

STRENGTHENING PARK FUNDING

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The history of parks in Virginia is rooted in the idea that people need access to public spaces outside of home, school, and work where they can recreate and develop as citizens. Shared public green spaces serve as the center of commerce, organization, and social interaction for community members. Parks are important places where people go to exercise, organize, recreate, and relax. Parks also give municipalities the opportunity to display their values through a shared public space and are vital to the fabric of many communities. Consistent funding for parks gives Virginians more opportunities to grow, and as a result, will make Virginia a more desirable place to live, play, and work.

CHALLENGE

State and local governments face competing priorities when making funding decisions. Budget constraints, lack of public awareness, inconsistent funding sources, and political priorities are all reasons that parks funding has been inconsistent. These funding inconsistencies have forced parks departments to defer maintenance and improvement projects, decrease public programming, and limit environmental conservation efforts.

Additionally, 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, which can lead to negative effects on health outcomes in these groups.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 are essential components of healthy and thriving communities. The government of the Commonwealth should be used as a force multiplier to encourage our local communities to invest more in parks to ensure their preservation and development. Increased funding from the Commonwealth would enable parks departments

to improve and maintain park facilities, enhance public programs, and protect more natural areas.

Increased maintenance and infrastructure funding will make parks more appealing to visitors. Based on a 2022 presentation from the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), the agency has a maintenance backlog of over \$240 million.³ Well-maintained parks attract visitors and provide safe and accessible spaces for recreation and relaxation. Upgraded amenities such as playgrounds, trails, picnic areas, and sports fields drive tourism and contribute to economic growth.⁴ Additionally, access to

the outdoors is not shared equitably because of many factors including race and different ability levels. Creating a statewide outdoor access equity model is the first step in determining where investments in parks are essential.

Increased funding for programming would also allow municipal park organizations to expand and enhance recreational opportunities for the citizens they serve. Parks play a vital role in providing opportunities for community engagement, social interaction, and cultural enrichment. Additional classes, workshops, events, and youth activities would be allowed to thrive if increased and consistent funding could be provided.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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

Create a statewide Outdoor Access Equity Model with stakeholder input through DCR.

\$5M per year to the Virginia Outdoors Foundation for Get Outdoors Grant Program to encourage outdoor recreation programming.

Establish a \$1M, 50-50 matching grant program to be facilitated by DCR to encourage localities to invest in capital improvement projects or invasive species management in local parks.