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Calendar of the Year

FOLLOWING THE ACTION

The Budget Process

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Each year, you can expect a similar timeline of events that make up the legislative calendar. The conservation movement has built its calendar in tandem with the legislative process, so VCN and its partners provide opportunities to come together at key moments throughout the year.

We have broken the calendar up into quarters to help you navigate this process. We’ll start at the end of the year, since elections in November shape the rest of the year.

Q1: January-March (General Assembly)

The state legislature convenes in early January and lasts for 60 days (in a non-budget year, and 60 days in a budget year).

Representatives in each chamber will introduce legislation in subcommittees, smaller bodies of a given committee, which will vote to move the legislation forward or not. When legislation is “not recommended” by the Senate, it still has a chance to pass in the full committee and then on the Senate floor. In the House, however, that particular version of the bill is “dead” if the subcommittee does not recommend it, and won’t make it to a floor vote—at least not in its current form.

In early December, VCN holds General Assembly Preview with virtual watch parties throughout the state to present which issues and policies we will be fighting for inside and outside of the building and make plans for local advocacy. Those policies come directly from Our Common Agenda, the policy index written and approved by our partner organizations.

Q2: April-June

The dust is settling on session in April, when the Governor approves (or vetoes) legislation. Legislators will briefly reconvene afterwards to consider the Governor’s amendments and vetoes. Legislators can reject changes and vetoed sections through May. In April, then, things are quieting down in the building. As a conservation community, however, it is already time to begin strategizing about how to build on our victories next year. We hold Regional Meetings with our partners to debrief session and solicit input for our Common Agenda, and then Workgroup Meetings (Energy, Lands, etc) to begin drafting policy positions.

During May and June, while the memories are still fresh and elected officials have more open schedules, conservationists should reach back out to legislators to thank them for their votes or sponsorships, or let them know if they were disappointed by a legislators’ votes. Some legislators will hold town halls, attend them, be vocal, and bring friends! This is a strategic time to focus on building relationships with legislators to set the stage for your ongoing communication throughout the year.

Q3: July-September

This is the quietest time of the year in Richmond, which makes it a strategic time to organize your community. This is a good opportunity to hold or attend advocacy workshops, research the issues, and start mobilizing to get out the vote for candidates you support. As they generally have more open schedules during the summer—though most have day jobs—it is a particularly good time to schedule a visit with your representatives in their district offices or via video conference.

Our Common Agenda is usually released and sent to legislators and VCN partners in early August, as well as becoming publicly available online. Many legislators already turn to Our Common Agenda when drafting policy, and using the papers within as reference points for your meetings will let a legislator know that your suggestions have been vetted by the conservation community.
It can be helpful to keep an eye on which bills have been filed and which committees they have been referred to for votes. In December and early January, before the General Assembly convenes, bills will start to be “pre-filed” and pop up in the Legislative Information System (https://lis.virginia.gov/). LIS will be updated throughout Session as bills are filed, referred to committees, and voted on. Keeping up with the action can help you figure out which friends you should nudge to get in touch with their representatives.

VCN maintains a Bill Tracker (http://www.vcnva.org/bill-tracker/) throughout the year that details every bill the Board and Legislative Committee have voted on. It contains talking points, whether we voted to support, oppose, or stay neutral on the bill, and who in our coalition you can contact for more information.

LEGISLATIVE INFORMATION SYSTEM (LIS)

Legislative Information System (LIS) is full of helpful information but rather difficult to navigate. Let’s follow HB28 from the 2022 Session, which adds a portion of the Maury River to the Virginia Scenic Rivers System.

So you’ve heard there is some legislation about scenic rivers, but can’t remember the bill number. Click Bills and Resolutions. From there, you can search by member, committee, or subject. But it may be easiest to just search for a key word.

2022 SESSION

Convenes January 12, 2022

Bills & Resolutions: Status of individual bills and related information.

General Assembly Members: Member sponsored legislation

Standing Committees: Legislation referred to committee

State Budget: Budget bills, committees, and summaries

Go to “Searchable Databases” on the left and click Bills & Resolutions. Then, type in your key words; in this case, I searched “scenic rivers.”

