

Fair Hill Horse Arena

Ken Wiggins

A meeting will be held on Wednesday June 8 at 1:00 PM in the Cecil County Administration Building to explore the possibility of financing an enclosed multi use horse arena at the Fair Hill Natural Resource Management Area about the size of the existing grand stand area on the fair grounds with public/private investments. The meeting was organized by Commissioner Dianne Broomell. I'm told that the Fair Hill stakeholders were invited to attend.

When it came to my attention, I was kindly invited to attend by Commissioner Broomell. She explained, "There is a variety of groups that could use the facility year round thereby increasing the events and visitors to our area." It is a public meeting, in a public venue, but it goes unadvertised. I plan to attend with an open mind, but in view of the last effort to bring a horse park to Fair Hill I am candidly somewhat wary of this project, and have many questions.

Who are the invited stakeholders? I assume the equestrian interests will be well represented, but as Fair Hill is a multi-use facility; will hikers, birders, fishermen, mountain bikers, naturalists, deer hunters, youth groups, etc. be represented?. I'm sure I've missed a few categories. Construction of a horse arena has the potential to impact all the other users.

Why do we need a Horse Arena? I'm not a horse person and don't understand the need, but if there is a need, why doesn't the equine industry build their own private facility? What requires taxpayers to fund a facility for the benefit of a special interest group? Is there some kind of emergency?

What's an enclosed multi-use facility? Doesn't an enclosed multi-use facility invite rock concerts, sporting events and motorcycle daredevils? I'm familiar with the Prince Georges County Equestrian Center and Showplace: <http://www.showplacearena.com/>. It is a very nice sports entertainment facility, that hosts all number of events year round. It is on the edge of town served by two major arteries in an urban/suburban area with generous parking. It makes lots of noise, traffic and light, and is highly visible. Would a facility such as this year round multi-use structure be a good fit for a rural, pastoral, natural resource management area? If the county wants a multi-purpose arena, wouldn't it be better to locate it near a major interchange like the Ripkin Stadium complex in Harford County is? An adjacency to the Hollywood Casino comes to mind. After all, the raison d'etre of the casino is to underwrite the thoroughbred horse industry.

Where will the public money come from? Cecil County recently reduced taxes and cut services to schools, the college, libraries and more. Does an arena claim a higher priority to these essential government facilities and services? Public money, by definition is from the federal, state and local taxpayer. Is this the right time for an extravagance like a horse arena, when weighed against our community's real needs?

By the way, this facility is meant to be constructed on public lands of very high value. They are pristine and irreplaceable. Will the equine interests pay for this land? Shouldn't there be a price on reducing our public open space for special interest use? Are there alternatives? What about the site of the formerly planned Cecil Ag museum owned by the County? I thought the county was looking for a solution to that problem as well.

Who will be the landlord? The Maryland Department of the Natural Resources is the present landlord. It has an orderly process to provide strategic planning for the Fair Hill NRMA called the Fair Hill Land Unit Plan that is periodically updated. The gist of the latest plan is that the DNR will attempt to preserve the existing facility largely as it is. Is this arena initiative part of that strategic planning process? DNR's vision statement says: *"In a sustainable Maryland, we recognize that the health of our society and our economy are dependent on the health of our environment. Therefore, we choose to act both collectively and individually to preserve, protect, restore, and enhance our environment for this and future generations."*

The past effort in 2005 to build a horse park would have transferred the horse park facilities to the Maryland Stadium Authority from the DNR. In essence it would have ceded hundreds of acres of what is now a wildlife management area to an entrepreneurial, independent authority answerable to no local legislator (see the Maryland Highway Administration for similar results regarding local sensitivities). Their mission statement says: *"To plan, finance, build and manage sports and entertainment facilities in Maryland. Provide enjoyment, enrichment, education, and business opportunities for citizens. Develop partnerships with local governments, universities, private enterprise, and the community."*

Last month, the Daily Record Business Writer reported that the Maryland Horse Industry Board is moving forward with plans to create a 500 acre state horse park by looking to the Maryland Stadium Authority to figure out how to pay for it. See:

<http://www.marylandsports.us/media/Documents/Board%20moves%20forward%20with%20Maryland%20horse%20park%20plans.pdf>

Could this be the same arena initiative we are talking about in Cecil County? Is this just a coincidence, or is there a connection? Are we talking about an arena or a horse park?

My bottom line question is, **"What problem are we attempting to solve?"** And why is the solution, a socialist redistribution of wealth scheme that takes from the taxpayer's pocket, (and his public lands) to fund an equestrian sports/entertainment venue. Maybe there is another way.

I haven't heard the other side and I may be barking up a non-existent tree, so I'll go to the meeting with my questions and hope to get some answers. I'll let you know what they are.

— Ken W.