

Report to the Howard County Council

HORSE PARK TASK FORCE

May 15, 2008

INTRODUCTION

Recreational and sporting horse activities are enjoying unprecedented and increasing popularity in Maryland. To support and promote these popular activities, the Maryland Department of Agriculture is looking for a suitable site for a State Horse Park. This new State horse park would accommodate activities such as horse shows, dressage, and cross-country riding. In contrast to the more familiar racetracks, the State horse park would not have gambling. Currently, horse enthusiasts often must travel outside of Maryland for suitable modern and attractive facilities (where they contribute to the other states' economies through spending for restaurants, hotels, and other services and supplies). In selecting the site for Maryland's horse park, the State should consider Howard County for our central location, excellent transportation facilities and highway access, and robust infrastructure, as well as for our long-established equine traditions. Howard County has beautiful countryside, and several hundred acres of it could be permanently preserved by dedicating them to the trails and meadows needed for equine-related activities. The horse park would also support local farms and serve additional public purposes by providing spaces for other, non-equine outdoor recreational and educational activities, such as hiking, biking, instruction, and research.

HISTORY

In May 2005, the Maryland Stadium Authority and two other State agencies asked local jurisdictions to propose a location for a new State horse park. The Stadium Authority worked with the Maryland Department of Business and Economic Development and the Maryland Horse Industry Board, which is a division of the Maryland Department of Agriculture. The Stadium Authority acted with the approval of the budget committees of the General Assembly. Initially, six jurisdictions in Maryland submitted proposals. The proposal put forward by the City of Annapolis, which would have located the horse park on the former Navy farm in Gambrills,

was selected but ultimately that proposal was withdrawn. The Anne Arundel County government seemed indifferent to the plans and there was significant local opposition.

Howard County, despite the local and regional demand for facilities, has not made significant investments in providing facilities for equine activities. Only a small portion of the multi-use Schooley Mill Park has equine facilities, which date from the 1980s.

Although the State is expected to issue a new request for proposals for a State horse park in the short term, it is clear that a decision will not be made quickly; the State will allot ample time for jurisdictions to craft proposals; and for the State to fully evaluate the possibilities.

Task force

By Council Resolution 114-2007, the Howard County Council created a horse park task force to study whether the County should pursue the establishment of a State horse park in Howard County. After studying the issues associated with establishing a horse park in Howard County, the task force was to advise the Council. Specifically, the task force was asked:

- (1) is there an appropriate location for establishing a horse park in Howard County?
- (2) what are the types of uses that should be allowed at the horse park?
- (3) what are the different types of management structures that could be used to operate the horse park?

The task force consisted of the following members:

Michael Erskine, DVM, who was elected chair

Howie Feaga, who represented the Howard County Farm Bureau

Kimberley Flowers, who represented the Department of Planning and Zoning

Clara Gouin, who represented the Department of Recreation and Parks

Del Karfonta, from the Columbia Bank

Joan Kennedy, the director of governmental affairs for the County Administration

Dr. Fred Lewis, DVM, a representative of the public

Michael Potts, a representative of the public

Peggy Schultz, who represented the Howard County Fair Association

Linda Stapf, from Stapf Financial

Kathy Zimmerman, who represented the Howard County Economic Development Authority

The task force worked diligently, meeting 9 times between November 15, 2007, and March 26, 2008. Each meeting was open to the public and the press. The task force also held an evening hearing on January 10, 2008, at which the public was invited to offer testimony. The minutes of each meeting and an audio file of the public hearing were promptly placed on the County Council's website and made available to the public. Each meeting was publicized on the County's web site. Additionally, each newspaper in general circulation in the County was notified of the meetings and the hearing as far in advance as was possible to do so.