Bills and Resolutions search result

Your search found 98 references in 17 documents. The number of references reflects each document’s description alone or in some examples to help you refine your search.

Scenic rivers

include filed legislation

HB28 (Kevin Yancey) Maury River, extends portion previously designated as scenic river by an addition... (1)

HB28 (Mark W). Maury River, extends portion previously designated as scenic river by an addition... (1)

Yes!! (Adeline Gandy) Maury River, extends portion previously designated as scenic river by an addition... (1)

HB28 (Jim H.) James River, designates an additional portion as a component of Scenic Rivers... (1)

HB28 (Mike H.) James River, designates an additional portion as a component of... (1)

So, let’s say this bill is still in session and I want to follow this bill so that I can know when is the best time to call my representative—and get my neighbors to join me. I can see that the bill will next appear in Local Government, but when can I expect that Committee to meet? Click Meetings from the front page of LIS to see upcoming meetings, from there, you can see links to Agendas and Dockets (which bills they plan to discuss/vote on), as well as the Live Stream Link to follow the action live.

Virginia Conservation Network Bill Tracker (2022)

The good news is that, unless you want to stay extremely up to date, you don’t need to delve through LIS very often. That’s our job, and why we maintain our Bill Tracker (http://www.vcnva.org/bill-tracker/).

Above, you can see all of the bills that VCN took a position on during the 2022 Session. You can see the bill outcomes as well as which issue area it falls under.

By clicking on our position, you can see the linked Talking Points which detail why we took our position and list the contact information for the person who wrote them so that you can get in touch for greater detail.

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THE BUDGET PROCESS

IMPORTANT INFORMATION
The Governor’s Budget Proposal is the template for the House and the Senate’s final proposals. Getting your goals in the Governor’s budget is very important. The budget is supposed to be finished before the end of the General Assembly session. Since it is a very fast process, it is important to be knowledgeable of your goals and to have a plan before the General Session begins. If the Budget is agreed on by the end of Session, the House and Senate must call a special session, generally in the summer.

HOW YOUR VOICE CAN BE HEARD
Communicate with the pertinent agency in August and September about funding before they submit their own budget requests. Communicate with the Governor, the Secretary of Finance, and the Secretary of Natural Resources about your funding goals, so they know what is of value to constituents and what they should put in the Governor’s Budget Proposal. Meet with your state delegate and senators and ask them to advocate to the agency and Secretariat in support of your budget priorities. If the Governor’s Budget Proposal does not include your budget requests, follow up with a legislator, in both the House and the Senate, about getting a budget amendment submitted before the first Friday of General Session. Meet in your district with your legislators before the GA begins in January. Meet with members of the various budget committees and subcommittees, as well as the committee staff assigned. Attend any pertinent committee and subcommittee meetings.

TOOLS AVAILABLE TO HELP
The Virginia Conservation Network (VCN) publishes the briefing book with policy recommendations and funding requests in September, use this as your guide to know what to ask for.

USEFUL LINKS
- House Appropriations Committee
  https://hac.state.va.us/welcome.htm
- Senate Finance Committee
  http://sfc.virginia.gov/
- General Senate Information
- General House Information
  https://virginiageneralassembly.gov/house/members/members.php

THE BUDGET TIMELINE

A TIMELINE OF EVENTS

AUGUST
State Agencies like the DEQ and DCR begin making budget proposals.

SEPTEMBER
Agencies send requests to the DBP. The Cabinet Secretaries must approve these requested budgets.

NOVEMBER
The Governor’s Office reviews the agencies’ requests and forms his/her own Budget Proposal.

DECEMBER
The Governor’s Budget Proposal is submitted to the General Assembly.

JANUARY
Senators must submit any Budget Amendments by the first Friday of General Session to the Senate Finance Committee.

JANUARY
The General Assembly begins and the Senate Finance Committee begins amending the Governor’s Budget Proposal and creating their own Senate Budget Proposal. The Senate Finance Committee is split into subcommittees that discuss specific aspects of the budget—such as the Economic Development and Natural Resources Subcommittees.

MARCH**
A Conference Committee is held, with 4 Conferees from the Senate and 4 from the House. An official Budget Proposal is produced, using parts of the individual House and Senate Proposals.

