



Rural Maryland Council 2019 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, Maryland economic growth has underperformed with employment growth of 0.8% in the first half of 2018. Since efforts have been made to improve revenue projections and slow structural expenditure growth, the State is currently experiencing a short-term budget surplus for Fiscal Year 2020. However, budget deficits are projected for Fiscal Years 2021 growing to almost \$1.4 billion by Fiscal Year 2024.

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 \$6 million for RMPIF in FY 2018! We continue to advocate for this important funding and support the proposed budget level of \$6 million in FY 2019.

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.

For the Maryland General Assembly's 2019 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. The Council supports private investments through the Opportunity Zones.

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:

- Implement legislation that allows electric utility easements and rights-of-way to be used for broadband, following the model implemented by the State of Tennessee;
- Impose limitations on damages in an eminent domain, trespass, unjust enrichment, or similar proceeding, where an electric utility easement or right-of-way is used for broadband;
- Provide support for additional resources and a capital budget request for the Office of Rural Broadband within the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development and the Governor's Office;
- Consider guidelines, metrics and monitoring for the deployment of funds;

- Future funding sources and assets should be considered in concert with the inventory of state assets to be completed by June 2020;
- Work with the State’s congressional delegation to increase federal grant funding or matching funds for rural broadband;
- Oppose public policy that discourages private or public investment in rural broadband; and,
- The Office of Rural Broadband should report annually to the Senate Budget and Taxation and Finance Committees and the House Appropriations, Ways and Means, and Economic Matters Committees the status of rural broadband deployment. Private Internet Service Providers should also be included in the status of broadband deployment.
- The Office of Rural Broadband should prepare a county by county report of previously unserved customers and identify mechanisms for internet service providers to access state assets such as fiber, towers and public buildings.

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, forestry, seafood, and aquaculture accounts for \$19.66 billion in economic activity, 83,619 supported jobs , and \$753 million in state and local tax revenue. 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;
- Continued funding of the Community Development Fund;
- Ensure Opportunity Zone funding is distributed to rural areas;
- 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, behavioral 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.

Education: The RMC looks forward to the release of the final report by the Kirwan Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education, and recommendations to provide at least \$450 million, in addition to the current state funding levels defined by the Thornton formula, be allocated in the budget to enable Maryland’s preK-12 system to perform at the level of the best-performing systems in the world. RMC supports education funding levels that are distributed to all jurisdictions throughout the State.

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