

**REPORT OF THE VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF
CONSERVATION AND RECREATION AND THE
STATE TRAILS ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

**CURRENT AND FUTURE PLANS FOR A
STATE SYSTEM OF ATTRACTIVE,
SUSTAINABLE AND ENDURING
TRAILS ACROSS THE
COMMONWEALTH**

**TO THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
CHESAPEAKE AND NATURAL RESOURCES; THE SENATE
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, CONSERVATION AND
NATURAL RESOURCES; AND THE CHESAPEAKE BAY
COMMISSION**



**COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA
RICHMOND
OCTOBER 2015**

REPORT NUMBER 1 OF 7

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COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA
DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION AND RECREATION

September 30, 2015

To: The Honorable Terence R. McAuliffe, Governor of Virginia
The Honorable Emmett Hanger, Chair, Senate Committee on Agriculture, Conservation
and Natural Resources
The Honorable Ed Scott, Chair, House Committee on Agriculture, Chesapeake
and Natural Resources
Ann Jennings, Executive Director, Chesapeake Bay Commission Virginia Director
Members, Virginia Delegation to the Chesapeake Bay Commission

From: Clyde E. Cristman 

Subject: Report in Accordance with Chapter 10.1-204.1 of the 2015 Virginia Acts of Assembly

We are pleased to provide this report, *Current and Future Plans for a Statewide System of Attractive, Sustainable and Enduring Trails Across the Commonwealth*, which has been prepared by the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) working with the Statewide Trails Advisory Committee. The report is presented in accordance with Chapter 10.1-204.1 of the 2015 Virginia Acts of Assembly (House Bill 1542; Delegate Lingamfelter) which called on DCR to convene a Committee to assist the Commonwealth in developing and implementing a statewide system of attractive, sustainable, connected, and enduring trails for the perpetual use and enjoyment of the citizens of the Commonwealth and future generations.

The Committee included representatives of the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, the Virginia Department of Transportation, the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. National Park Service, the Virginia Director of the Chesapeake Bay Commission, and non-legislative citizen members, including representatives from the *Virginia Outdoors Plan* Technical Advisory Committee, the Recreational Trails Advisory Committee, and other individuals with technical expertise in trail creation, construction, maintenance, use, and management.

This report presents an initial needs assessment and a list of outcomes desired by the members as expressed at the initial meeting of the Committee on August 19, 2015. The report also makes specific recommendations for resources needed to complete the work outlined in the General Assembly request.

We look forward to continued work with this committee in advancing the development of trails across Virginia.

Attachment

cc: The Honorable Molly Joseph Ward
Members, Board of Conservation and Recreation

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*State Parks • Soil and Water Conservation • Outdoor Recreation Planning
Natural Heritage • Dam Safety and Floodplain Management • Land Conservation*

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PREFACE

This report has been prepared in accordance with the requirements of § 10.1-204.1 of the Code of Virginia which was passed during the 2015 General Assembly Session (House Bill 1542, Delegate Lingamfelter). Section A of § 10.1-204.1 stipulates “that the Committee shall be appointed by the Director of the Department of Conservation and Recreation and shall be composed of a representative from the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, the Virginia Department of Transportation, the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, the U.S. Forest Service, and the U.S. National Park Service; the Virginia Director of the Chesapeake Bay Commission; and non legislative citizen members, including representatives from the Virginia Outdoors Plan Technical Advisory Committee and the Recreational Trails Advisory Committee and other individuals with technical expertise in trail creation, construction, maintenance, use, and management.” The Advisory Committee shall examine and provide recommendations regarding:

- options to close the gaps in a State system of trails as described in § 10.1-204;
- creative public and private funding strategies and partnerships to leverage resources to fund the development of trails;
- integrated approaches to promote and market trail values and benefits;
- the development of specialty trails, including concepts related to old-growth forest trails across the Commonwealth;
- strategies to encourage and create linkages between communities and open space;
- strategies to foster communication and networking among trail stakeholders;
- strategies to increase tourism and commercial activities associated with a State trail system;
- strategies to enhance the involvement of organizations that promote outdoor youth activities, including the Boy Scouts of the U.S.A. and Girl Scouts of the U.S.A. and the 4-H program of the Virginia Cooperative Extension; and
- other practices, standards, statutes, and guidelines that the Director of the Department of Conservation and Recreation determines may enhance the effectiveness of trail planning across the Commonwealth,
- including methods for receiving input regarding potential trail impacts upon owners of underlying or neighboring properties.

