

**REPORT OF THE VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF  
CONSERVATION AND RECREATION AND THE  
STATEWIDE 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 2021**

## STATE TRAILS ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERS

**Cat Anthony**, Executive Director  
Virginia Capital Trail Foundation

**Sally Aungier**, Regional Director  
Virginia Horse Council

**James Beamer**, Legislative Outreach Managing  
Director, Dominion

**John Bolecek**, State Bicycle and Pedestrian Planner  
VA Dept. of Transportation

**Michael Burton**, Trails Manager  
James River Park System

**Rob Campbell**, Community Conservationist  
James River Association

**Andrew Downs**, Southwest & Central Virginia  
Regional Director, Appalachian Trail Conservancy

**Anthony Duncan**, Mid-Atlantic Regional Director  
International Mountain Bike Association

**Dennis Gaston**, Eastern area state forests manager  
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**Paul Gilbert**, Executive Director  
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**Leslie Grayson**, Owned Lands Manager  
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**Timothy Hupp**, President  
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**Adrienne Kotula**, Director  
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**Jeff Monroe**, Associate Director  
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**Jerry Nichols**, RTP Advisory Board  
Expedition Outfitters

**Alister Perkinson**, Parks Administrator  
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**Nikki Rovner**, The Nature Conservancy  
VOP Technical Advisory Committee

**Sarah Sanford**, NC/VA Coordinator  
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**Jody Shiflett**, Director of Cycling and Fitness  
Paralyzed Veterans of America

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**Brantley Tyndall**, President  
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Spearhead Trails

**DCR Staff members:** Forrest Atwood, Julie Buchanan, Nathan Burrell, Michael Fletcher, Kelly McClary, Kristal McKelvey, Kellie Seaton, Tom Smith, and Jennifer Wampler.

## PREFACE

This report has been prepared in accordance with the requirements of § 10.2-204.1 of the 2015 Virginia Acts of Assembly (House Bill 1542; Delegate Lingamfelter, amended in 2020). Enactment 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 Wildlife Resources, 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 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 in 2020.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

By the end of the calendar year 2021, the State Trails Advisory Committee (STAC) will have met twice. The first meeting was held on May 17, 2021 and the second meeting will be held on October 26, 2021. The STAC met virtually in May during the declared state of emergency issued by Governor Northam by Executive Order 51 on March 12, 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. STAC will meet again virtually in October under the provisions adopted in the recent budget bill (HB 7001), effective August 10, 2021 which specifically states in 17.a., *“That notwithstanding any other provision of law, any permanent or interim legislative study or advisory commission, committee, or subcommittee, other than a standing committee of the General Assembly to which bills and resolutions are referred during a legislative session pursuant to Article IV, Section 11 of the Constitution of Virginia, or any executive advisory board or council may conduct a meeting by electronic communications means without a quorum of the public body physically assembled at one location if the meeting is being held solely to receive presentations, updates, public comment, or conduct other forms of information gathering. If a quorum is not physically assembled, the commission, committee, subcommittee, board, or council shall not take any votes or make any formal recommendations at such meeting.”*

The following report summarizes staff initiatives and committee work for the calendar year.

## **STAFF PROGRESS REPORT**

Staff time has largely been consumed by the Shenandoah Valley Rail Trail feasibility study work required by the General Assembly during the 2020 budget session. Other 2021 accomplishments include the diversification of the committee, an update of the trails GIS layer, and a partnership with the Virginia Department of Health for a *Walk with Ease* initiative.

### ***Shenandoah Valley Rail Trail Feasibility Study***

The 2020 General Assembly of Virginia passed House Bill 1800 requesting the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) to study the feasibility for development of a linear park along the Shenandoah Valley rail corridor from Front Royal to Broadway, Virginia. The 48.5-mile study corridor passes through three counties and eight towns within the Northern Shenandoah Valley Regional Commission and the Central Shenandoah Planning District

Commission. DCR sought out collaboration and formed partnerships early on to address study requirements. The pulse of the community was measured through listening sessions, outreach meetings and an extensive public survey. Interviews with elected officials and staff from the jurisdictions indicate a willingness to help support the project through various means depending on local capacity and every jurisdiction has provided a resolution of support.