MARCH**
The Joint Proposal is sent to the Governor, and he/she may sign, veto, veto specific items, or send it back to the GA with amendments.

FEBRUARY
The committee must report its budget the Sunday after Crossover*. After this, the Senate discusses and votes on the proposal. After the Senate proposal is passed, it is sent to the House for approval.

* In short sessions (an odd numbered year) the committee must report its budget the Sunday before Crossover
** Any event occurring in March during long session must occur in February during short session due to time restrictions
GETTING TO KNOW YOUR LEGISLATOR

WHO ARE MY LEGISLATORS?

The first step to state level advocacy is understanding our legislators: who they are, the issues they care about, and how they have voted on all bills introduced in their district in the state Senate and House of Delegates. This will show you who currently represents your district in the state Senate and House of Delegates. But there may have been turnover if there was a recent election, so you should check whether someone else will be taking office in January. click “Elections” under “My Representatives.”

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For example: let’s say I live in the courthouse building of Pearisburg in southwest Virginia. In 2021, I searched my address at 120 North Main Street, Pearisburg, VA 24354, and found that Jason Ballard was the state delegate for my new district, House District 42. By clicking “See unofficial candidate list” under Delegate Ballard’s name, I can see my district boundary changes and details for the next election. So when I plan my course of action for making sure conservation is a top priority for my state delegate, I will focus on Delegate Ballard.

WEBSITE, EMAIL LISTS, AND SOCIAL MEDIA

To get a full picture of your representative’s priorities, you will want to search for their website, follow them on social media, and sign up for email updates. If you take note of your representative’s voting record, find out who their major donors are, look at their website, follow them on social media, and sign up for their newsletter, you will come armed to your meetings and phone calls with a lot of helpful information about how to most effectively make a case for your position.

For better or for worse, legislators do not approach the session as blank slates, and it’s important that we understand where they stand on the issues and which issues are most important to them. Incumbents have voting records, and both incumbents and newcomers will have a record of donations made to their election campaigns. Additionally, their websites will show which issues they prioritize in their election campaign. Committee assignments will determine which issues your representative has the most power over because bills will originate - and be voted on - in a given committee before they make it to the floor. Many newsletters will have robust social media presences, where they may also indicate issue stances as well as advertise events they are hosting or plan to attend. Finally, you can subscribe to get email updates from their offices throughout the session.

VOTING RECORD

The best way to determine where your legislator actually falls on the issues is to look at their voting record. There are two things you should look at: bills they have sponsored (indicating a high priority issue) and how they have voted on all bills introduced in recent sessions.

Senator McClellan, Mary Rafferty, Trieste Lockwood, and their children meet for Lobby Day

WHAT DOES MY LEGISLATOR WANT?

For example: My representative in the Senate, John Edwards, is an incumbent. If I click “Vote Analysis” under his name, I can see which bills he sponsored under the aptly named “Bills Sponsored” tab and his overall votes under “Voting Analysis.” Senator Edwards has been in office since 1996, so I can also filter by year to look farther back into his voting record.

COMMITTEES

Under the “Committees” tab, you can see which committees your representative sits on. This matters because it may determine what issues they care most about and whether they can introduce a given bill.

For example: Senator Edwards sits on the Finance and Appropriations committee. If I am concerned about the development of recreational trails in my area, I might want to advocate for increased funding for outdoor recreation when I meet with him. Of course, I can also advocate for whichever issue I or my group is most concerned about, but it’s worth noting that he could wield greater influence on budget issues than some others.

MONEY

Another way to assess which issues your representative might care the most about is to see who contributed the most to their campaign. Because the #1 priority for all legislators is to get re-elected, their donors matter. Click “Candidate,” and then click “Top Donors” on the right.

From here, I can filter by “Year” to see all contributions that have been made to Senator Carr’s election campaigns or contributions within a specific time period. This can provide some telling information.

For example: if I search “All Years,” I can see that Dominion Energy has donated over $50,000 to Senator Edwards’s campaigns over the years. However, in 2021, he did not receive any money from Dominion. Instead, he received the most money from a law group and a medical society (among other business groups) and several large individual donors.

Social media search for your representative’s name on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Not all representatives will have all three, but you should follow them on whichever platforms they use to stay up to date on their opinions and upcoming events.

