

## KC's economic future at the starting gate

*Published in the Chronicle-Independent, April 23, 2007.*

Kershaw County has been given a gift. Decades of influential and visionary people, along with our ideal location, have helped build our area's reputation as a "horse town." Camden and Kershaw County are home to the many aspects of the horse industry, including owners, trainers, breeders, riders, veterinarians, event facilities, and support services such as blacksmiths, tack suppliers, feed dealers, barn builders, and real estate agents who assist in locating horses and their owners to our area.

To outsiders, Camden is known primarily for the Carolina Cup Races, and also for its fall counterpart, the Colonial Cup Races. Even if you do not own a horse, you have benefited from all of this equine-centered activity because it contributes to the local economy. Aside from the tremendous impact of the two big races that Camden hosts, local businesses such as restaurants, hotels, and service stations get a significant boost from the tourism that is generated more subtly but steadily from weekend horse shows and competitions. Day in and day out, the horse industry is providing jobs, contributing to the economic vitality of the area, preserving open spaces, and creating a dynamic environment for the area's residents and visitors.

Our current success is only the beginning. Kershaw County is poised to take the next major stride in expanding our local equine industry and reap greater economic benefits. For Kershaw County to maximize its potential, it is also important that the equine industry statewide is growing strong, as well.

I was pleased to see a recent front-page article in the Chronicle-Independent regarding the Equine Promotion Act of which I am a co-sponsor along with Rep. William D. Witherspoon, Chairman of the House Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Environmental Affairs Committee. This bill is important because the South Carolina Equine Industry has room for significant long-term growth and sustainability that will mean big economic returns for our state.

As filed, the bill would establish a South Carolina Equine Promotion Board and sets forth the composition of the Board and its duties. Promotion is encouraging the development and growth of the equine industry, and includes regular equine censuses; informational and educational materials and programs; research; positive interaction with the state and local governmental agencies; enhancement of knowledge and image of the equine industry; and the improvement of disaster preparedness.

The bill provides for an assessment of a nickel per 50-lb bag of commercial horse feed to fund the efforts of the Board. Anyone who has purchased commercial horse feed has the right to receive a refund of the assessment upon application to the Department of Agriculture.

Our state must recognize the contribution of the Equine Industry to the State of South Carolina -- already a \$3.3 billion industry -- and its potential to grow by providing a means for horse owners to voluntarily assess themselves in order to provide funds to promote the interests of the horse industry. Other SC commodities self-assess and self-promote in a similar manner, such as the Beef, Cotton, and Peach Boards.

Other states, such as North Carolina, Virginia, and Maryland have enacted similar legislation that has greatly benefited their equine industries. I believe that if South Carolina is to improve its status in the equine world, it is essential that this Promotion Board be established and provided some resources to promote the SC Equine Industry effectively. It is estimated that the feed assessment will bring in around \$180,000 per year to be used towards equine promotion.

Opposition to the bill has kept it in Committee, and I have been making efforts to amend the bill so as to gain enough support to get it a hearing. The bill's passage is not assured, and in any case it will not be passed by the full General Assembly this year.

We in Kershaw County should not wait for state action; there is much that can be accomplished on the local level. It is the dream of many people to have a large-scale equestrian center (also referred to as a horse park or arena) in Kershaw County. Any project of this size must have the full support and cooperation of the county and city governments, community leaders, and the private sector. Whether or not the state will invest in a horse park remains to be seen. Other areas of the state are also looking into this idea. If we are to beat the competitors to the finish line, Kershaw County must move forward on this effort with collective determination.

I am encouraged by recent conversations and expressions of support within the community. By the time this column is published, I, with a group of local interested citizens, will have attended the first National Equine Economic Development Summit in Tryon, North Carolina. We hope to return inspired and armed with strategies that will help realize Kershaw County's potential as a top equine center. We can make it happen, and we can celebrate as a community in the winner's circle.