While Our Common Agenda covers many different topics and conservation efforts, they all intersect in our communities. This means that we must be more intentional with the way we invest in mixed-use, walkable, and transit-oriented communities. We must ensure that flood-prone communities become less vulnerable through investments in flood-preparedness and resiliency. With the new social-distancing norms as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many Virginians are in dire need of access to parks and green spaces, trails and outdoor recreation, and safe opportunities for biking and walking.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARIES AND CONTACT INFORMATION

VCN POINT OF CONTACT
Wyatt Gordon
Policy & Campaigns Manager - Land Use & Transportation
wyatt@vcnva.org

Pat Calvert
Senior Policy & Campaigns Manager - Land Conservation & Healthy Waters
pat@vcnva.org

BOOSTING SMART GROWTH
Where and how we build our communities is critical to maintaining our quality of life, boosting equity, and protecting the environment. Smart growth promotes development in and near our cities, towns, and walkable, mixed-use, transit-accessible communities. By encouraging housing – including affordable housing – close to jobs, retail, and services, with streets designed for safe walking and biking, frequent, reliable transit, we reduce driving and pollution, protect natural and historic resources, and expand opportunities for those who cannot afford a car or are unable to drive. Current state policies too often fuel car-centric development, but reforming those policies to promote smart growth will bring environmental, health, and economic benefits to all Virginians.

Karen Campblin // Sierra Club Virginia Chapter // karen@ktcplan.com
Chris Leyen // Virginia League of Conservation Voters // cleyen@valcv.org
Stewart Schwartz // Coalition for Smarter Growth // stewart@smartergrowth.net

ENSURING THE RESILIENCE OF VIRGINIA’S FLOOD-PRONE COMMUNITIES
Virginians are already seeing the impacts of climate change across the state, from sea level rise along our coastlines to increased rainfall statewide. We must build upon the leadership of recent years to protect Virginians and preserve our natural resources into the future. Although all communities will undoubtedly face tough decisions, chronically underserved communities face disproportionate risks. Community-engaged comprehensive resilience planning and careful investment in adaptation measures will ensure an equitable future for all Virginians as well as the preservation of our natural resources.

Jay Ford // Chesapeake Bay Foundation // jford@cbb.org
Kim Jermaine // Chesapeake Climate Action Network // kim@chesapeakeclimate.org
Emmy Steinhilber // Environmental Defense Fund // esteinhilber@edf.org
Skip Stiles // Wetlands Watch // skip.stiles@wetlandswatch.org

ENSURING VIRGINIANS HAVE DAILY ACCESS TO THE OUTDOORS
From the Appalachian Mountains to the Chesapeake Bay and Atlantic Ocean, the Commonwealth of Virginia is abundant with opportunities for outdoor recreation, but too many of its residents live beyond a short walk to a park or green space. We can ensure Virginians have daily access to the outdoors by identifying communities that currently lack access to parks and green spaces, investing resources for parks, green spaces, and public access infrastructure projects. Creating an outdoor access equity model and securing funding for parks, green spaces, and associated infrastructure will help improve daily access to the outdoors across our Commonwealth.

Parker AgeLasta // Capital Region Land Conservancy // parker@capitalregionland.org
Cat Anthony // Virginia Capital Trail Foundation // cat@virginiacapitaltrail.org
Justin Doyle // James River Association // jdoyle@thejamesriver.org
Lynda Frost // Trust for Public Land // lynda.frost@tpl.org

INCREASING SUPPORT FOR TRAILS
The pandemic and the resulting increased demands on public parks and trails have confirmed that parks and trails for outdoor recreation and transportation are vital public infrastructure. Virginia must provide dedicated, stable funding and enact more effective policies to help manage trail resources equitably and create a connected state-wide trail system which will promote walkability, prosperity, and help build resiliency. Trails can be designed to connect natural areas which serve as floodplains, manage stormwater, and provide tree canopies to regulate air quality and temperature. Trails can also offer a low-cost transportation option that reduces traffic and air pollution while providing safe places for community members to gather and exercise, increasing the civic and social health of a community.

