



Rural Maryland Council 2017 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.

The Board of Revenue Estimates recently reported weaker than expected General Fund growth for Fiscal Year 2016 with a difference of \$250 million between estimated revenue and actual attained revenue. Revenue estimates for Fiscal Year 2017 were also subsequently written down to expect a \$365 million difference in revenue. Leading into Fiscal Year 2018, state revenues are still expected to grow 3.4% however a structural deficit for Fiscal Year 2018 is expected. As we understand the Governor's intent to eliminate the structural budget deficit, any proposed budget reductions should be equitably distributed so that not one program or jurisdiction carries the burden of resolving the structural deficit.

Fiscal Year 2017 Budget Priorities:

Rural Maryland Prosperity Investment Fund (RMPIF): The rural areas of the state continue to struggle to recover economically as reflected in unemployment and poverty rates. **To address these disparities, funding of the Rural Maryland Prosperity Investment Fund (RMPIF) remains a top priority.** Obtaining this critical support in the amount of \$6 million in funding for RMPIF would encourage necessary economic development and support necessary services. We thank the Governor and the Legislature for approving \$2 million for RMPIF in FY 2017! We continue to advocate for this important funding and support the proposed budget level of \$4 million in FY 2018.

The RMC strongly supports continued state support of:

- RMC Operating Expenses - (\$388,917)
- Maryland Agricultural Education and Rural Development Assistance Fund (MAERDAF) - (\$167,000)
- Maryland Agriculture and Resource-Based Industry Development Corporation (MARBIDCO) – (\$2.875 million)
- Next Generation Farmland Acquisition Program – (\$5 million)

The RMC also strongly supports maintaining the current funding of the State's five regional councils at the historical legislative intention of \$200,000 each.

For the Maryland General Assembly's 2016 Legislative Session, the Rural Maryland Council supports the following legislative priorities:

Rural Economic Development: The Maryland Department of Commerce is expected to introduce a new tiered tax credit program to better address the needs of the business community. The Council supports efforts to encourage rural economic development in the form of tax credits to new or expanding businesses in rural

Maryland. Tax credits for angel investments for startup businesses would help encourage small business development.

Viable Agriculture, Aquaculture, 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. RMC also supports policies that build strong rural communities:

- Adequate funding to ensure the retention and placement of University of Maryland Extension (College Park and Princess Anne) agricultural agents in each county and provide for appropriate agricultural research;
- Land preservation programs such as Program Open Space which funds Rural Legacy and the Maryland Agriculture Land Preservation Foundation;
- Expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit to ensure low-income workers and families access to basic necessities and providing an economic boost to neighborhood businesses;
- Core Smart Growth programs such as the Sustainable Communities Tax Credit, Maryland Heritage Area Grants and the Community Investment Tax Credit;
- Expanded funding for the Department of Housing and Community Development's Community Legacy, Strategic Demolition and Smart Growth Impact Fund; Neighborhood Business Works and Rental Housing Works programs;
- Changes to the current Land Bank law including enabling jurisdictions to create Land Banks for blight elimination purposes; 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 agriculture production, particularly in regards to the expansion of utility-scale solar arrays without local input. The Council opposes any tax or fee imposed on agricultural products such as poultry. Efforts to restore concession sharing with local governments or recognize the impact of state purchases of land should be considered.

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 worst health than their suburban counterparts. RMC supports the expansion of telemedicine to enhance rural health care. The Council also supports the efforts of the Rural Health Care Delivery Workgroup of the Maryland Health Care Commission to study rural health care needs.

Infrastructure: Infrastructure improvements remain a key piece of place-making strategies in creating and retaining vibrancy in our rural communities. RMC supports:

- Expansion of Rural Broadband;
- Transportation Funding for Local Governments; and
- Expansion of heavy rail for commerce, transit and tourism-related purposes.

For more information, visit the RMC's website at: rural.maryland.gov
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