HORSE PARK

The May 2006 *Maryland Horse Park & Agricultural Education Feasibility Study* ("Feasibility Study") stated that "[t]he primary goals of the proposed horse park are to enhance the State of Maryland's tourism appeal as well as its rich history and tradition in the horse industry; promote business activities related to the horse industry; and encourage maintenance of open space". According to J. Robert Burk, the Maryland Horse Industry Board's Executive Director, a new request for a nomination of real property would likely be made no earlier than the summer of 2008. It is likely that the request will seek a site of at least 500 acres that would support a variety of equine and open-space activities (not including horse racing). The State, the task force understands, would want a facility that could host national and possibly international events. Any decisions regarding the selection of a proposed site would likely be made after, and possibly well after, the November 2008 elections. After site selection, construction of a horse park would take 3 years to complete according to the previous feasibility study.

Harford County and possibly Cecil and other counties may also be seeking to be the home to the Maryland horse park. Several other states, including Virginia, Kentucky, and New Jersey have similar horse parks to the horse park envisioned for Maryland

At a meeting with J. Robert Burk, Executive Director, Maryland Horse Industry Board, Maryland Department of Agriculture, and Crystal Kimball, publisher of *The Equiery*, the task

force learned that the State will seek a large facility of national stature. The desired State horse park would consist of a smaller developed area and larger area of green space that includes a variety of trails and fields. Facilities at the horse park would conform to LEED standards thus protecting the environment. The task force believes that the Maryland Horse Industry Board is expected to be very flexible in future requirements for a Maryland Horse Park proposal and will encourage jurisdictions to be creative in their proposals.

The Horse Industry Board completed a horse census in 2002 and determined that there is a need for the kind of large venue for equine events (other than racing). Although the Horse Industry Board will be seeking sites of 500 or more acres, the task force believes that the Board may accept a smaller site if it can accommodate the proposed activities and achieve the desired goals.

Anne Arundel proposal

The task force reviewed the *Feasibility Study*, which was done in 2006 and which evaluated the proposal for a State horse park in Anne Arundel County, which ultimately was withdrawn. In that plan, a total of approximately 56 acres was to be used for the building structures, riding rings, parking lots, roads, and other developed facilities. The rest of the land would remain largely natural to accommodate a cross-country course, trails, and other open space activities.

The *Feasibility Study* predicted 328 event days for the Anne Arundel site. (It is worth noting that a day with several small events at a horse park is typically counted as several "event days". Some people are misled and think that an "event day" is the same as "a day with an event"; i.e., 250 "event days" is not the same as 250 days with events.) The equine enthusiasts that met with the task force and the Horse Industry Board do not expect more than about 3 large (15,000 people) events a year at the State horse park. The task force agrees with this evaluation; most equestrian events that could use the horse park would be much smaller, drawing fewer than 100 participants and few spectators. Almost all events would take place on weekends.

Horse sales

The Fasig-Tipton Company (a large horse auction company) is seeking a new home in the region to hold sales for which 800 or more stalls are desired. The Company currently holds five

auctions each year at the Maryland State Fairgrounds. The Feasibility Study reports that sales at the Maryland auctions for 2005 totaled about \$50 million. The task force understands that the Company is actively seeking alternative venues outside Maryland due to the inability of the State Fairgrounds to accommodate the significant growth the Company's auctions have experienced in recent years. The Company's growth parallels the growth of equine-related activities -- an increasingly important part of our economy.

Features

The Horse Industry Board would look favorably on a park that serves multiple uses including non-equine uses. The Board would look most favorably on a proposal that shows strong backing from the local jurisdiction including broad public support and local contributions, which might include land, road improvements, or other in-kind contributions.

Plans for the attempt to build a State horse park in Anne Arundel County were designed to attract national and international non-racing competitions, including show jumping, eventing, dressage, western riding, and steeplechase. The park was also designed to accommodate other equestrian events such as breed demonstrations, trail riding, jousting, rodeo, and 4-H activities. The task force concluded that, in addition to these recreational and sporting activities, the horse park could host horse sales and equine research. In addition to being a preeminent site for these various equine activities, the task force believes that a State horse park could accommodate many other activities including non-equine sports such as soccer and foot races and other kinds of events including livestock exhibitions and dog shows. A horse park could include meeting rooms and classrooms, campgrounds, and picnic areas. A horse park could be designed for the easy erection of temporary stalls or other structures in a way that would be friendly to the environment and to the users.