Cat Anthony // Virginia Trails Alliance // cat@virginiacapitaltrail.org
Wendy Austin // Friends of the Lower Appomattox River // vaustin@folar-va.org
Kyle Lawrence // Shenandoah Valley Bicycle Coalition // Kyle@svbcoalition.org
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CHALLENGE
The past 80 years of sprawling development have proven costly, generating longer commutes, record levels of carbon pollution, socio-economic segregation, and the irrevocable loss of historic, natural, and scenic resources. Underfunding transit while subsidizing the development of car-dependent communities, Virginia’s land use and transportation policies have forced families to live ever farther from jobs, schools, and other essential destinations. It has contributed to racial and economic segregation by moving jobs farther from people of color, people with disabilities, low-wage, and other vulnerable populations while prioritizing single family homes with prices out of reach for most people.1

Daily needs. A 2019 study from the American Automobile Association (AAA)2 estimated the cost of annual car ownership at over $9,000. With the average Virginia family owning a minimum of two cars and accruing between $18,200-$36,460 per year in related expenses according to AAA, there is far less income to be put towards putting food on the table, starting a small business, or investing in education. And for individuals and families that cannot afford a car, do not drive, or choose greener transportation, essential services and job opportunities are increasingly out of reach. Sprawling, car-centric development also costs localities and the state far more in terms of infrastructure and destroys countless acres of farmland and forest.3

SOLUTION
Smart growth represents the Commonwealth’s greatest opportunity to reduce vehicle miles traveled, lower state and localities’ cost burdens from infrastructure, and build a prosperous future in which people at all levels of the income ladder have a fair chance to get ahead. Compact, walkable, mixed-use, transit-oriented communities (TOCs) with a mix of housing options reduce the amount we have to drive, reduce air and climate pollution, and save families money in combined housing and transportation costs. In-fill development in our existing cities, towns, and inner suburbs allows us to use and modernize existing infrastructure and convert parking lots to livable communities, while installing modern stormwater management. But we need the state to prioritize these places for infrastructure investment.

Allowing for missing middle housing (accessory dwelling units, duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes, and multifamily) near existing public facilities, removing legal code sections and zoning policies that result in racial exclusion and segregation, and expanding inclusionary zoning will expand opportunities for all Virginians.

Transit-oriented communities (TOCs) with a mix of housing options reduce the amount we have to drive, reduce air and climate pollution, and save families money in combined housing and transportation costs.

Matching these measures with state and local funding for affordable housing close to jobs and transit will have numerous benefits—reducing driving, providing security and stability for families and children, reducing stress, and improving health. Investments in affordable housing in accessible locations will provide far greater transportation benefits and co-benefits than never-ending spending on road expansion to support ever-longer commutes.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS
Calculate maintenance and replacement needs for existing and aging roads, bridges, water, sewer, schools, and other public buildings, and fully fund the replacement of all facilities in poor condition before funding infrastructure for greenfield development, eliminating poor conditions within the next 10 years.

Incorporate a points system in relevant state agency application processes to prioritize allocation of state road, transit, water, and economic development, and public facilities funds to cities, towns, and to compact, walkable, transit-oriented places in the suburbs, provided these jurisdictions also demonstrate they are accommodating housing affordable for all levels of their workforce.

Increase the state affordable housing trust fund to $200 million within three years and establish funding prioritization for projects close to jobs and high-quality public transit.

End bans on multi-family housing, and lower minimum lot sizes in Virginia’s cities, towns, and suburbs to allow for more affordable housing options.

Authorize inclusionary zoning in all localities and make it more flexible for localities.

Conduct a statewide study to identify racial inequities and barriers in Virginia’s Codes relating to planning, zoning, subdivision, and covenants, and recommend change.
ENSURING THE RESILIENCE OF VIRGINIA’S FLOOD-PRONE COMMUNITIES

Jay Ford // Chesapeake Bay Foundation // jford@cbf.org
Kim Jemaine // Chesapeake Climate Action Network // kim@chesapeakeclimate.org
Emily Steinliniber // Environmental Defense Fund // esteinhilber@edf.org
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CHALLENGE

Virginians are on the frontlines of climate change. Coastal Virginia faces the highest rate of relative sea-level rise on the East Coast.1 Rainfall intensity is also increasing, threatening coastal, inland, and riverine communities.2 This places Virginia’s residents at risk and threatens the future of our coastal wetlands and shorelines. Sea level rise and increasing water temperatures threaten to set back decades-long investment in Virginia’s Chesapeake Bay and vital coastal ecosystems including the commitment to “no net loss” of wetlands. The chronically underserved and under-resourced communities least able to adapt, plan, and invest in preparedness and protection face the greatest risks from climate change while simultaneously facing compound threats of discrimination.

