

2021-22 CONSERVATION COMMUNITY BUDGET PRIORITIES

Funding to protect our natural resources remains a priority for the conservation community. The COVID-19 pandemic has made it clear that among the essential needs for Virginians are clean air, clean water, equitable access to the outdoors, and access to transportation alternatives. Investments in our natural resources and transportation will not only further Virginia's long-standing policy goals – these investments will help relieve the economic and health-related impacts of our prolonged battle with this pandemic (read more at vcnva.org/specialsession). For more information, please contact Pat Calvert at pat@vcnva.org or (434) 484-0804.

Virginia Conservation Network and the conservation community has taken positions on the following budget amendments:



OPPOSE 4-14#2H clarifies the provisions of the COVID Relief Payment Plans for utilities managed by local governments, aligns the program to current business practices, and clarifies the program applies only to residential customers. Additionally, this amendment amortizes payments over six months for both the housing and utility payment plans established in the introduced budget. Cutting the amortization period in half – from 12 months to six months – does not provide a reasonable amount of time for repayment.

SUPPORT 4-14#3H directs the State Corporation Commission (SCC) to conduct an emergency investigation of the earnings of investor-owned electric utilities and to order credits to customers' bills for earnings above 70 basis points above the utility's authorized rate of return for calendar years 2017 through 2019. It also provides that in any triennial earnings review conducted for a utility in 2021 the Commission shall order bill credits for any earnings above 70 basis points above the utility's authorized rate of return and that the Commission shall have the discretion to amortize certain categories of costs incurred by utilities. Similar to HB5088, this amendment establishes a fund of over \$100 million for utility debt forgiveness to aid Virginians who have accrued debt to Dominion due to the Covid crisis. The fund will be created using the 30% of overcharges that under current law Dominion keeps (SCC cannot compel Dominion to refund or invest the money).

SUPPORT 4-14#4H establishes the Emergency Debt Repayment plan for residential customers and utility companies to address past due accounts that stemmed from the public health emergency. Similar to HB5117, this amendment would allow utility customers to recover at a pace that will give more room to pay all their utility and other obligations during COVID-19 economic recovery.

SUPPORT 374#1H directs the Department of Conservation and Recreation to assess the feasibility of the establishment of a linear park near Seven Bends State Park. Converting this unused rail corridor into multi-use recreational trail enjoys broad support from the community. In fact, mayors, town councilmembers, county representatives and non-profits along the corridor formed the Shenandoah Rail Trail Exploratory Partnership in 2019 to assess the possibilities of a trail from Broadway to Strasburg, connecting two counties, eight communities, many historic and cultural resources and multiple schools and businesses. These local leaders have been working hard within the Partnership to find the best fit for the rail company, the localities, and our communities.

SUPPORT 380#1H provides \$200,000 from the general fund each year for the Department of Environmental Quality to establish an environmental justice director. The director would assist in implementing the recommendations of the Interagency Environmental Task Force Working Group established under the Secretary of Natural Resources in Chapter 1289 of the 2020 Session of the General Assembly. The Governor's budget does not propose any funding for staff to accomplish this work. His original budget called for 6 FTEs to do this work so we are asking for only a fraction of the original staffing but this would ensure someone was able to keep things moving. We fear that, without a dedicated and funded position, the actual work of environmental justice, not just the rhetoric, will effectively halt.

SUPPORT 482.20#17H restores \$159,000 in general funds each year for the Department of Historic resources to establish an underwater archaeology program. Both state and federal law mandate the survey and protection of underwater archaeological resources. Yet for years now, DHR's responsibilities have gone unfulfilled. Re-establishing this program will fulfill DHR's responsibilities under state (§10.1-2214 of the Virginia Code requires DHR to preserve and protect the Commonwealth's underwater historic property) and federal (the National Historic Preservation Act requires the inventory of all historic resources including those underwater) law.

