



**Maryland Public Broadcasting Commission**  
**Fiscal Year 2025 Operating Budget**  
**Response to Department of Legislative Services Analysis**

**MARYLAND SENATE**  
**Budget and Taxation Committee**  
**Education, Business and Administration**  
**Senator Nancy King, Chair**  
**March 1, 2024**

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**MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES**  
**Appropriations Committee**  
**Education and Economic Development**  
**Delegate Stephanie M. Smith, Chair**  
**March 4, 2024**

## SUMMARY

Your committee is considering an FY25 Executive Budget that damages MPT in two distinct ways: First, MPT's appropriation would be cut by \$1 million. Second, and worse yet, the 2017 legislation that provides a future years' funding formula would be repealed.

**The proposed FY25 budget eliminates a hallmark of the General Assembly. It cuts forever the legislatively approved funding for the Center for Maryland History Films and other critical activities at Maryland Public Television.** This center, thanks to the General Assembly, recently produced nationally viewed and acclaimed shows about Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass.

**The FY25 budget removes any funding for the center and thereby prevents the making of programs like the currently in production film on Marylander Thurgood Marshall story and other Maryland-centric projects.**

The legislature's mandated funding of the center (via the formula) and other MPT projects provides certainty as well as cash. Show productions start and are built on guaranteed funding in future years. Production cannot occur on a year-to-year basis. Elimination of the legislature's funding plan nullifies any assured program production by the center – and if the **Center for Maryland History Films does not produce these shows about Marylanders and Maryland, who will?** It appears nobody.

Please restore the \$1 million appropriation and maintain the enacted funding formula that is supporting for the Center for Maryland History Films in FY25 and beyond.

### Introduction: highlights of the year

The team at Maryland Public Television conveys its sincere thanks to the State of Maryland for the FY24 appropriation that has fueled a wide variety of educational, engagement, and programming initiatives for the benefit of the citizens of Maryland.

General Assembly funding beginning in 2017 allowed us to launch the Center for Maryland History Films and share with the nation two noteworthy MPT films focused on Marylanders Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass and shown in all top 100 U.S. markets -- and viewed by a combined audience of nearly 10 million people. These set the stage for still another history production – a documentary about Justice Thurgood Marshall that is now in the works for a 2025 national PBS premiere.

### Serious threats that jeopardize our future

**The proposed budget and analyst recommendation would make the Marshall documentary the last. Without funding certainty, there are no future productions about Maryland and its people.** Even as we express gratitude for your past support and endorsements, we call your attention to the analyst's recommendation in support of the proposed Executive Budget for MPT for FY25 – a recommendation we strongly oppose.

If the Executive Budget goes through unaltered, MPT's appropriation would be cut by \$1 million. **Worse yet, the 2017 legislation that provides a funding formula – a formula that keeps our network healthy and productive in and beyond FY25 -- would be repealed.**

Here is our own analysis:

***OPPOSE: Repeal of funding formula law enacted in 2017***

The Executive Budget proposes the repeal of a law that passed unanimously in the Senate and overwhelmingly in the House in 2017. This statutory requirement ensures that MPT will be funded at the level of its current-year appropriation and increased by the state's General Fund growth. When the Senate and the House spoke via this legislation, they were protecting MPT from the vagaries of federal funding, the uncertainty of Special Funds revenue such as grants, and the unpredictable swings in media consumption patterns and so on.

Since the year 1966 – the year of our founding legislation -- there have been 14 laws enacted in Maryland dealing with MPT. All of them were supportive of the public-serving mission of our organization and all aided and abetted our financial well-being. Senate Bill 1034 that became law on June 1, 2017, was the most visionary and affirming legislation in our history – encouraging MPT to sustain its reputation as one of America's leading producers of public TV broadcast content and protecting it from unforeseen fiscal challenges from outside Maryland.

To repeal that landmark law now seems to second-guess the House and Senate commitment to quality television ... to undercut the public safety requirements that our towers, transmitters, and technology support statewide ... and to hamstring the making of entertaining, engaging, and educational content.

***OPPOSE: Reduction of \$1 million in FY25 appropriation***

Slashing \$1 million from our general fund appropriation for FY25 slams the brakes on what we've publicly committed – to the legislature and to our viewers – namely, to further grow the new Center for Maryland History Films.