In recent years, Virginia’s leadership has taken important steps to reduce flood risk and build flood resilience. Virginia joined the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative and designated 45% of proceeds to the statewide Community Flood Preparedness Fund, with 25% set aside for low-income geographic areas, providing communities access to critically needed funds. Virginia has undertaken many initiatives to increase coastal protection and plan for climate change and will release a Coastal Resilience Master Plan by the end of 2021. Virginia is the first state to include sea level rise in its tidal wetlands permitting and the Chesapeake Bay Preservation Act.

Some communities have identified billions of dollars in needed resilience investments, while many have not yet begun to calculate the costs. Virginia cannot lose momentum, and must ensure that this vital work continues with the next Governor and General Assembly.

SOLUTION

Climate change and flooding impact the entire Commonwealth. An equitable and comprehensive approach to flood resilience is needed to protect Virginia’s people, places, and resources.

Future resilience planning and programs must be statewide, science-based, inclusive, and ongoing. Mandates for inclusion of climate change impacts in our environmental programs and regulations must be implemented and the involvement of frontline communities must be prioritized. Virginia could lose much of its tidal wetlands and coastal shoreline by mid-century unless we act now to vigorously enforce newly-developed regulations to protect them. Increased riverine flooding threatens the gains we have made on water quality. This argues for continued statewide allocation of resources from the Community Flood Preparedness Fund, with emphasis on nature-based solutions and priority given to low-income Virginians.

We must also ensure transparency and oversight of these resources and continue to prioritize identification of additional sources of funding and financing strategies to support communities as they build capacity and implement resilience solutions.

Communities are already and will continue to experience the negative impacts of flooding. Many impacted Virginians do not have the capacity to protect their homes, businesses, property, and natural resources from repeated flooding. We must work not only on large-scale infrastructure, but also to protect the lives and livelihoods of families and communities.

Finally, limited resources and climate reality necessitate that dialogue begin now to ensure the equitable and cost-effective protection and adaptation of our environment and communities in the future, including consideration of meaningful managed retreat.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Protect advances on resilience by codifying administrative initiatives, including operation and governance of the Community Flood Preparedness Fund, extension of the Coastal Resilience Master Plan to a statewide plan every four years, and adequate resources and talent to maintain and advance comprehensive resilience strategies.

Support policies and funding to protect families and communities, especially underserved and under-resourced communities, increasing community resilience statewide.

Include climate change and resulting impacts in all localities’ comprehensive plans to ensure a future that includes equity for all Virginians and continued protection of our natural resources.

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CHALLENGE
Virginia State Parks, Natural Area Preserves, Wildlife Management Areas, State Forests, and statewide trail systems are spectacular places for our residents to connect to the great outdoors. But for too many Virginians, these parks and public lands are inaccessible due to the distance from home, uneven distribution across the Commonwealth and the lack of facilities compliant with the Americans with Disability Act. And, within communities, race and income play a role in determining the quality and size of parks and green spaces individuals have access to in the United States. More affluent and predominantly White neighborhoods tend to have access to higher quality park systems with more acreage than those with larger low-income and Latinx or Black populations.

