



# Rural Maryland Council 2015 Legislative Priorities

*The Rural Maryland Council (RMC), an independent state agency, brings together rural leaders, government officials at all levels, and the representatives of the non-profit and for-profit sectors to develop public policy solutions to the challenges unique to rural Maryland. Ultimately, our mission is to improve the quality of life while preserving the cultural heritage of Maryland's rural communities.*

RMC recognizes the fiscal challenges that face the state. Baseline projections for Fiscal Year 2016 estimate a structural deficit of \$760 million with the deficit reaching \$1.5 Billion in 2020. The Spending Affordability Committee has recommended that the Fiscal Year 2016 Operating Budget reduce the ongoing structural deficit by 50%. Regardless, any proposed budget reductions should be equitably distributed so that not one program or jurisdiction carries the burden of resolving the structural budget deficit.

The RMC strongly supports continued state support with level funding of:

- RMC - (\$167,000)
- Maryland Agricultural Education and Rural Development Assistance Fund (MAERDAF) - (\$167,000)
- Regional councils - (\$150,000 each)
- Maryland Agriculture and Resource-Based Industry Development Corporation (MARBIDCO) – (\$2,875,000)

The RMC also strongly supports funding of the regional councils to the historical legislative intention of \$200,000 each.

For the Maryland General Assembly's 2015 Legislative Session, the Rural Maryland Council supports the following legislative priorities:

**Funding of the Rural Maryland Prosperity Investment Fund (RMPIF):** In 2006, the General Assembly established the Rural Maryland Prosperity Investment Fund to provide grants to regional non-profit and educational entities for economic and community development projects that would help bring rural Maryland's standards of living up to statewide averages by 2030. As of Fiscal Year 2015, however, no funds have ever been appropriated for RMPIF. Obtaining this critical support in the amount of \$6 million for Rural Prosperity is a top priority. With the rural areas of our state still struggling to recover economically, funding of RMPIF would encourage economic development and support necessary services.

**Rural Health:** Rural Maryland currently experiences a shortage of health care providers particularly in specialty areas, mental health and dental care. Moreover, rural populations are also overall older and in worse health than their suburban counterparts. RMC supports:

- expansion of loan reimbursement programs to help retain new high quality professionals in rural areas in Maryland and removing stringent eligibility guidelines;
- expansion of the use of telehealth; and
- expansion of the scope of practice for nurse practitioners.

**Viable Agriculture, Forestry & Rural Communities:** Agriculture remains Maryland's largest commercial economic sector and is incredibly important to our rural areas. Agriculture output reaches \$8 Billion annually with an additional \$3 Billion in value-added products and accounts for approximately 22,000 jobs. RMC supports programs and policies that will sustain and enhance agricultural production and agritourism, including:

- Land preservation programs such as Program Open Space which funds Rural Legacy and the Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation;
- Core Smart Growth programs such as the Sustainable Communities Tax Credit, Maryland Heritage Area Grants and the Community Investment Tax Credit; and
- Energy policies that promote long-term, locally generated, renewable energy.

RMC is also interested in nutrient management regulations and land use decisions that may adversely impact agricultural production or agricultural heritage.

**Expansion of Rural Broadband:** According to the Congressional Research Service, over 324,000 rural Maryland residents lack access to high-speed internet. In a study published in July 2013, 3.2% of Maryland's population lacks access to fixed broadband. However, of that figure almost 20% (19.2%) of that population resides in our State's rural areas. The lower population density of rural areas presents unique challenges in the deployment of broadband. The greater the geographical distances among customers, the larger the cost to providers looking to serve those customers. Therefore, there is less of an incentive for companies to invest in broadband in a rural region than in an urban one where there is more demand, more customers with higher incomes, and less cost to the service provider.

**Transportation Funding for Local Government:** In recent years, Maryland's municipal governments have been subject to reduced State funding resulting from decreases in their share of highway user revenues (HUR). This reduction in State funding continues to affect the ability of local governments to provide transportation services within their communities. RMC supports MACo and MML in their request that state policymakers evaluate highway funding and the effects of these drastic local reductions to Maryland's roadway – and to take necessary steps to restore HUR and local roadway infrastructure.

### *About the Rural Maryland Council*

The RMC is the *only entity in state government* specifically designed to convene rural leaders across the state and across disciplines to identify economic development challenges common to rural areas and to develop and implement realistic, workable solutions. The RMC is an independent state agency and federally designated State Rural Development Council. Our mission is to bring together federal, state, county and municipal government officials as well as representatives of the for-profit and nonprofit sectors to identify challenges unique to rural communities and to craft public policy, programmatic or regulatory solutions. As a collaborative partnership, the RMC operates under the guidance of a 40-member Executive Board, in a nonpartisan and nondiscriminatory manner.

For more information, visit the RMC's website at: [rural.maryland.gov](http://rural.maryland.gov)

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