The following pages present the findings and recommendations of the State Trails Advisory Committee that was assembled in accordance with provisions of this Act.

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STATE TRAILS ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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REPORT OVERVIEW AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

The next four pages summarize the initial work of the State Trails Advisory Committee, established in the summer of 2015, to complete the tasks assigned in HB1542. A brief needs assessment is followed by a report on the initial meeting of the Committee. This report includes both the Committee's prioritized list of actions that will advance State trails in the Commonwealth, and their recommendations for resources needed to complete this work.

Initial Needs Assessment

Grant applications

For the Recreational Trails Program (RTP) grant cycle that closed on August 6, 2015, 27 applications requesting over \$5.5 million in funding assistance were received (Source of funding: Federal Highway Administration-Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (P.L. 112-141) more commonly known as MAP-21). DCR has \$1.2 million for projects this year. At present, this will help fund seven projects contingent upon site inspections, technical and budget clarifications and completion of National Environmental Policy Act requirements. This is a typical grant round in that many excellent projects were declined due to insufficient funding levels.

Planning and design are not funded through the RTP program. This creates a hardship for the communities that can't invest the needed time up front to ensure that these facilities are built to handle runoff and minimize long-term maintenance costs. Lack of planning has also caused delays in project completion.

Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT's) Transportation Alternatives (TA) program, which is utilized for many bike/ped improvements around the state, faces a similar shortfall. In the last grant round submitted November 1, 2014, VDOT received 89 applications requesting a total of \$31.8 million in TA funds. From that, 57 applications were chosen totaling \$18.8 million in TA funds.

For TA trail projects, this MAP-21 funding program requires development of a shared-use path, with design guidelines for width and surfacing that many trail developers complain are too demanding—particularly in rural areas with steep topography. A state source of funding and perhaps special permitting is needed with more flexibility to design and install sustainable trails that have a lower environmental impact.

Related Statistics from Virginia Outdoors Plan

The 2011 Virginia Outdoor Survey asked respondents to select up to three recreation opportunities that are “most needed in Virginia” from a list of possibilities. The most frequently selected choices were “trails for hiking and walking” (68%), “public access to state waters for fishing, swimming, and beach use” (60%), and “access to natural areas” (55%).

Respondents were also polled about nearly 50 different recreational activities and which ones they had participated in within the past 12 months. The most frequently mentioned activity was “walking for pleasure” (82%, up from 72% in 2006).

The need for more trails was echoed in public input from regional meetings held across the state, along with the need for more information on existing trails.

Staffing

One full-time equivalent (FTE) grant administrator currently manages both the RTP and the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). With the requirement that parks funded through LWCF are preserved in perpetuity for recreation, staff time is also needed to monitor sites to ensure compliance. Currently the agency is behind on meeting the inspection requirements of the program due to insufficient staffing. Funding for the wage staff position that supported these efforts was lost in 2013 due to budget reductions.

Prior to 2009, DCR had one FTE dedicated to trails, and a planning bureau manager who oversaw her work and handled negotiations with railroads (House Bill 2088), Federal Energy Regulatory Commission relicensing, property acquisition and other higher-level tasks. The manager’s position was eliminated in 2009, and his responsibilities divided among the staff. On current work plans, only 30% of one FTE is allocated to serve as State trails program coordinator.

