

CONNECTING & INVESTING IN VIRGINIA'S TRAIL NETWORK

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WHY IT MATTERS

Trails are an essential part of our state's recreation and transportation infrastructure that enable carbon-free travel, critical to reducing vehicle miles traveled and related carbon emissions. Trails also foster a greater connection within and between communities and nature by providing safe, accessible, and usually free opportunities to get outside.¹ Because of trails' complete separation from automobile traffic, trails are often the only place where people feel comfortable biking or walking in their communities.²

This has significant dividends for mental and physical wellbeing, particularly in rural areas and for at-risk populations, and promotes both a conservation mindset and protection of key natural landscapes and historic and cultural resources along trail corridors.³ Many trails are built to highlight or connect users with important sites and stories, like the Tobacco Heritage Trail, which takes users through the story and landscape of Virginia's historic tobacco-producing region, or the W&OD Trail, which connects urban and suburban residents to multiple parks.

Trails are not only an amenity for residents, they are often significant economic drivers.⁴ Trails are both large infrastructure projects with maintenance needs and attractions that draw visitors and new residents, and consequently businesses, who want to experience the trail and related events, like the annual Cap2Cap ride between Richmond and Williamsburg or the Appalachian Trail Days Festivals in Damascus.⁵ Many Planning District Commissions and economic development partnerships have identified existing and potential trail networks as growth engines.⁶

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Virginia has a large network of trails across the state, from small local neighborhood walking trails to regional trails, like the Capital Trail, and multi-state trails like the Potomac Heritage and Appalachian Trails. These trails comprise a mix of surface types, from dirt and gravel to asphalt. Many routes make use of historic infrastructure, like old rail lines, and existing infrastructure, like unpaved roads in rural areas, but protected trail infrastructure is the highest priority for development because it provides maximum safety, accessibility, and long-term usability.

Trails are funded, built, and managed by a complex mix of local, state, and federal agencies and non-profit organizations. Civic volunteer groups and non-profit organizations often play an important role in long-term upkeep. At the state level, the Department

of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) oversees the Virginia Outdoors Plan, which provides policy and guidance for outdoor recreation resources, including trails. DCR also manages over 1,000 miles of natural surface trails on state park lands alone and administers the federally funded Recreational Trails Program (RTP), which provides competitive grants to localities for building and rehabilitating trails and trail-related amenities.⁷

The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) administers the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) and SMART SCALE programs, which are critical sources of funding for multi-use trails. However, the current program rules prioritize larger-scale road and transit investments, presenting challenges for trail advancement. VDOT also manages the State Trails Office, which is responsible for developing Virginia's Statewide Trails Plan and creating a central hub of trail-related information and coordination. The State Trails Advisory Committee (STAC) is intended to support coordination between VDOT and DCR on the development of Virginia's trail network.

The FY2023 and FY2024 Virginia General Assembly budgets included approximately \$89 million in dedicated funding for trails. This historic investment reflects the growing recognition of the economic, recreational, and health benefits that a connected trail network provides to communities across the Commonwealth.⁸ However, there have been no additional investments since then.

OPPORTUNITIES

There are many exciting and ambitious regional trail projects underway in Virginia, like the Eastern Shore Trail, which aims to connect rural communities along the coast; the Fall Line Trail, which will connect Ashland to Petersburg; and Trail757, which will create a regional trail system connecting the Hampton Roads region. There are also significant opportunities to repair and improve natural trails, like updating infrastructure along the Appalachian Trail and improving accessibility and connectivity of natural surface trails on public lands such as state parks, wildlife management areas, and state forests.

Strong coordination between agencies is key to deploying dollars towards shovel-ready, high-impact projects that foster greater connectivity within and between communities. In the near term, a strong State Trails Plan could guide coordinated, strategic investment and development across Virginia's trail network. Recent policy changes underscore the urgency for Virginia to better reflect the transportation, health, environmental, and equity benefits of

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active transportation and multimodal infrastructure.

VDOT could also take into greater account the role gravel roads play in supporting low-stress biking and walking opportunities, and work with localities to improve them rather than solely prioritizing paving these roads.⁹

Looking to the future, adequate dedicated annual funding to expand trail development and improvement is vital to successful and timely project completion. Natural surface trails are relatively low-cost to develop but currently receive no state funding. The multi-use trails currently under development are large, regional construction projects that will need funding from multiple sources to be completed. Dedicated funding for trails would help localities build these trails and more effectively leverage outside funding.

TOP TAKEAWAYS

Trails provide vital infrastructure for recreation and transportation that reduce travel-related carbon emissions, support physical and mental health by providing safe opportunities for recreation, and help people connect with important natural and historic resources

Dedicated annual funding is needed to expedite and improve trail construction, improvement, and maintenance.

Align state policy and programs to better reflect the transportation, health, environmental, and equity benefits of active transportation and multimodal infrastructure.

ENDNOTES

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