



# THE MARYLAND HORSE COUNCIL

## Government Relations Committee

by Jane Seigler, MHC Government Relations Committee Co-Chair

Regular readers of this column probably know that MHC's Government Relations Committee spends a lot of time during the legislative session reviewing bills that have been introduced in Annapolis, flagging ones of interest or concern, and preparing and delivering testimony at bill hearings.

But effective advocacy is more than just reading and responding to legislation during the Session. Effective advocacy also involves building relationships and trust with individual legislators over the years. This latter point was borne out in February when a bill (**HB 640/SB 869**) was introduced that was intended to address a concern that buildings used for "value-added agriculture" (think winery and brewery tasting rooms, etc.) were being wrongly classified as "commercial" rather than "agricultural" for purposes of property tax assessments. The bill included buildings used for equine activities on the list of "value added agricultural" buildings. (Good) But - it prescribed that, while most buildings used in value added ag would be assessed at 25% of their full cash value, indoor riding arenas would be assessed at 50% of their full cash value. (Bad) We immediately contacted the bill's sponsors and asked for an explanation of this discriminatory treatment. As a result, they quickly agreed to reduce the assessment rate on indoor arenas to 25%, in line with other value added ag buildings. As of this writing, the hearings on these bills have been canceled and have not been re-scheduled. The fact that we have worked so hard over the years to build relationships and a reputation as honest and trustworthy advocates paid off.

Some of the bills on our radar include:

**HB 57/SB 235** - would remove the exemption for veterinarians from the reporting requirements of the Prescription Drug Monitoring Program.

**HB 113/SB 42** - would require minors to wear helmets when riding on public land or the grounds of a facility that solicits the public for recreational, educational or competitive activities, with certain exceptions. We have worked closely with the sponsors on this bill. As of this writing, the House bill has passed out of the House and moved over to the Senate.

**HB 234/SB 278** - would allow the MD Horse Industry Board to set late fees for stable license renewals.

**HB 305/SB 405** - would require the Dept. of the Environment to develop standards for outdoor lighting.

**HB 402** - would authorize nuisance lawsuits for rodent infestations. Exempts properties used for equine activities, due to our efforts last year.

**HB 511/SB 826** - would authorize a person operating a bicycle that is approaching a stop sign at an intersection on a highway with two or fewer lanes for moving traffic to "cautiously" make a turn or proceed through the intersection without stopping if the person reduces the speed of the bicycle to a "reasonable rate" and yields the right-of-way to vehicles in the intersection and vehicles near enough to the intersection "to pose an immediate danger." Our testimony pointed out the vague terms in the bill, which make compliance and enforcement problematic and poten-

tially dangerous. The sponsor promised to address. We have submitted suggested language.

**HB 530/SB 645** - would establish a Maryland Office of Trails in the Department of Transportation to develop and maintain a Maryland Trails Network, and advance the development, maintenance, and use of trails in the State; would also establish the Maryland Trails Advisory Commission in the Department of Transportation to provide guidance to State agencies regarding certain items related to trails. We are working to ensure that equestrians are represented on the Commission.

**HB 667/SB 17** - would establish that each animal harmed in a violation of a prohibition against animal cruelty is a separate offense; and other sentencing provisions.

**HB 686** - would require "a program organized for recreational athletic competition or instruction for participants who are under the age of 19 years" to develop venue-specific emergency action plans for each facility for concussions and sudden cardiac events.

**HB 778** - would allow statewide Sunday hunting of Migratory Game Birds.

**HB 991/SB 1074** and **HB 1404/SB 1149** - would authorize state (HB 991/SB 1074) or local (HB 1404/SB 1149) regulation and permitting of industrial sludge (DAF - dissolved air flotation by-products) facilities. Such facilities are often sited in rural areas, with little or no regulation.

**HB 1388** - would add veterinarians to the list of professions for which "a noncompete or conflict of interest provision in an employment contract or a similar document or agreement that restricts the ability of an employee to enter into employment with a new employer or to become self-employed in the same or similar business or trade shall be null and void as being against the public policy of the State."

**HB 1494/SB 745** - would increase the number of MD residents in the student body of the VA-MD College of Veterinary Medicine from 30 to 42.

**HB 1500/SB 847** - would repeal the 10:30 a.m. time restriction on Sunday hunting in Dorchester County for all game bird and game mammal seasons

**SB 872** - would establish increased sentences of imprisonment for up to 3 years and a fine not to exceed \$5,000 or both for the abuse or neglect of an animal if the abuse or neglect results in the death or euthanasia of the animal; and authorizing the court, as a condition of sentencing a certain defendant, to prohibit the defendant from owning, possessing, or residing with an animal for a period of time determined by the court.

By the time you read this, the legislative session will be two thirds over, and many bills that we are active on or watching as I write will have already passed or failed. Horse Council members will have received updates through our newsletter and social media, and a full wrap up of the session will be published in the May issue.