If you were proud that Maryland brought to the nation the landmark films on Harriett Tubman and Frederick Douglass in 2022 – two productions that aired in 186 separate markets in the U.S. and were viewed by a combined 9.6 million people -- then you can appreciate our concern that Tubman and Douglass might be among the first and the last films of a short-lived Center for Maryland History Films, not the pacesetters for all future history programs focused on Maryland.

Remove the \$1 million and MPT will broadcast the promised Thurgood Marshall documentary that was funded for FY24, but then we'll have to close up shop. Making national films about historic, impactful Marylanders; major events in Maryland history; and noteworthy historic places in the Free State is an enterprise that you applauded and funded for its initial years. A \$1 million cut will, most assuredly, give you less to applaud about where MPT is concerned.

Similarly, the Legislature always praises the reach of our educational activities and the breadth of the community and civic engagement that we achieve. **A \$1 million cut from a \$13 million appropriation slices at history and education and community work right down the line.**

We urge this committee to overturn the analyst's recommendation and the punitive Executive Budget measures proposed for FY25.

## Analyst's comments

The analyst (page 2) indicates that MPT should discuss the development of “additional original documentary and feature programming in further detail.” MPT is happy to provide further detail:

As the analyst noted, FY24 funding allowed the production of the Thurgood Marshall documentary that is still in the works for a 2025 debut. It will follow in the footsteps of the national Tubman Douglass films (that aired in October 2022) insofar as it will inevitably air in all top 100 U.S. markets; it will likely enjoy in excess of 3,000 broadcasts nationwide; and it will reach hundreds of thousands of persons via social media engagement.

In the analyst's “Key Observations” section on Membership and Contributions (page 8), he cites a decrease in membership and donations from the previous year but does not acknowledge that FY23 was significantly higher on both measures than 2019, the last “normal” year before COVID impacts began to be felt in all areas of commerce, education, and media across the nation. To compare FY23 to COVID-prompted fallout in 2022 is perhaps well-intentioned but misleading.

In the “Key Observations” on Original Programming, the analyst fails to acknowledge programming that is significant to the State of Maryland – specifically, the series *Outdoors Maryland*, the wall-to-wall coverage of the Maryland General Assembly sessions, the Governor's State of the State address, and political debates. These contributions to our overall state-centric programming should be mentioned.

In the “Key Observations” on Viewership, the analyst suggests that MPT should discuss the increase in viewers in FY23. The Tubman-Douglass documentaries alone accounted for a substantial increase in viewers as did the extraordinary tune-in of the series *Maryland Farm & Harvest* and *Outdoors Maryland* – even the new *Destination Maryland* tourism-focused program. In the “Delivering Content” and subsequent sections below, we describe other productions that attracted more viewers in the post-COVID year.

## By the numbers

As organizations everywhere emerged from a pandemic-impacted business focus, MPT, too, re-approached business as usual with some impressive results. Foremost among these in the last fiscal year were:

- **Membership** – 66,500 voluntary paid members (a record 24,688 of them monthly sustainers)
- **Viewing** – 1.0 million monthly broadcast viewers on our top two channels and a growing number of online and streaming viewers who are not reflected in the 1.0 broadcast viewers we have cited
- **Revenue** – ranking 9<sup>th</sup> in revenue among 151 PBS member stations
- **Awards** – climbed to 196 in earned regional Emmy Awards since the network's founding in 1969 (including 4 national Emmy Awards)
- **Website pageviews** – 2.36 million views of our primary website, *mpt.org*
- **MPT in the news** – 504 separate items of news coverage about MPT during the year
- **Engagement** – more than 10,000 individuals attending 131 separate virtual/in-person events

## **Delivering content**

MPT prides itself on being Maryland's best storyteller and journalistic reporter of the people and events that matter to our citizens. These are the primary FY23 statistics that evidence of MPT's productivity in the last fiscal year:

- *Local productions* - **142 programs accounting for 80.8 viewing hours of content**
- *Local acquisitions* - 29 programs accounting for 30.5 viewing hours of content
- *National productions* – 5 series/specials, 57 separate episodes, 29.5 viewing hours
- *National presentations* – 5 series/specials, 46 separate programs, 24.5 viewing hours

## **Coverage of Maryland sporting events**

MPT offered more than 13.5 live and recorded broadcast hours of international equestrian competition last October when the third annual Maryland 5 Star was staged at Fair Hill in Cecil County. In partnership with the Maryland 5 Star organization, MPT both broadcast and livestreamed its coverage of the event, one of only two equestrian events of its kind in the United States and among seven worldwide. Similarly, MPT re-introduced Maryland viewers to the 2023 Maryland Cycling Classic in September 2023 with six hours of live MPT Sports Desk coverage of the nation's single biggest cycling event.

