

# ENSURING CONSISTENT SUPPORT FOR TRAILS

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Trails facilitate the movement of people, create opportunities for outdoor recreation, maximize the benefit of conserved land, improve public health, and stimulate economic development across Virginia. Despite the multitude of benefits trails provide, they are inaccessible to many communities, and Virginia is not building them fast enough to meet growing demand. Ensuring consistent support for trail planning, construction, and maintenance will continue to make Virginia a great state in which to live and visit.

## CHALLENGE

We are grateful for the creation of the Office of Trails and past funding over the recent years for trails, but future funding is uncertain. Trails are continually shown to be essential to our transportation and public health systems, allowing for millions of trips each year in Virginia and accounting for tremendous health improvements.

Additionally, trails play a crucial role in our economy by generating tens of millions in tourism dollars and health benefits for users of all kinds of trails, including water trails for canoeing and kayaking, hiking trails, horse trails, and walking and biking trails. Despite the clear evidence of the vast benefits of trails, Virginia is not building them at a pace to meet the demand and need.<sup>1</sup> We must continue to invest in trails to meet both the current demand for trails as well as the increased need for trails in all regions in the Commonwealth.

Too few Virginians have access to trails from their front doors. We must build more trails close to where people live. Access to trails for transportation, health, and recreation should not be ZIP Code dependent, but for many communities, there are challenges with meeting local funding needs to build local trails;<sup>2</sup> thus we need to dedicate state funds to help with matching funds for local communities to take advantage of historic opportunities, both with funding from the Commonwealth as well as the federal government.

Access to trails across Virginia is not equitably shared;<sup>3</sup> we must prioritize statewide trail planning and coordinated investment in trails that meet current and future needs, especially in low-income communities as well as majority Black and Latinx communities.

## SOLUTION

With clear demand across the Commonwealth for trails of all types, state-wide support for trail planning, development, and construction must increase to meet that demand. Increasing trail usage more than justifies the need for consistent state funding to help all communities build new trails as well as improve and maintain existing infrastructure.<sup>4</sup>

The Office of Trails at VDOT can help lead the way in the Commonwealth by supporting local communities and regional agencies through the dissemination of best practices in trail planning, development, construction, operations, maintenance, and rehabilitation. Trails must be constructed to accommodate all ages and abilities and be planned to promote community connectivity. In addition, they must be maintained and improved over time to both meet the needs of current trail users and attract new users. Trails are economic engines for Virginia and increase the quality of life for its residents.

A minimum of \$41 million a year of state revenue should be allocated to the Office of Trails at VDOT to build and maintain Virginia's significant backlog of trail development. It is imperative that funding be allocated to effectively invest in a variety of trails, from major trail projects with the highest potential for use to trails in communities that are fiscally challenged to meet matching requirements.

In addition, a state-wide trail designation should be created, similar to Florida's Designation System,<sup>5</sup> to strengthen public awareness and use of Virginia's interconnected trail systems. This designation system should include local, regional, and statewide trails that provide important transportation and recreational opportunities across the Commonwealth.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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

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

Fill the remaining full-time staff position established in 2022 to add more staff capacity to the VDOT Office of Trails.

Establish a State Trail Designation Program and direct resources toward marketing Virginia's trail systems.

\$1.5M in state-derived trail funding to the Department of Conservation and Recreation to match the Federal Recreational Trails Program grant program.