



Rural Maryland Council 2018 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.

According to the Maryland Department of Legislative Services, economic growth is expected to continue at a similar pace as 2016. **Although recent general fund revenues exceeded expectations in fiscal 2017, the estimate for 2018 was revised down due largely to weakness in sales tax collections. A budget deficit is projected for Fiscal Year 2018.** Risks also exist based on potential federal actions that would impact direct aid to Maryland and tax revenues from federal employees who reside in Maryland.

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 \$4 million for RMPIF in FY 2017! We continue to advocate for this important funding and support the proposed budget level of \$6 million in FY 2018.

The RMC strongly supports continued state support of:

- **RMC Operating Expenses - (\$513,917)**
- **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 – (\$2.5 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 and restoration of the Small, Women and Minority-Owned Business Account funds.

For the Maryland General Assembly's 2018 Legislative Session, the Rural Maryland Council supports the following legislative priorities:

Rural Economic Development: 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.

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

RMC supports the recommendations offered by the Task Force on Rural Internet, Broadband, Wireless and Cellular Service, including:

- Statutory and regulatory amendments should be reviewed and implemented to reduce obstacles and permitting challenges between private providers and State and local government;
- a complete inventory of all state and local government agencies assets including cellular towers, water towers and other structures should be completed within the next year;
- The State needs access to updated mapping to better educate constituents, elected and appointed leaders. This updated mapping capability could be used to calculate the overall cost for universal service last mile broadband and should include a complete population and business density for each county. Local government should be asked to help identify un-served and underserved areas with opportunities for input by the Internet Service Providers (ISPs).

The Council will continue to chair the Task Force for Rural Internet, Broadband, Wireless and Cellular Service to determine the problems, issues and potential actions to address broadband access to un/underserved areas of rural Maryland. RMC also supports:

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

Viable Agriculture, Aquaculture, Forestry & Rural Communities: Agriculture remains Maryland's largest commercial economic sector and is incredibly important to our rural areas. Agriculture and forestry 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;
- Adequate funding for the Chesapeake Bay Trust Fund;
- 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 Maryland Heritage Structure Rehabilitation 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;
- Creation of the Community Development Fund;
- 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.

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 efforts to enable and expand telehealth to provide access to preventative and critical care services in rural areas.

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

50 Harry S. Truman Parkway
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

(410) 841-5772 rmc.mda@maryland.gov