

ENSURING VIRGINIANS HAVE DAILY ACCESS TO THE OUTDOORS

Parker Agelasto // 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

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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.¹ We can ensure Virginians have daily access to the outdoors by identifying communities that currently lack access to parks and green spaces and 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.

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.²

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.

We must prioritize addressing similar inequities in Virginia by helping communities create new close-to-home parks and green spaces. Furthermore, investments in new public access infrastructure and facilities must be designed and constructed to accommodate people of all abilities to promote inclusion, and programs to connect citizens to our state's public lands and trails must be adopted.

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 uses 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.

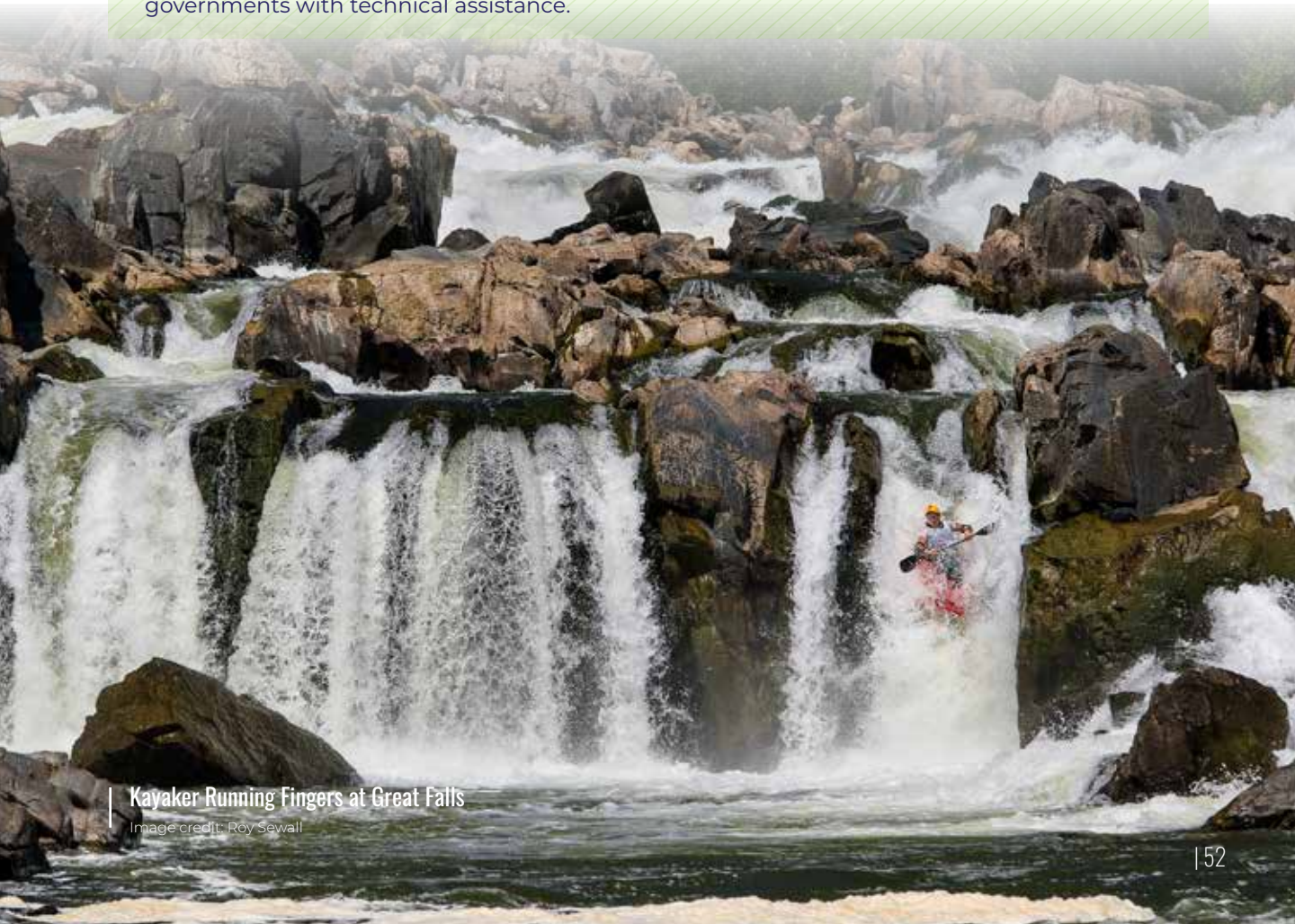
Fund the Virginia Land Conservation Fund (VLCF) at \$40 million annually.

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.³

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