

INCREASING SUPPORT FOR TRAILS

Cat Anthony // Virginia Trails Alliance // cat@virginiacapitaltrail.org
 Wendy Austin // Friends of the Lower Appomattox River // waustin@folar-va.org
 Kyle Lawrence // Shenandoah Valley Bicycle Coalition // Kyle@svbcoalition.org
 Sarah Sanford // East Coast Greenway Alliance // sarah@greenway.org

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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 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.¹

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.²

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."³

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Virginians need 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 2020.⁴ 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.⁵

\$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.