STATE TRAILS ADVISORY COMMITTEE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The State Trails Advisory Committee met this summer to prioritize outcomes for the purpose of this 2015 report. Subsequent meetings are planned in the spring and fall of each year to meet legislative requirements and develop annual reports through the sunset year, 2021.

State Trails Advisory Committee Meeting

The first meeting of the workgroup was held on August 19, 2015 at the Virginia Housing Center in Glen Allen. DCR staff reviewed the group's 10 tasks and established six subcommittees to divide the work. During this first meeting the Committee:

- Was introduced to each of the six State trails identified in the Virginia Outdoors Plan
- Reviewed the history of the DCR Trails Program and the work of a previous Commission and Task Force.
- Was provided copies of relevant legislation, the trails subchapter from the VOP, a *History of Trails in Virginia and Supporting Federal Legislation and Policy*, a *State of the Trails Report* and related documents.
- Formed into subcommittees to develop a prioritized list of outcomes or action items that provide the basis for this report. Subcommittee topic areas are included in Appendix B. A seventh subcommittee, "Barriers" did not meet but is a placeholder to discuss issues that may arise with House Bill 2088 (2009).

The following represent some of the points made in the discussion:

1. Eighty percent of recommendations for the 2018 VOP regarding the committee will require additional DCR staff resources.
2. Statistics are needed on how many grants are awarded versus how many submitted.
3. The committee needs more information on Old Growth Forests and how they would be incorporated into State trails

The consensus of the group was that more staff resources will be needed if the group is going to accomplish the 10 tasks outlined in House Bill 1542. All the Committee members present voted unanimously to support a state park bond, new state funding for trails, and two more full-time state employees to administer and carry out the State Trails Program.

Prioritized list of action items by subcommittee

The following list is a selection of action items or outcomes desired by the State Trails Advisory Committee. This prioritized list was developed and selected after members broke out into each subcommittee.

Communication

- Connect to social media
- Define audiences
- Engage diverse populations

Leverage Resources

- Ask the General Assembly for staff dedicated to the Virginia's statewide trails initiative
- Increase funding for trails
- Increase partnerships/advocates
- Consider what organizational structure would be most effective for the Statewide Trails Advisory Committee to realize the group's desired outcomes

2018 Virginia Outdoors Plan

- Evaluate grant process, benchmark and streamline process, additional staffing and funding
- Increase regional planning for trail networks
- Prime communities to better serve trail users, and expand partnerships, education and awareness

Implementation-Connecting Trails

- Organize a Governors Roundtable on Trails
- Develop a classification/branding system that distinguishes between State, regional and connecting trails
- Develop an inventory of existing, planned and potential trails and routes for studying potential connections, scaled to need, which might be used to connect existing trail networks.

Implementation-Scenic Trails (including Old Growth Forests)

- Define/develop the concept of Old Growth Forests
- Determine where existing old growth forests are in Virginia and where there may be opportunities to connect with existing or proposed State trails
- Identify potential areas for old growth forests on existing public lands and work with private landowners to negotiate public access.

Implementation –Recreation Trails

- Support legislation to require co-location of rails, utilities and trails on existing and planned corridors
- Organize state or regional greenway and trail conferences
- Encourage overnight accommodations along State/regional trunkline trails

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Support for state park bond of at least \$500 million

It was the consensus of the Committee to support a state park bond of at least \$500 million

2. Support new state funding for trails from either the bond or general funds

It was the consensus of the Committee that more funding is needed for trails development, and that this funding should come from the state for implementation of the State trails program.

3. Support sufficient staffing to administer and carry out the State Trails Program and to manage related capital projects

It was the consensus of the Committee that more staff resources are needed to administer the full implementation of a statewide trails program, and to manage the workload associated with a bond.

APPENDIX A: COMMITTEE LEGISLATION

VIRGINIA ACTS OF ASSEMBLY -- 2015 SESSION

CHAPTER 461

An Act to amend the Code of Virginia by adding a section numbered 10.1-204.1, relating to the establishment of the State Trails Advisory Committee; report.

