

**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 2022**

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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.

TRANSMITTAL LETTER
STATE TRAILS ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERS
PREFACE

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INTRODUCTION

The State Trails Advisory Committee (STAC) met twice during FY2022. The first meeting was held on October 26, 2021, and the second meeting was held on April 28, 2022. The STAC met virtually in October and in person in April during the Virginia Land Conservation and Greenways Conference in Richmond. The STAC will meet again virtually in October, 2022, under the provisions adopted in the 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.”* Holding one virtual meeting each year ensures participation from across the state.

The following report summarizes staff initiatives and committee work for the fiscal year, including current and future plans for a statewide system of attractive, sustainable, connected, and enduring trails across the Commonwealth and recommendations from the Committee that will be incorporated into the Virginia Outdoors Plan as specified in [§ 10.1-204.1, Section C](#).

STAFF PROGRESS REPORT

Staff time has been directed toward the Dahlgren Railroad Heritage Trail feasibility study, work required by the state budget adopted by the General Assembly in June of 2022. Work continues on Trails Program web updates, the 2023 Virginia Outdoors Plan (VOP) and addressing recommendations identified in the 2018 VOP, including addressing trail barriers and improving trail data. Later this year, staff will serve on the InteractVTrans User Advisory Group.

Dahlgren Railroad Heritage Trail Feasibility Study

The 2022 General Assembly of Virginia passed House Bill 30, Item 375K directing the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) to review the properties of the Dahlgren Railroad Heritage Trail (DRHT), consisting of approximately 15.7 miles in King George County, Virginia, and make recommendations to the Chairs of the House Appropriations and Senate Finance and Appropriations Committees by October 1, 2022, on the Trail's suitability as a recreational area for incorporation into Caledon State Park, to preserve the historical trail and enhance Caledon State Park facilities, the Trail, and recreational opportunities for the citizens of King George County and visitors to Caledon State Park.

Further, in its review, DCR was asked to consider

- any one-time and/or ongoing expenses associated with the Trail's acquisition and incorporation into Caledon State Park;

- management of the area or park by a combination of public and private entities;
- potential user activities at the area or park including but not limited to camping, hiking, bird watching, equestrian activities, and biking; and
- operation of the area or park with only those improvements minimally necessary for activities listed herein and consistent with the preservation and protection of the property's conservation values and natural resources.

Staff consulted research conducted by others, including a 2022 Concept Plan completed by the National Park Service for the Friends of the Dahlgren Railroad Heritage Trail, a 2021 George Washington Regional Commission Greenways Feasibility Study and some history captured by Dawn Bowen in her 2009 article *Building a Trail and Connecting a Community: The Establishment of the Dahlgren Railroad Heritage Trail*.

A DCR review team was also formed with members conducting several site visits to the DRHT, including a visit by seven DCR staff on July 29th. The entire trail was also [photo-documented](#) over two days in July and August.

Over sixty (60) stakeholders were invited to respond to questions by phone and email, about whether and how the DRHT should be integrated into the Park, with almost fifty (50) responding. A stakeholder listening session was also held on August 16th to gather additional feedback. An additional request for feedback was sent to 131 adjacent landowners via a mailed letter on September 7th.

Trails Program Web Updates

Staff updated DCR's websites related to the [Trails Program](#). A [new interactive map](#) featuring regional tourism sites that promote outdoor recreation and the [Arthritis Friendly Trails Map](#) are now featured under the Local Trails Page. Both of these maps will be updated as more information becomes available.

