

TRAILS FOR SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

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WHY IT MATTERS

Trails and outdoor recreation are vital to Virginia's economic development and livability. In 2022, outdoor recreation contributed over \$11 billion to the Commonwealth's economy, reflecting a 15% increase from the previous year.¹ This growth underscores the significant and rising demand for outdoor activities, opportunities, and spaces. Moreover, the economic impact extends beyond direct spending on recreation. Supporting activities, particularly travel and tourism, generated nearly \$3.9 billion in economic activity and sustained over 47,000 jobs in Virginia's restaurants, hotels, arts, recreation, and entertainment industries.²

Virginia's trails attract millions of visitors. In 2022, nearly 11% of the 42.2 million overnight visitors to Virginia participated in hiking-related activities, while half engaged in various outdoor activities.³ This influx of visitors underscores the role of outdoor recreation in driving tourism, which is crucial for the state's economy.

Additionally, trails and outdoor recreation amenities enhance the appeal of Virginia for new and future residents. High-quality natural amenities drive amenity migration, particularly among high-skill, high-income workers who prefer remote-capable industries.⁴ This migration bolsters local economies and supports broader economic development efforts across the Commonwealth.

The Virginia Tech Center for Economic and Community Engagement highlights the role of trails in promoting economic development while conserving green spaces. Rural resort communities exemplify how trails and green spaces are the main attractions that differentiate these areas from urban environments.⁵ The availability of trails and outdoor activities not only improves livability but also positions Virginia as a competitive destination for both visitors and residents, driving economic growth and community well-being.

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Virginia's trails are thriving, thanks to \$89 million in dedicated state funding for significant regional projects like the Shenandoah Rail Trail, Eastern Shore Rail Trail, and the Fall Line Trail. This funding has been crucial to the success of building Virginia's multi-use trails over the past two years and should create a source of recurring, dedicated funding for trails.

An additional milestone achieved in 2022 was the establishment of the Office of Trails, whose first task

has been the development of a statewide plan to create a comprehensive network of regional multi-use trails. The Statewide Trails Plan encompasses an inventory of existing and proposed trails, identifies key gaps in the network, outlines development steps and best practices, and seeks to offer opportunities for community engagement and visioning. However, it's worth noting that the Office of Trails does not address single-use recreational trails, indicating a gap in trail development that limits the agency's role and benefits in many communities.⁶

The Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) has also made significant progress, opening its 42nd park, Sweet Run State Park, in October 2023, which introduced new hiking and equestrian trails to the community.⁷ Additionally, the DCR administers the federal Recreational Trails Program, providing \$2 million in grants annually. Nonetheless, this amount falls short of the growing need for trails in Virginia, as grant applications totaled over \$6.3 million last year alone.⁸ Recreational trails in Virginia have been underfunded for decades, necessitating a new source of recurring annual dollars dedicated to trail development.

An exciting update regarding Virginia's trails is the upcoming 100th anniversary of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy in 2025, commemorating a century of dedication to one of the nation's most iconic trails.⁹ This statewide trail serves as an economic and tourism catalyst for the entirety of Virginia but shares the same needs as the state trail system. Improving trailheads and road crossings is critical to the Appalachian Trail's ability to drive tourism, regional identity, and outdoor engagement throughout Virginia.

OPPORTUNITIES

Virginia has an excellent foundation of trail resources that drive vibrant urban and rural economies, support regional identity, and contribute significantly to the unique character of every community. Getting the most out of our trails requires purposeful action.

Maximizing the value of outdoor recreation to Virginia's communities requires a high-quality visitor experience and attractive, functional, and safe trailheads. The Office of Outdoor Recreation and Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) can support communities that rely on trails for tourism, community character, or new commercial investments by ensuring that Virginia makes the best possible first impression to those visiting our trails.

Improving access points is also a critical step in making trail experiences more attractive to commu-

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nities that have been historically excluded from outdoor recreation. Whether it's a local visitor's first time to the Trail in their backyard, an out-of-state tourist hiking the Appalachian Trail's 544 miles in the commonwealth, or a business looking to relocate to a trail-friendly community, nothing says "you belong here" more than a well designed and inviting trailhead.

Road crossings remain one of the most dangerous parts of on-trail recreation, whether it's the Appalachian Trail, the Capital Trail, or a smaller community trail. Prioritizing the development and implementation of safe trail crossing plans increases the value of trails to all, and in Virginia, we have the personnel to do it. Our Office of Outdoor Recreation and the dedicated workforce at VDOT can ensure our trail and road interfaces are safe for hikers and motorists alike.

Funding for DCR to support the development of single-purpose trails will allow for 'all boats to rise' as the Office of Outdoor Recreation focuses on multi-use trails. This is a critical step in ensuring that Virginia has the widest spectrum of recreational experiences available.

TOP TAKEAWAYS

Virginia's trails are thriving: \$89M in dedicated state funding has been crucial to the success of building Virginia's multi-use trails over the past two years.

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Virginia Creeper Trail Cyclist
Photo by Patti Black

ENDNOTES

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