Bonus: this might feel like a lot of research, but if you want to go deeper, you can sign up to receive a Google alert (an email) whenever your candidate is mentioned in the news, which will give you a sense of their uncurated public image. It’s easy to do go to https://www.google.com/alerts and type in your representative’s name.

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Social media search for your representative’s name on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Not all representatives will have all three, but you should follow them on whichever platforms they use to stay up to date on their opinions and upcoming events.
One of the most effective actions you can take is meeting with your representative in person. Why? An in-person meeting puts a face (or, ideally, faces) to an issue, and allows you to make a more nuanced appeal. If you keep at it and continue to build a relationship with them throughout the year, they eventually look at you as someone they can reach out to about matters related to your issues.

That's the long term vision, but for now, we can focus on how to set up an initial meeting and what to do once you get there.

**SETTING UP THE MEETING**

Once the legislative session has begun, most representatives’ staff will be available in Richmond office from 8-5. But the best case scenario is that you meet with them in advance of the session to get them thinking about environmental issues before the unforgiving pace of the legislative session sweeps them away.

Legislator’s phone numbers, emails, and addresses can be found at [http://virginiageneralassembly.gov](http://virginiageneralassembly.gov). It is better if this request does not come out of the blue. To that end, you can send an initial email articulating who you are, the issue you would like to discuss, and that you are looking forward to working with them this year. The tone should be cordial, regardless of where your legislator has fallen in the past on the subject you want to discuss. Finish off by thanking them for their dedication to public service.

It is possible that you will get a response (likely from an aide) to this email, but you may need to follow up with a phone call a day or two later. The principles of making the connection and showing your persistence will stand out.

You may also need to follow up by calling back. Letting them know in advance that you will check in with them a couple days will be helpful, as their staff person will understand you are not giving up on a face-to-face meeting in the near future.

Your legislator will be most available during the summer months, but plan to meet with them once a quarter. Having started building a relationship throughout the year, your meeting in November or December, right before session begins, will be all the more impactful.

Keep in mind that these are helpful meetings for your legislator. Usually, they have to do the hard work of figuring out what their community wants. By offering to come directly to your legislator with your priority issues, you are saving them time. State and local legislators do not hear from their constituents as often as you might imagine, so your request and your persistence will stand out.

**SAMPLE EMAIL TO REQUEST A MEETING WITH A LEGISLATOR**

district21@senate.virginia.gov

Requesting a meeting with Appalachian Voices

Senator Edwards,

My name is Emily and I am a constituent in Pearisburg. I am excited about the possibility of making progress on land conservation and water pollution issues this year and would like to request a meeting to talk about increased regulatory oversight for pipeline development. For more than 20 years, Appalachian Voices has worked to advance legislation to protect our area from development, and I look forward to working with you this year.

Thank you,

Emily
Appalachian Voices
[Phone Number]

You have a meeting scheduled. Now what? The good news is you have already done much of the work by researching your legislator. At this point, you should have a rough estimate of where they stand on your issue. Perhaps they have broadly supported environmental initiatives, but no legislation about your particular issue has come up to a vote. Such a legislator is a “likely supporter.” A legislator who has voted against similar conservation initiatives would be a “likely opponent.” Or your official could be a newly-elected representative who didn’t mention related issues during their campaign, so they fall into the “uncertain” camp. This will determine how you frame your issue.

Then, you will need to prepare what you want to actually say during the meeting. These meetings are frequently not very long, so you should focus on the points you want to make (and there shouldn’t be more than a couple) on paper prior to heading in. Here is an example of a typical agenda.

**BE FRIENDLY AND CORDIAL THROUGHOUT THE MEETING**

Even if your legislator is a “likely opponent,” this is not the right setting for a combative attitude.

**THE ISSUES TO THEIR SELF INTEREST!**

At this point, you know a lot about your legislator, so you should tailor your approach to their self-interest. For example: Delegate Carr received sizable donations from the beer industry and other business interests, and research has shown that beer will get vastly more expensive as a result of agricultural disruption tied to climate change. I won’t explicitly say, “I know the beer industry gave you money,” but I could say something like, “So many of the small businesses, like breweries, that make Richmond great will be jeopardized by climate change.”

