

ENSURING CONSISTENT SUPPORT FOR TRAILS & PARKS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Trails, parks, green spaces, and blue spaces are essential for communities to thrive and prosper as they create opportunities for outdoor recreation, improve public health, stimulate economic development, and key components of transportation networks. Ensuring consistent support for trails and parks will continue to make Virginia a great place to live, work, and play.

CHALLENGE

For too long, trails and parks have been underfunded. Based on a recent presentation from the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), the agency has a maintenance backlog of over \$240 million.¹ We need to invest in our parks and trails so future generations can continue to utilize them instead of letting these assets fall into disrepair.

For too many Virginians, parks, green spaces, and bodies of water are inaccessible due to distance, uneven distribution across the Commonwealth, and lack of facilities compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act. 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 We must prioritize addressing inequitable access to parks, green spaces, and bodies of water in Virginia by identifying places where access is poor and making investments in new parks, green spaces, water access, and trails.

SOLUTION

Parks and trails have been overwhelmed with an increase of usage over the past year which justifies the need for consistent funding to reach all communities and maintain existing infrastructure.³ Equitable access to outdoor

spaces promotes physical activity, which includes many health benefits, including decreases in obesity, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes.⁴ Currently, access to the outdoors is not shared equitably; the need to create a statewide outdoor access equity model is the first step in determining where investments in parks and trails are essential.

Investments in trails, public access infrastructure, and associated facilities must be constructed to accommodate all ability levels and promote inclusion that connect parks and green spaces to all. A state-wide trail designation should be created, similar to Florida's Designation System, to ensure an inclusive interconnected trail system and to strengthen public awareness and protection around our trail assets.⁵ Protection of green spaces is linked to protecting air quality, which helps decrease respiratory and cardiovascular diseases.⁶

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

\$41M per year in recurring funding, adjusted for inflation to 2022 dollars, for the Office of Trails to plan, construct, and maintain trails in the Commonwealth in VDOT.

\$1M for grant match funds for low-income communities, communities of color, and smaller localities of population less than 25,000 for better connectivity to transportation and recreation, to be administered by VDOT.

Establish a State Trail Designation Program and direct resources toward planning and constructing state trails through the Office of Trails.

\$57M per year for the Department of Conservation and Recreation's State Parks to support essential staffing, programs, and backlog of maintenance issues.

Direct the Department of Conservation and Recreation to create a statewide Outdoor Access Equity Model with stakeholder input.

Peaks of Otter, Bedford

Photo by Blaine Fitzgerald