## **Growing voluntary support for Maryland's only statewide broadcaster**

The cultivation of new members ramped up, and the resulting membership tally reached 66,500 by June 30, 2023. Fully 24,688 of these members opted to be "sustainers," providing a monthly donation to ensure a steady stream of membership revenue to MPT.

Similarly, the team on MPT's Major & Planned Giving unit produced an increased amount of revenue in FY23 grants and bequests. Grants were made by six generous foundations, endowments, and corporate entities. Even donors of used vehicles added to MPT revenue derived from the sale of 84 cars and trucks, contributed to MPT by individuals during FY23.

## **Maryland State Ad Agency: important messages effectively delivered**

Launched in 2019 as a service for State of Maryland agencies and governmental units, the Maryland State Ad Agency (MSAA) division of MPT achieved remarkable milestones in both the number of clients served and campaigns conducted in FY23. In all, MSAA conducted advertising campaigns for 11 clients, including the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development, the Maryland Department of Health, the Maryland Higher Education Commission, the Maryland State Police, and others. These campaigns garnered 650 million total audience impressions while positively affecting the health and safety of Marylanders.

## **Production Services furnishes legislative session coverage**

Each year's coverage of a Maryland General Assembly session includes MPT's reporting on the weekly series *State Circle* where the analysis is cogent and comprehensive on the part of anchor Jeff Salkin and Annapolis correspondents Sue Kopen, Charles Robinson, and Nancy Yamada. But an equally important Maryland General Assembly focus is the significant work-for-hire performance on the part of the Production Services team that in FY23 delivered on 90 days of

streaming of proceedings from the Maryland Senate and House of Delegates chambers. MPT provided the technical expertise, staffing, and execution over a span of 13 hours daily. The sessions were viewed on the Maryland General Assembly's website.

**... but that's all in the past**

As the demonstrated leader in telling Maryland's stories, Maryland Public Television turns its attention to what is on its production drawing board, a documentary about Justice Thurgood Marshall, the next major production of the **Center for Maryland History Films**.

Following the remarkable national films on Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass – the first products of MPT's Center for Maryland History Films – the documentary on Justice Marshall will again be broadcast on PBS stations across the country. These landmark documentaries – made possible by an appropriation from the State of Maryland – were accompanied by educational material that greatly aided classroom instruction tied to the films. The same reach and engagement is anticipated for Justice Marshall's production.

The Center for Maryland History Films is a natural outgrowth of MPT's long history repertoire – literally dozens of productions focused on Maryland's historic people, places, and events developed and produced since the *Stories of Maryland* series premiered in the 1969-1970 timeframe. As noted above, the Executive Budget for FY25 now proposes to cancel the Center and all the as-yet-untold stories of Maryland history.

While MPT's ability to tell history is threatened, the network's celebration of Maryland's number one natural resource, the Chesapeake Bay, is at present unimpaired with the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary observance of **Chesapeake Bay Week** coming in April 2024. MPT will offer more than 20 hours of content focusing on the bay's history, heritage, and resources as well as efforts to protect its valuable ecosystem.

**Analyst recommendation**

MPT strongly disagrees with the analyst's concurrence with the Governor's allowance for the Maryland Public Broadcasting Commission (R15P00) for FY25. We oppose the \$1 million reduction in the MPT FY25 appropriation, and we oppose the repeal of the 2017 funding legislation [*i.e.*, Chapter 816 (SB 1034) – *Maryland Public Broadcasting Commission – Funding and Video Streaming*] that was so overwhelmingly enacted by the Maryland Senate and House.

**Submitted by:**

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Maryland Public Television / Maryland Public Broadcasting Commission  
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