, or what-have-you.

We hope that as many trail users and trail user groups as possible will submit written testimony in support because it will benefit all trail users – hikers, bikers, birders, walkers, runners, skiers, etc. – not just equestrians. We expect the committee hearing to be the second or third week of

January, and we will share information about when to submit testimony in support as soon as we have it.

RIGHT TO RIDE BILL

Del. Sara Love (D-Montgomery) has pre-filed a bill to acknowledge that "equine activities are a valued part of the state's historical, cultural, and social heritage that provide unique, recreational benefits to residents of the state." The bill also says that "it is the intent of the General Assembly that residents of the state have a right to engage in equine activities subject to regulations and restrictions under laws that the general assembly enacts."

This bill mirrors the language that the General Assembly passed last session regarding a "right to hunt and fish." Del. Love said at the hearing on that bill that equine activities deserve equal consideration by the General Assembly because equine activities are just as integral to Maryland's historical, cultural, and social heritage as hunting. After all, the first sanctioned Thoroughbred horse race in America took place in Maryland (the Annapolis Subscription Plate), George Washington brought his hounds to chase fox at Doughoregan Manor and Burleigh Manor in Howard County, and there are more horses per square mile in Maryland than in any other state in the country, just for starters.

HELMET LAW

Del. Mary Lehman (D-Anne Arundel & PG) plans to introduce legislation this session to require anyone under the age of 18 to wear a helmet when riding on "a highway; a horse-riding path; or any other property open to the public or used by the public for pedestrian or vehicular traffic." The requirement would not apply to minors who are "practicing for, riding to or from, or competing or performing in a show or event where helmets are not historically part of the show or event; crossing a public highway that separates privately owned land; or engaged in an agricultural practice or pursuit."

If you are a member and would like to discuss these bills, or any other bills, please contact the Government Relations Committee Co-Chairs, Jane Seigler (seigler.jane@gmail.com) and Kim Egan (kegan@mdhorsecouncil.org).

If you are not a member but would like to join the dialogue on equine-related policy in Annapolis, please join at www.mdhorsecouncil.org/join.

Did you receive our latest legislative update? The Maryland Horse Council typically monitors over 50 bills annually that may affect our state horse community, everything from minimum wage bills for our farm workers to anti-harassment bills for our working horses. Become a member today and receive these updates throughout the legislative session. Join the Maryland Horse Council to receive legislative updates right to your email! JOIN.MDHORSECOUNCIL.ORG