



Martha's Vineyard Horse Council

September 19, 2007

Dear Martha's Vineyard Commission members:

Horses are not as common a sight on Martha's Vineyard as they once were. They may be seen grazing in a few roadside pastures, or pulling hay wagons and carriages for special events, or performing at the Agricultural Fair, but most equestrian activity takes place off the island's main roads and therefore out of public view. A reliable estimate places the number of horses on Martha's Vineyard year-round at more than a thousand; the equine population, like the human, increases in summer.

The Martha's Vineyard Horse Council (MVHC) was founded in the early 1970s and is the island's only nonprofit organization devoted to equestrian activities. Its official purpose is "to bring together all horse lovers on Martha's Vineyard, to promote horses and their related activities, as well as to provide educational clinics, seminars and youth programs for its membership." It currently has upwards of 150 members. We range in age from single digits to "right up there." Whether we keep our horses in fully equipped boarding stables or in modest backyard barns, we live for the hours we can spend at the barn, grooming, mucking stalls, cleaning tack, feeding, and doing the myriad chores that go into horsekeeping. We do all kinds of riding, solo and in company; some of us also drive.

The MVHC sponsors several horse shows and other activities throughout the year. Among its most popular events is the annual fall pace ride, which takes place on the trails in and near the state forest. Many MVHC members ride the island's trails, dirt roads, and ancient ways year-round. The state forest provides an extensive network of trails, dirt tracks, and fire lanes, which horseback riders share with walkers, joggers, runners, Rollerbladers, and bicyclists. The five special ways that have been nominated by the Edgartown Planning Board for designation as a DCPC are especially important to riders east of Barnes Road because they allow riders to access the state forest without riding along the main roads.

In bygone decades, riders could go almost anywhere on horseback. In these days of more and faster traffic, the main roads are best avoided. Increased development has restricted or eliminated access to many previously accessible fields and trails. Like other lovers of the outdoors, equestrians depend on public lands and publicly accessible trails. The MVHC urges the Martha's Vineyard Commission to designate these five special ways as a district of critical planning concern so that they will remain safe and accessible to riders in coming years, and even in future generations. (Received by e-mail 9/19/7 jat)