Demographic research documented latent demand for bike/pedestrian infrastructure and higher levels of disability, overweight, obesity, hypertension and high cholesterol in the study area. There are 4.5-million people within a 90-minute drive of the proposed trailheads within the towns.

There are not enough outdoor recreation facilities in Northern Virginia to meet demand. The unmet demand has impacted federal, state, and local outdoor recreation providers. There may be opportunities to partner with the federal government for trail development or maintenance. State and regional management alternatives are also being explored should Norfolk Southern agree to sell the corridor, which includes 117 road and private driveway crossings and 49 structures which include 16 long or multi-span bridges, 7 single-span bridges and 13 culvert and drainage inlets. The project is expensive to launch and maintain, but feasible with enough resources. There is widespread political support.

### ***Committee Diversification***

At the direction of DCR's Director, Clyde Cristman, staff invited members to represent new voices on the state committee. As a result of this initiative, Jody Shiflett of the Paralyzed Veterans of America, and Vicky Ferguson of the Monacan Indian Nation, have agreed to serve. Other valuable members have been lost due to a variety of issues. Tom Johnson, representing the Great Eastern Association, sadly passed away and three other members retired from their organizations. These retirements include: Liz Belcher, Dan Mahon, and Champe Burnley. On the upside, there have been several replacements to the committee, which are: Timothy Hupp, Frank McGuire, and Brantley Tyndall. Jeff Monroe, representing academia (Associate Director-UVA IRB for the Social and Behavioral Sciences) and the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (Supervisor of Membership) has also agreed to serve. The effort to diversify the committee is ongoing and new members will be added over the coming year.

### ***Walk with Ease Initiative***

As part of the ongoing effort to improve data on trails, staff partnered with the Virginia Department of Health *Walk with Ease Coalition* to identify and promote trails that met the *Walk with Ease* criteria. Targeted to those with arthritis, trails that meet the criteria also serve people who are older, disabled, or those with a chronic disease who may not be comfortable on more challenging terrain. With a list of facilities filled in by various government agencies on Google Sheets, a map was created to identify locations and provide basic information on each trail. The map, available online<sup>1</sup>, indicates that there is a widespread need for more trail facilities that meet the *Walk with Ease* criteria. The sparse map may also reflect no response by the localities invited to participate, since there is no incentive or requirement to provide the data. Another call for data has gone out and the map will be updated in October.

### **COMMITTEE PROGRESS REPORT**

In response to advocacy work by the Virginia Trails Alliance and others, the General Assembly voted to direct \$10 million to fund long-distance, regional, multiuse trails. The Office of Intermobility Planning and Investment was directed to set up a policy working group to evaluate and recommend a prioritization process for multi-use trail opportunities, a master planning process, and a funding needs assessment. Staff presented to the working group in early September on the importance of good data and the need for an interagency council to collaborate on a trails database to coordinate mapping, signs and markers. The presentation also highlighted the need for a state trail designation process, the need for a state trails plan and the importance of a state trails economic impact study. A follow up meeting with the policy working group is scheduled in late September.

### ***May 2021 STAC Meetings***

Guest speakers, at the first STAC meeting on May 19<sup>th</sup>, representing the Commonwealth included Senator Emmett Hanger, representing the 24th District, Cassidy Rasnick, Deputy Secretary of Commerce and Trade, and Ronique Day, Deputy Director of Intermodal Planning and Investment.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://vdc.maps.arcgis.com/home/webmap/viewer.html?useExisting=1&layers=60f583473f594bd0810475847bbdc0e5>

Senator Emmett Hanger, who also serves as the co-chair of the Outdoor Recreation Caucus and the co-chair of the Sportmen's Caucus, pointed out that the Shenandoah Valley Rail Trail project would be an economic engine for the Valley. He was pleased to announce that \$10 million was appropriated for trails in this year's state budget and that a new state park in Loudoun also received funding. Ronique Day provided more information on the budget amendments that included the \$10 million appropriation.