The Maryland Horse Industry Board has indicated that it wants a large horse park of 500 acres, 800 acres, or more. But the nucleus of the horse park would likely be less than 60 acres; the *Feasibility Study* called for less than 60 acres to be developed at the Anne Arundel County site. The remainder of property would remain green, open space. Riding trails and hiking and biking paths would use the perimeters of the property. An equine cross-country course would also use the perimeters of the property. There would be ample room for attractive buffers and barriers to

protect sensitive areas.

To accommodate out-of-County users and visitors, ideally the horse park would be located with good access to major highways. However, other than for the expected 3 large events a year, the task force does not believe that a horse park will create significant vehicular traffic. A horse park would generate significant business for hotels and restaurants, so proximity to them would be beneficial.

The task force notes that a premier horse park should have a combination of temporary and permanent stalls to accommodate 800 horses. The facility should include sites for an additional several hundred temporary stalls. A horse park would include several other permanent buildings such as an enclosed ring with tiered seating. The horse park would include show rings and other outdoor structures. The horse park would have large, open fields, natural areas, and meandering trails. A horse park could, and probably should, include limited camping for competitors and picnic areas for the public.

Ultimately, though, the site plan, scope of use, and public access for any horse park will be determined jointly by the property owner, the County, and the Maryland Horse Industry Board.

PUBLIC DEMAND FOR VENUE

A large demand for horse facilities and trails exists today locally and regionally. According to the 2002 *Maryland Equine Census*, the Maryland Horse Industry Board estimates that there are more than 87,000 horses in Maryland with more than 5,100 in Howard County. There are at least 38,000 people directly involved in the horse industry in the State. The Census estimated \$765,780,000 in total equine-related expenditures for 2002. Dr. Cheng-i Wei, Dean of the University of Maryland, College of Agriculture, indicates that there are more horses than cattle in the State! Nearly 60% of horses in the State are used for sport, recreation, work, and other non-racing purposes. Given these findings, the State recognizes that the equine industry comprises a large part of Maryland agriculture -- a leading component of its economy. The task force finds that the County would benefit from providing facilities for this growing sector.

Economic impacts

In addition to their primary purposes in providing a venue for equine sports and other activities, horse parks consistently generate considerable tax revenues. Although horse parks may not always break even operationally, the growth in tax revenues and the economic benefits from a horse park are large and well-documented;¹ horse parks generate considerable business for hospitality, agriculture, tourism, and similar sectors.

The task force received testimony from the public and from those representing many State and local equine organizations showing that organizations hold their events out of State because there are no suitable facilities in the State. And even those facilities that exist today in the State lack sufficient capacity, appropriate facilities, and enough indoor spaces. It is reasonable for the State and the County to both accommodate the demands of this growing constituency and to recapture this outflow of local dollars.

The concept proposed for the horse park in Anne Arundel County showed that it would be distinct from the facilities offered by existing equine facilities in the State such as the Prince George's Equestrian Center, Fair Hill, or the State Fairgrounds. The proposed park is anticipated to be an equine attraction similar to the Kentucky Horse Park and others that draw visitors from both within and outside of the State. Consequently, while there may be some minor shift of events currently hosted in existing in-State venues, according to the 2006 *Economic Impact Analysis For a Proposed New Horse Park in Anne Arundel County, Maryland*, the majority of activity is anticipated to be new business to the State.²

Public testimony

The testimony presented to the task force at the public hearing and in writing was overwhelmingly positive. Horse-related pursuits generate considerable business activity in the County and the State. In addition to accommodating local equine events and recreational riders, citizens testified that a horse park would also preserve open space and provide a site for other

