

BLAZING TRAILS FOR RECREATION & TRANSPORTATION

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WHY IT MATTERS

Trails are essential to Virginia's transportation network and outdoor recreation economy, serving residents and visitors alike. Peer states are reaping the health, economic, and conservation benefits from aggressive investments in outdoor recreation infrastructure. Meanwhile, Virginia is losing ground in attracting tourism, talent, and outdoor-focused business growth. Investment in trail development delivers the critical community infrastructure that keeps Virginia competitive while building affordability.

Trails strengthen connections within and between communities and nature by providing safe, accessible, and often no-cost opportunities to get outside. Trails are frequently the only places where people feel comfortable biking or walking in their communities, providing valuable community gathering spaces and promoting safe, sustainable forms of transportation reducing traffic congestion and environmental impact.

These benefits translate into real gains for public health, quality of life, and community resilience, especially in rural areas and for at-risk populations. Trails are a bridge between our built and natural environments, helping to preserve our natural landscapes and open space while protecting our historic and cultural resources. Many are designed to connect people directly to Virginia's stories and resources across rural, suburban, and urban settings.

Trails are not just recreational amenities, they are powerful engines of local economic vitality. They attract visitors, support events, increase spending at nearby businesses, and help communities recruit new residents and employers seeking a high quality of life. Trail events across the Commonwealth generate tourism dollars that stay in local economies.

For all of these reasons, trails consistently rank at or near the top of resident investment-priority surveys. Trails benefit Virginians' quality of life and the Commonwealth's economic competitiveness.

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

In 2026, Governor Abigail Spanberger emphasized the importance of outdoor recreation to Virginia's economy, conservation, and quality of life with a focus on competing nationally. Per capita and per acre, Virginia has fallen behind in outdoor recreation among peer states with similar natural assets and geographic positioning. For example, Pennsylvania reports 14,000 miles of statewide trails.

Virginia released its first **Statewide Multiuse Trails Plan** in 2026, showing a multi-use trail inventory of

over 1,600 miles and recommendations for 3,000 more. These facilities range from natural surface trails to paved shared-use paths but exclude many "single-use trails" such as the Appalachian Trail, complicating comparisons to other states who take a more comprehensive approach to accounting for trails.

Trails are funded, built, and managed through a variety of partnerships among local, state, federal, and nonprofit organizations. **Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation** and **Virginia Department of Transportation** administer key funding programs, both federal and state, and oversee trail inventories in State Parks as well as in the transportation right of way.

The Virginia General Assembly's one-time investment of \$79 million in multi-use trails in 2022 (FY23) reflected growing recognition that trails are important economic, transportation, health, and tourism assets. However, no additional dedicated funding has been provided since then, and that fund is exhausted, leaving six major trail projects incomplete and the rest of the state-wide network unaddressed. To remain competitive with neighboring states and fully realize the economic potential of outdoor recreation, Virginia should renew and expand its commitment to trail investment on an ongoing basis, while prioritizing projects that deliver the greatest benefits to residents, visitors, and local economies.

OPPORTUNITIES

The Statewide Multiuse Trails Plan lays out a compelling vision, several key pieces of which are already underway. There are also significant opportunities to restore and expand natural surface trail systems through critical maintenance and accessibility improvements. Sustained annual investment would keep trail projects large and small moving forward.

Establishing a transparent, metrics-based framework for evaluating trail investments, similar to **SMART SCALE** or DCR's **Recreational Trails Program** would help Virginia make the best prioritization decisions and help local efforts compete for funding. Evaluation scoring should consider connectivity, safety, economic impact, access to underserved communities, projected usage, tourism potential, and cost-effectiveness. Virginia should also more fully account for the transportation, health, environmental, and equity benefits of trails and active transportation when making funding decisions. At the same time, it also is important to plan and design trails to avoid or minimize to the extent possible adverse impacts on environmentally sensitive areas and resources.

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Strong interagency coordination is essential to direct funding toward shovel-ready, high-impact projects that improve regional connections. Building on Virginia's State Trails Plan to prioritize spending and construction can provide a unified framework. The **State Trails Office** and DCR should develop collaboratively the metrics and criteria to document the gaps in a state-wide network and align the resources needed.

Finally, Virginia and its localities should prioritize development that leverages trails, transit, and active transportation as part of their affordability strategies. Enabling more residents to live near trail networks that support recreation and transportation will reduce household transportation costs and strengthen community quality of life.

TOP TAKEAWAYS

Trails connect Virginians and visitors to nature, reduce transportation congestion and pollution, bring physical and emotional joy by providing safe opportunities for recreation, and give Virginians needed connections to place and community.

Trails should be funded robustly and consistently, through transparent allocation programs, as they are significant economic drivers.

Trails play an important role in affordability by reducing transportation costs, keeping spending local, and strengthening Virginia's outdoor recreation economy.

ENDNOTES

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6. *Outdoor Recreation Economic Statistics*. (2024). Bureau of Economic Analysis. <https://www.bea.gov/news/2026/outdoor-recreation-economic-statistics-us-and-states-2024>
7. *Apply for Pennsylvania Trail of the Year Status*. (2026). Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. <https://www.pa.gov/services/dcnr/apply-for-pennsylvania-trail-of-the-year-status>