Cassidy Rasnick provided an introduction to the [Office of Outdoor Recreation](#) and reported that the outdoor recreation industry is bigger than the pharmaceutical industry. There are 200+ outdoor-focused businesses in Virginia. Her office compared specific industries with regional assets. Hiking/camping, watersports, and food & beverage were three industries that had the most connections throughout Virginia. The Office of Outdoor Recreation is focused on three things: (1) business recruitment and expansion; (2) promoting Virginia as an outdoor destination; and (3) branding, and coordinating agencies' work with industry. She advised that Virginia could use regional offices within the Outdoor Recreation Office to help build connections and introduce groups and companies to each other.

Cat Anthony led discussion advising that the Virginia Trails Alliance formed about two years ago and that they meet four times a year. The alliance is currently working on [white papers](#) regarding trails and access to the outdoors and a listserv was created to share trail resources. The alliance is committed to working with Virginia's United Land Trusts (VAULT) to get dedicated funding resources for trails. To help generate more resources, they continue to invite legislators to get out on the trails.

Caron Whitaker, Deputy Executive Director for the League of American Bicyclist, provided a congressional update with an emphasis on potential funding sources. She pointed out that with the American Rescue Plan and the infrastructure bill there is more money available for trail development.

In response to trail user concerns, a panel including representatives from other states discussed trail designation and how it can overcome barriers to trail development. Speakers included: Sarah Sanford with the Virginia and North Carolina Coordinator for the East Coast Greenway Alliance;



Samantha Browne with the Bureau Chief for the Division of Recreation and Parks in Florida's Office of Greenways and Trails; Kim Williams, Senior Environmental and Recreation Planner for Equinox; and, Tom Howard, Chair of the Tidewater Trails Alliance. \* *Minutes from this meeting are included in the Appendix.*

### ***October 2021 STAC Meeting***

The second STAC meeting is scheduled to convene on October 26<sup>th</sup>. It is projected that one guest speaker will be Professor Ralph Buehler, Program Chair and Professor, from Virginia Tech in the field of Urban Affairs and Planning. He will share information from his new book, *Cycling for Sustainable Cities*. Staff from the VOLPE Center have been invited to discuss the Federal Highway Administration's report and recent publication, *Rails with Trails, Best Practices and Lessons Learned*. A panel will share their experiences trying to develop or manage rail trails.

### ***Future Meetings and Conferences***

DCR is partnering with Virginia Tourism, the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development, Virginia Main Streets, Virginia Cooperative Extension, Virginia Farmers Market Association and the National Park Service to host a 4-day conference on October 18<sup>th</sup> through October 21<sup>st</sup>. The title of the conference is **Base Camp: Exploring the Trails, Agritourism, and Downtown Ecosystem** and the theme is Resilience, Relevance, Connectivity. Program and registration details are available at <https://vafma.org/va-agritourism-conference/>.

Staff will hold meetings with stakeholders in each planning district this fall to identify "featured projects" as a way to prioritize outdoor recreation needs identified in the state's comprehensive outdoor recreation plan. In the 2018 Virginia Outdoors Plan, many trail projects were "featured projects" that ranked higher on grant applications.

Although a lead partner has not been identified, discussions are underway for a future Mid-Atlantic Summit that can explore connections to neighboring states on the mainland and the Eastern Shore.

## **CONCLUSION**

Work on trails is advancing on many different fronts:

- VDOT is leading trail development within the agency's right-of-way;
- The Office of Intermobility, Planning and Investment (OIP) is leading an interagency work group as directed by the General Assembly;
- DCR is coordinating STAC meetings and developing trail data and long-range plans for a connected network;
- The Office of Outdoor Recreation is promoting trail experiences to attract consumers and industry; and
- The Virginia Trails Alliance, supported by Virginia's United Land Trusts, is focusing advocacy efforts on barriers to product development.

During a meeting with the Office of Intermobility, Planning and Investment, it was suggested that it may be necessary to establish an office of trails and greenways or an interagency council that can effectively manage the many facets of trail acquisition, development, and management without redundancy.