¹ see pages 4 and 5 of the *Feasibility Study*

² See page 5 of the *Economic Impact Analysis*

uses such as meetings, sports, hiking, biking, and animal shows, A horse park, citizens said, would provide a site for agricultural research and education. Citizens testified that a horse park would need to have only 50 or 60 developed acres; the rest could be open, green fields, meadows, and forest land available for multiple recreational and academic uses. Although a few citizens were concerned about the capacity of the road infrastructure to handle additional traffic, the task force believes that with modest road improvements and planning, a horse park would rarely have significant impact on traffic. *See* “Concerns” below. Additionally, concerns about the economic viability of a horse park were raised. Given the experiences of other State horse parks and the additional tax revenues generated from tourism and agricultural activities in support of the horse park, the task force believes that a horse park in Howard County would be viable and beneficial to the County.

Testimony reinforced the findings of the *Feasibility Study* and the results of a survey conducted by the Horse Industry board; the proposed horse park should accommodate a variety of equine event types including jousting, riding education, therapeutic riding, auctions, and trail-rides. It is anticipated that the horse park will also accommodate non-equine events including foot races, field sports, animal shows, meetings, classes, and social events.

Equine events

The *Feasibility Study* offered a brief description of some of the more popular equine events:

- Dressage – A French word for “training” describes the process of schooling a horse to respond to its rider’s commands. Competitive dressage is judged on how well entrants perform certain movements while exhibition dressage is the display of communication between horse and rider. Competitive dressage is popular at all levels of skill from beginner to Olympic-level where tests require movements and gaits to be performed in certain sequences.
- Hunter/Jumper Shows - Participants compete on courses that simulate a hunting field with natural obstacles and jumps. Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina have the most registered hunts in the country representing over one-third of the national total. Jumping competitions require jumps over multiple fences and occur

at multiple skill levels. Grand Prix events represent the highest level of show jumping offering large stakes and difficult jumps.

- Steeple-chasing – Jumping races are held at major race tracks over brush and hurdle fences. Individual hunt clubs sponsor hunt race meetings over brush, hurdles, and timber fences as well as point-to-point races over timber fences only.
- Three-Day Eventing – The same combination of horse and rider performs a dressage test, cross country course ride, combination of roads, tracks, steeplechase, and stadium jumping round in three consecutive days. The Rolex Three-Day Event falls in this category and is on the world and Olympic competition level.
- Western – Horse and rider engage in competitions derived from a cowboy's work. Western events can include cutting, reining, and penning events.
- Saddle Horse – With arched necks and elevated legs, these horses compete in equitation (judged on form and control), fine harness (drawing buggies) and gaits (three- and five-gait perform at walk, trot and canter).
- Youth Clubs – The United States has over 600 individual Clubs, with more than 12,000 members. The purpose of the Pony Club is to teach riding and care of horses and ponies to those under 21. Programs are offered in dressage, eventing, show jumping, mounted games, and fox hunting, among others. According to the Horse Industry Board, the Maryland region has 21 pony clubs including three in Pennsylvania that come to Maryland for competitions. Approximately 1,500 youth are currently enrolled in the Maryland's 4-H programs.
- Driving – Carriage driving includes three event types: cross-country driving, obstacle driving, and dressage.
- Rodeo – Competitions are commonly hosted in calf roping, steer wrestling, bull-riding, and barrel racing.
- Other Equine Events – Polo, jousting, riding education, therapeutic riding, auctions, endurance riding, collegiate events, and trail rides are other common uses of horse parks.

Location in Maryland

A horse park in Howard County, with its central Maryland location and its excellent

access to road, rail, sea, and air transportation facilities is likely to attract nationally- and internationally-recognized competitions. According to the Maryland Office of Tourism, the State BWI Welcome Center, which is close to Howard County, attracted approximately 390,000 visitors in FY 2004. Howard County has the well-developed agricultural and hospitality infrastructure needed to support both participants and spectators. Howard County offers excellent proximity to large population centers and has a highly-educated citizenry with among the highest median incomes in the nation. The County also has a well-established and well-deserved reputation as a tourist destination. These factors combine to make it likely that a horse park here, in addition to meeting the large demand for this kind of venue, will attract corporate sponsorships and other private investments.