SOLUTION
• Identify communities across the Commonwealth of Virginia that have poor access to parks and green spaces by creating a statewide outdoor access equity model with guidance provided by stakeholders, including local park and recreation agencies.
• Ensure resources are available to fund park, green space, and public access infrastructure projects by increasing annual funding to the Virginia Land Conservation Fund (VLCF). Doing so will increase the funding available for community park and green space projects, including through the Virginia Outdoors Foundation’s Preservation Trust Fund and Get Outdoors grant programs.
• Use state bonds to make outdoor infrastructure investments at Virginia State Parks, Natural Area Preserves, and along statewide trails and bodies of water.
• Expand the use of the Virginia Clean Water Revolving Loan Fund to include the ability to fund parks and green infrastructure projects in localities with high poverty rates and poor access to parks and green spaces where the fund has flexibility to forgive portions of debt.
• Provide funding to the Department of Conservation and Recreation to hire staff to provide technical assistance to local governments interested in applying to grant programs, including federal grant programs.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS
Direct the Department of Conservation and Recreation to create a statewide outdoor access equity model with guidance provided by stakeholders.
Fund the Virginia Land Conservation Fund (VLCF) at $40 million annually.
Create a new outdoor recreation community access grant program that gives communities the ability to better plan their outdoor recreation infrastructure investments.
Expand the use of the Virginia Clean Water Revolving Loan Fund to invest in community green infrastructure.
Fund public access infrastructure projects including roads, parking, trails, and facilities for disabled access at Virginia State Parks, Natural Area Preserves, statewide trails, and along bodies of water using $115 million in bonds as recommended by Virginia Forever.
Hire four additional full-time employees in the Department of Conservation and Recreation for the purposes of leveraging grant funding from federal grant programs and providing local governments with technical assistance.

Kayaker Running Fingers at Great Falls
Image credit: Roy Sewall

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CHALLENGE
Outdoor recreation is a way of life for some – from people walking and bicycling to young children who play in parks. All Virginians must have equitable access to outdoor recreation and trails for transportation and to ensure that we have places to hike, bike, boat, fish, hunt, view wildlife, or simply enjoy the quiet and peace of nature.

Connected parks and trails as active transportation networks have been conclusively shown to benefit our communities in significant ways: boosting local economies, improving physical health, achieving a cleaner environment, and providing affordable transportation access for everyone.

Even though Virginia has amazing trails like the Virginia Creeper Trail, Roanoke River Greenway Trail, the High Bridge Trail, and the Appalachian Trail, Virginia’s long-distance and regional trails are underfunded, understaffed, and overused. A great demand for trails exists across the state but no cohesive system to develop, manage, maintain, and fund the trails exists. According to the 2017 Virginia Outdoors Demand Survey (VODS), 43% of Virginians ranked trails as the most needed recreational opportunity. A higher percentage of urban residents mentioned trails as most needed.

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Virginia needs multi-modal transportation and places to recreate, this has never been more clear during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-21. The Virginia Capital Trail saw a 42% increase in trail usage while the Canal Walk in Richmond saw a whopping 125% increase in 2020. Even though trails are essential and much-needed, financial needs in the state of Virginia for trail planning, construction, and development remain unmet.

SOLUTION
The documented benefits to the quality of life of Virginians and the increases in trail use across the state in 2020 demonstrate a clear need for additional miles of trail. Funding should be used to build new trails in addition to extending and maintaining existing trails.

Recurring funding and increased staffing are significantly more impactful for trail development than non-recurring funding due to required project needs and multi-year timelines of trail projects. It is imperative that Virginia set up a source of annual recurring funding for trail planning and construction. All funding for trail planning and construction, whether recurring or non-recurring, should be distributed in an equitable manner. The administration of trail funding should take into account the differing funding constraints and needs of different size and types of communities. This includes reducing grants’ local match rates for smaller and rural communities so that the amount is proportional to community metrics such as smaller population tax-base, fewer numbers of vehicles, less land area, etc. Distributing funding through VDOT and VA DCR allows funding to be used for the development of all types of trails: paved trails, natural surface trails, and water trails.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS
$20,000,000 to VDOT for the construction of multi-use trails, feasibility, environmental, and engineering studies, and two FTEs.
$20,000,000 to DCR for the construction of natural surface trails, feasibility, environmental, and engineering studies, and two FTEs.
$1,000,000 in funding for grant match funds for low-income communities, communities of color, and smaller localities with a population of less than 25,000 for better connectivity to transportation and recreation. This would be administered by VDOT.
$100,000 in funding for these communities to promote trail tourism through Virginia Tourism Corporation.

Create a process for designating select trails as official State Trails and directing resources towards trail planning and construction. State Trail designation should be coordinated with DCR and VDOT depending upon trail type.
ENDNOTES

BOOSTING SMART GROWTH


ENSURING THE RESILIENCE OF VIRGINIA’S FLOOD-PRONE COMMUNITIES


ENSURING VIRGINIANS HAVE DAILY ACCESS TO THE OUTDOORS


INCREASING SUPPORT FOR TRAILS


ENDNOTES