[H 1542]

Approved March 23, 2015

Be it enacted by the General Assembly of Virginia:

1. That the Code of Virginia is amended by adding a section numbered 10.1-204.1 as follows:

§ 10.1-204.1. State Trails Advisory Committee established; report.

A. The State Trails Advisory Committee (the Committee) is hereby established as an advisory committee of the Department of Conservation and Recreation to assist the Commonwealth in developing and implementing a statewide system of attractive, sustainable, connected, and enduring trails for the perpetual use and enjoyment of the citizens of the Commonwealth and future generations. The Committee shall be appointed by the Director of the Department of Conservation and Recreation and shall be composed of a representative from the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, the Virginia Department of Transportation, the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, the U.S. Forest Service, and the U.S. National Park Service; the Virginia Director of the Chesapeake Bay Commission; and nonlegislative citizen members, including representatives from the Virginia Outdoors Plan Technical Advisory Committee and the Recreational Trails Advisory Committee and other individuals with technical expertise in trail creation, construction, maintenance, use, and management. The Committee shall meet at least twice each calendar year.

B. The Advisory Committee shall examine and provide recommendations regarding (i) options to close the gaps in a statewide system of trails as described in § 10.1-204; (ii) creative public and private funding strategies and partnerships to leverage resources to fund the development of trails; (iii) integrated approaches to promote and market trail values and benefits; (iv) the development of specialty trails, including concepts related to old-growth forest trails across the Commonwealth; (v) strategies to encourage and create linkages between communities and open space; (vi) strategies to foster communication and networking among trail stakeholders; (vii) strategies to increase tourism and commercial activities associated with a statewide trail system; (viii) strategies to enhance the involvement of organizations that promote outdoor youth activities, including the Boy Scouts of the U.S.A. and Girl Scouts of the U.S.A. and the 4-H program of the Virginia Cooperative Extension; and (ix) other practices, standards, statutes, and guidelines that the Director of the Department of Conservation and Recreation determines may enhance the effectiveness of trail planning across the Commonwealth, including methods for receiving input regarding potential trail impacts upon owners of underlying or neighboring properties.

C. No later than October 1 of each year, the Director shall provide a status report on the work of the Committee to the Chairman of the House Committee on Agriculture, Chesapeake and Natural Resources; the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Natural Resources; and the Chairman and members of the Virginia delegation to the Chesapeake Bay Commission. The report shall include, (i) current and future plans for a statewide system of attractive, sustainable, connected, and enduring trails across the Commonwealth and (ii) any recommendations from the Committee that will be incorporated into the Virginia Outdoors Plan, which plan shall serve as the repository for recommendations from the Committee. The Virginia Outdoors Plan updates shall be used to capture and advance the concepts developed by the Committee.

D. Members of the Committee shall receive no compensation for their service and shall not be entitled to reimbursement for expenses incurred in the performance of their duties.

E. For the purposes of this section, "old-growth forest" means a forest ecosystem distinguished by trees older than 150 years and tree-related structures that naturally contribute to biodiversity of the forested ecosystems and provide habitat to native Virginia wildlife species, including wildlife species that have been approved for introduction by the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries.

2. That the provisions of this act shall expire on January 1, 2021.

APPENDIX B: SUBCOMMITTEE TOPIC LIST

Implementation			Communication	2018 VOP	Leverage Resources
Scenic Trails	Recreation Trails	Connecting Trails			
Old Growth Forest	Trunkline Development	Link communities and open space	Promotion	Practices, statutes, standards or guidelines	Funding strategies
	Close the gaps	Trail Towns	Stakeholder communication and networking	Recommendations	Commercial Activities/ Tourism
	Specialty Trails		Outreach to youth		Grant Programs
			Outreach to adjacent property owners		Partnerships
			Signage		Advocacy
			Awards		
			Inventory Mgmt.		