The horse park would also provide a location for the many employers in the region to hold events such as meetings, seminars, banquets, receptions and other types of special events.

BENEFITS

Municipalities and states throughout the U.S. have recognized the economic benefits of operating various public facilities for sports, entertainment and meeting/convention business. Numerous stadiums, arenas, and convention centers have been developed with the use of public funds due, in part, to the ability of these venues to generate economic activity at area businesses and tax revenues. According to the Maryland Stadium Authority, recent trends in venue development have included funding for \$400 million of equestrian center projects; nine are in the design concept stage in the U.S. Jurisdictions are developing these facilities due to a growing market and the desire to boost economic impact by attracting an affluent market segment associated with horse ownership, training, and competitions. Spending on items such as farriers, feed, bedding, and veterinarians can add up to significant direct spending associated with such venues. Industry sources, including the United States Equestrian Federation, Inc. have openly supported development of a Maryland horse park due to the steady growth in participation at competitions in recent years and an increasing occurrence of date conflicts at existing venues.

Revenues

The *Feasibility Study* shows that a horse park would generate sufficient revenue from

rentals to cover the cost of operating the facility.³ A horse park would also generate significant tax revenues for the State and the County, well above the cost of the debt service on the bonds issued to build the horse park.⁴ The *Feasibility Study* also estimated that State and local taxes generated by the proposed horse park's operations would total approximately \$9.3 million a year.⁵ In addition to the tax revenues and benefits for business and industry, the *Feasibility Study* indicated that a horse park could generate an annual surplus of up to \$372,000⁶ that could be used for lease payments, improvements, or other expenses.

Tourism

Tourism in Howard County provides an important economic benefit for the County and would be enhanced by a horse park. Howard County has a diverse and ample supply of hotel rooms in the vicinity of the proposed horse park. The County's numerous restaurants would similarly benefit from a horse park.

Multi-use

The proposed horse park would also complement the wide variety of other attractions that Howard County offers its visitors. Residents of Howard County would enjoy access to a multi-use State Park with outdoor recreational opportunities and world-class event facilities. Residents would also have new and exciting educational opportunities. The Horse Park would help support a growing and sustainable recreational horse industry. A horse park would also provide non-equine recreational opportunities on its paths and athletic fields. A horse park would add to the variety of arena, meeting, and classroom spaces available in the County.

Agricultural benefits

Furthermore, the horse industry is an increasingly important sector of the agricultural industry. The horse industry helps support farming by providing a demand for hay, grains, and other crops. The horse industry also creates a demand for agricultural equipment and supplies

³ See page 5 of the *Feasibility Study* and page 6 of the *Economic Impact Analysis*.

⁴ See page 74 of the *Feasibility Study*.

⁵ See page 73 of the *Feasibility Study*.

⁶ See page 74 of the *Feasibility Study*.

and ancillary services.

Open space

The Horse Park will help preserve open space. Most of the land at the site of the horse park will be green, natural space. Profitable farms and sustainable agriculture are a cost-effective means to help preserve our diminishing open space and green vistas; such spaces add to the County's quality of life.

CONCERNS

Traffic

Several members of the public suggested that a horse park would overburden the road network. The *Feasibility Study*, however, stated that the horse park “would create negligible traffic impacts ... during weekdays [and on] Saturdays, the ... traffic could be accommodated without causing significant adverse impacts to the adjacent roadway network if” modest improvements were made.⁷ The improvements would consist of turn lanes at the entrances to the horse park and at nearby intersections. Vehicle traffic would be spread out over much more time compared to the concentrated traffic seen for events such as concerts. The task force received testimony that non-equine, team sports such as soccer generate more traffic than would be expected at a horse park. For these kinds of events, temporary signs alert motorists and allow them to avoid congested areas. The County's Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance would ensure that infrastructure needs are addressed before plans move forward. And the County already knows how to implement traffic control measures during special events. The task force believes that the other infrastructure needs of a horse park would be modest because a horse park represents a less intensive use than almost any other kind of development. Infrastructure needs would be addressed during the planning for and development of a horse park.