**TELL YOUR PERSONAL STORY**

Why is this important? Stories are much more powerful than facts or figures, and likely to stick with your legislator. You may notice when politicians discuss policies they support, they will often reference a person whose experience underscores why the policy is so important. You could be that person!

- Lean heavily on imagery; paint a picture for them.
- Keep it short—a minute or two, at the most.

**HAVE A SPECIFIC ASK!**

You don’t want to merely ask your legislator to “support conservation initiatives” or something else vague. Instead, have a yes or no question prepared. “Will you support/introduce/sponsor legislation to fund the Chesapeake Bay cleanup?”

**PREPARING FOR AND RUNNING THE MEETING**

**TIPS AND BEST PRACTICES**

**GIVE EACH PERSON AT THE MEETING A ROLE**

Usually, you will come to these meetings with 1-3 other people. Each person there should deliver at least one part of the agenda.

**STICK TO YOUR TALKING POINTS**

It can be easy to get sidetracked if your legislator asks you a question that is not that relevant to your issue, or not within the realm of positions you or your group are advocating for. Simply and politely say, “That’s an important question/issue, but the reason we are here today is to ___” is an effective tool to get back on message.

**PRACTICE!**

Prior to meeting with your legislator, the group that will be attending should get together to go over all the talking points, agree upon answers to anticipated questions, and role play the entire meeting from top to bottom.

**MAINTAIN REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS**

Much of the time, your legislator will not agree on the spot to introduce, sponsor, or support a given bill, or even take a particular stance on an issue. They have a lot of factors to weigh—the committees they are part of, competing interests, and so on. That’s why following up after the meeting is so important—especially if they take some action on the issue you brought up.
SAMPLE AGENDA FOR MEETING WITH A LEGISLATOR

BEGINNING OF THE MEETING
- Make a personal connection, catch-up or get to know them better (schmooze for a minute!)
- Thank them for something they did, or make a connection to an issue they highlighted during their election campaign

CAMPAIGN OR ISSUE PRESENTATION
- 2 to 3 minutes of easily digestible information; i.e. current state of pollution in the Chesapeake

PERSONAL STORY
- How has this issue affected your life?

ASK
- What specific action do you want them to take?

DIALOGUE
- Get feedback from the decision maker
- Answer questions from them
  » You should anticipate what questions they may have in advance, and type up a sheet with agreed-upon responses
  » If you don’t know the answer, never make it up. Tell them you will get back to them (and then do).
- Ask follow up questions
  » A good question is always: “What would you need to see from your community to take X action?”
  » Agree on a plan of action

WRAP UP
- Determine a time to check back in, if the meeting was inconclusive
- Leave them with a one-pager with concise information about the issue
- Thank them for their time

FOLLOW UP
- Track everything: who was present, what the legislator agreed (or not) to, and the follow-up plan you developed
- Send a thank you email or letter
- Publicly thank (and tag) the representative on social media (picture included)
- Do anything you said you would do, like send follow-up info
- Stay in touch

MEETING VIRTUALLY WITH YOUR LEGISLATOR

If it is not possible to meet with your legislator in person, you can ask to set up a virtual meeting instead. Thankfully, the principles are largely the same. Here are a few additional things to keep in mind to keep the meeting running smoothly:

- If several constituents have set up a meeting together, it is doubly important to prepare an agenda together and determine who will cover which sections.

- Check your internet connection in advance to head off any technical difficulties that may eat up the limited face time you will get.
- Keep your camera on and mute when you are not talking to keep background noise to a minimum.
- Share links to helpful resources or articles directly in the chat.

While it might be intimidating to get in front of your legislator, once you do it, you will find that the vast majority are friendly and pleased to meet with you. It’s important to remember that you are not expected to be an issue expert; instead, you are constituents (or, at least a couple people in your group are) that are highlighting an issue that matters to them. While giving them a few facts or figures about your position will be helpful for context, what really matters is that you make a positive impression and tell a compelling story.

These meetings are a chance for you to exercise your political voice and show legislators that environmental issues must be a big part of the conversation this year and every year. Imagine if every conservationist in Virginia met with their legislators.