Open Space

Because a horse park requires the development of some facilities, some people are

⁷ See page 80 of the *Feasibility Study*

concerned that creating a horse park would cause a loss of open space. On the contrary, the task force believes that a horse park as a way to preserve open space. The open spaces that exist in the County today that are not parkland or under preservation easements are vulnerable to development in the future. A horse park, though it would include some buildings, is largely open space. The land devoted to a horse park would be protected from pressure to use the land for other, more intensive purposes.

Viability

Because many horse parks across the country do not always break even operationally, some people are concerned that a horse park would require public support. Although the task force believes that the kind of world-class facility envisioned by the State would break even, the task force also believes that it would be good public policy to support a horse park. The economic benefits and increased tax revenues of a horse park are clear. Additionally, the segment of the public that uses horses for recreational and sporting purposes deserves support similar to that offered to those who pursue other recreational or sporting activities.

SITES REVIEWED

The task force reviewed a number of sites in the County. There are suitable sites for a horse park located in Howard County. The task force notes that, at this stage of review, no official contact with the property owners has been made. The owners of these sites will need to be contacted formally as part of a separate site selection process. One of these sites is owned by the State. One site is entirely in private hands. The other sites consist of County property and adjacent private property.

Although the State has previously requested properties of at least 500 acres in size, the task force believes this may be negotiable. The task force concludes that a successful horse park could be located on a smaller piece of property, perhaps 300 acres -- which is twice the size of the New Jersey Horse Park. Nevertheless, there are at least two properties in excess of 500 acres and several more properties in excess of 300 acres in the County.

- The University of Maryland, College of Agriculture, operates the Central

Maryland Research and Education Center (CMREC) on a 925 acre site just west of Clarksville. It is the largest research farm operated by the University. In addition to agricultural research, CMREC is the home of the Home and Garden Information Center and the regional office of the Cooperative Extension Service.

Several officials from the University met with the task force. Brian Magness, Director of Development, Associate Dean Dr. Leon H. Slaughter, Frank Allnutt, CMREC director, and Dean of the College of Agriculture, Dr. Cheng-i Wei. The officials indicated that the University of Maryland was probably not interested in having a horse park on the CMREC property, but Dean Wei seemed open to further discussion. Dr. Wei suggested that interested people could contact the provost and the University president and present information to them about equine programs and activities. He noted that he would like to see a strong program of equine studies in the College.

The task force believes that a horse park could coexist with the research activities underway and contemplated at CMREC. The developed facilities for a horse park would only occupy a small percentage of the total park. Some equine activities use large open spaces or long trails, which leads to a requirement for a large parcel; however, activities like trail riding and polo could take place on spaces that could also be used for other purposes. Additionally, trails could wind around fields and structures without creating a disturbance.

The task force also notes that the University has already announced plans for a large conference and education center to be built at the CMREC. In future years, there may be additional pressure for more buildings at the CMREC. A horse park could ensure preservation of open spaces and forestall additional, more intensive, construction.

- Although the task force has not met with the owners, a largely undeveloped parcel of more than 900 acres is in private hands in Ellicott City. That property is among the largest tracts of undeveloped land in Howard County. The task force has been informed that a preservation easement on the property expired at the end of 2007. The task force believes that a horse park could be situated on the property in a way that protects the historic residence and preserves the privacy of the residents yet generates significant income for them.

- Benson Branch Park is 333 acres situated between Folly Quarter and Tridelphia Roads and is now undeveloped. Despite its lack of improvements and limited parking, a few people now use it for trail riding. Part of the park is wetlands. Once appropriate arrangements are made with adjacent property owners, this site may qualify for the State horse park. In any case, it would make a good location for a County horse park.

- The 85-acre Howard County Fairgrounds in West Friendship is located across Frederick Road from the West Friendship Park. Those two parcels combine to over 430 acres. The task force understands that some adjacent or nearby properties may be on the market in the near future. This combination of parcels offers unparalleled access to Route 70 and the County's agricultural infrastructure. The task force believes that the Howard County Fair Board and the Antique Farm Machinery Club could be partners in developing a horse park.

- The Belmont estate, although only 85 acres, is adjacent to Patapsco State Park. It may be possible to locate a horse park in a way that preserves the mansion, does not disturb HCC's plans, and accommodates the neighbors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In general

The task force recommends that the County Council continue the process of developing a proposal to locate the Maryland Horse Park in Howard County.

Contact with property owners

The task force recommends that owners of the reviewed properties be contacted to accurately and specifically inform them of the scope of the horse park, the owners' control over the planning process, and the benefits to owners. Property owners may not fully comprehend the low-impact nature of a horse park and the benefits that would flow to the owners. Furthermore, construction of a horse park could occur in stages so as to minimize disruption. For these reasons, the next steps in site selection must be taken by an entity with the power to negotiate. An entity with negotiating authority would be able to provide information about the needs of the

horse park to the owners of potential sites. The entity would also be able to provide information to the owner about the benefits to the owner that would flow from a horse park.

Agricultural preservation

Under current law, a horse park could not be built on land in agricultural preservation. Nevertheless, the task force sees many horse park activities as agricultural in nature: grazing, stabling, growing hay, etc. The task force believes that it may be possible to place the developed part of a horse park on a parcel not in agricultural preservation if an adjacent parcel in agricultural preservation was available for those horse park activities that are unquestionably agricultural.

Assembling parcels

Because it may be possible and practical to assemble other contiguous properties in the County either by purchase or through easements, the County may wish to act formally to seek proposals from landowners. This may reveal sites that the task force was not able to identify. The task force notes that it received several inquiries from landowners who wished to propose their properties for a horse park.

Feasibility study

Once the County has selected a site, the task force recommends that the County commission a formal feasibility study. This study would assess the economic impact, assess the traffic/infrastructure impact, and assess infrastructure improvements and costs to mitigate any negative impacts specific to the selected site.

Management

The horse park could be operated by the State directly. However, the task force recommends the creation of a foundation to operate the horse park and to cooperate with the State and the County. Establishing a foundation -- a public-private partnership -- would be beneficial to the horse park. A foundation would include representatives from user groups, the local community, and the property owner. The foundation would advise the State and County, assist in raising funds, and coordinate volunteer efforts in support of the park.

Local facility

If the County does not pursue or is not selected for the State horse park, the task force recommends that the County undertake to build a local horse facility. There is ample unmet demand and many benefits to having a local horse park. The County once planned a smaller horse park at Alpha Ridge Park, but the public safety training center was built on that spot. The WSSC has been allowing trail use by horses on the property adjacent to their reservoirs, but the permission seems to be tacit, reluctant, and accompanied by concerns over erosion and trail maintenance. Elsewhere in the County, some trail riding occurs along the Patuxent River with access from Savage Park. A purpose-built County facility could ease the strain on WSSC land and would be a welcome addition to the Patuxent trails and the small facility at the multi-use Schooley Mill Park. Schooley Mill has a single 300' x 150' equestrian ring and 4 1/2 miles of trails with limited usability for horses.

Outreach

The task force also recommends that the County create a process to educate the public about the horse park. This process would ensure publication of accurate information regarding the public benefits of a horse park: open space, multi-uses, positive economic impacts, etc. The process would provide accurate information about any negative effects and the actions planned to mitigate those effects. This process should also provide opportunities for public input.