Virginia Outdoors Plan Update

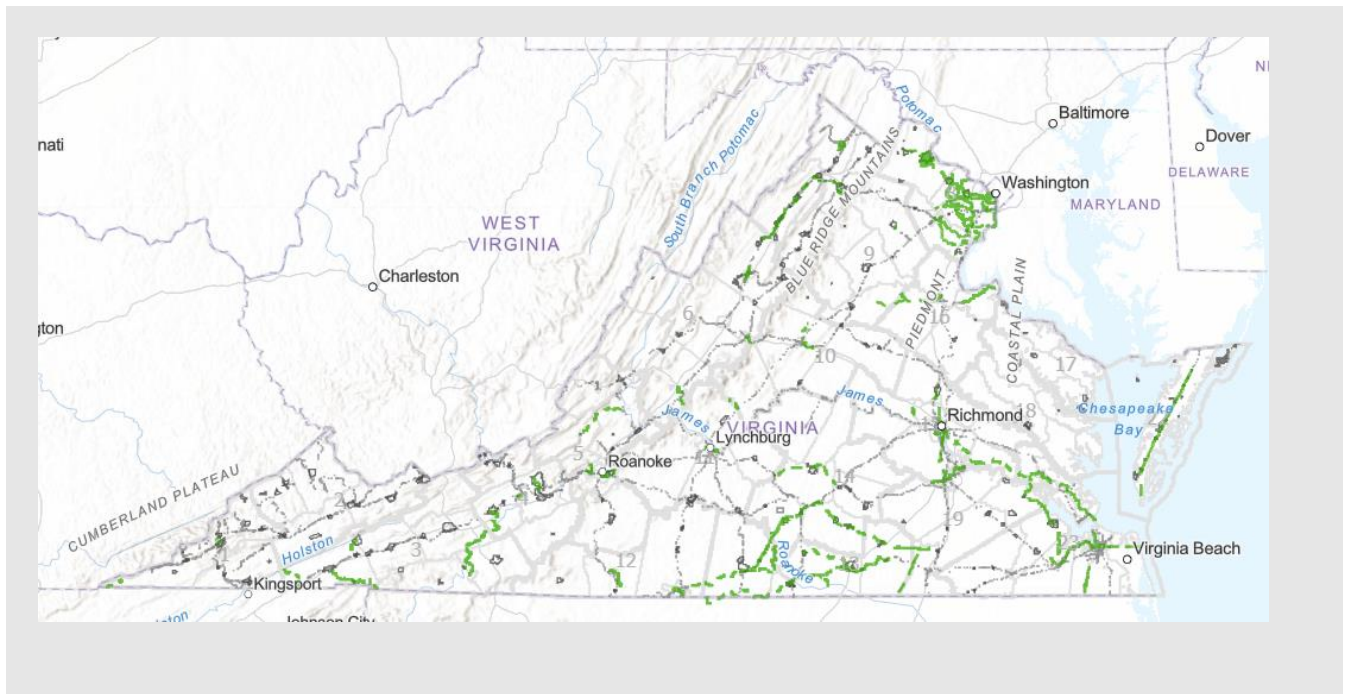
With the Virginia Outdoors Plan (VOP) update in 2023, staff developed an outline for the Trails Chapter that will be reviewed by the State Trails Advisory Committee at their October 27 meeting. Staff worked on updating the trails layer for the VOP Mapper, adding a new layer for regional trails, and expanding other trail layers with help from Open Street Map.

Recreational Rail Crossings and Regional Multiuse Trails

As part of the ongoing effort to improve data on trails, staff partnered with regional governments to develop a draft map of proposed and existing regional trails that complied with the definition of regional multiuse trails in the report issued by the Office of Intermodal Planning and Investment in January 2022. That definition follows:

- Serve non-motorized users – primarily people on foot, bicycle, wheelchair, or horseback – in a shared environment.

- Fall predominantly in their own rights-of-way – such as along a utility corridor or former rail line. Multi-use trails can also be located within the road right-of-way, either alongside the road or on-road. Multi-use trails in road right-of-way change depending on development context and available right-of-way. Regardless of the context, users should be provided a safe experience through separation from motor vehicle traffic (consistent with safety principles and design best practices).
- Meet design standards for accessibility and “shared use paths” defined by VDOT – includes a hard surface such as crushed stone, asphalt, or concrete and a minimum width for safe two-way operation.



Proposed and existing multiuse trails are indicated in green

Because there is a new federal grant to assist with the elimination of at-grade crossings, the map also included data on railroad crossings provided by the Department of Rail and Public Transportation. DCR solicited feedback from regions regarding railroad crossings of concern to recreational users. Railroad and highway barriers to trail networks have been an impediment to trail development and STAC members included a recommendation in the last Virginia Outdoors Plan to address these barriers. Staff submitted an [Every Day Counts](#) nomination to FHWA calling for more research on this topic.

The map was also an experiment in using ArcGIS Online for collaborating with regions for improving trail data. Feedback received from regional GIS staff who were able to access and edit the map shared through group settings may be useful to those charged with establishing a state trails office.

InteractVTrans User Advisory Group

This fall, staff will serve on the InteractVTrans User Advisory Group, which focuses on practitioners who can evaluate and advise the Office of Intermodal Planning and Investment (OIPi) on matters related to the delivery mechanism for VTrans products. More specifically, the group performs the following activities:

- Identifies the need for new datasets, features, and functions
- Evaluates and advises OIPi-STP on suggestions or recommendations for new datasets, features, and functions
- Tests new datasets, features, and functions
- Shares the VTrans outputs with others

COMMITTEE PROGRESS REPORT

This year, the General Assembly invested in trails at historic levels. Committee members, through their advocacy organization, the Virginia Trails Alliance, lobbied for this funding and are grateful for this investment. Other needs expressed by committee members over the years will be addressed by a new State Trails Office, as highlighted below.

- *House Bill 29, Item 447.10, B-9. Up to \$37,500,000 shall be transferred to Item 446 for additional support of the planning, development, and construction of multi-use trails throughout the Commonwealth. Priority shall be given by the Board to new regional trails, projects to improve connectivity of existing trail networks, geographic diversity in the use of such funds, and for the establishment of a State Trails Office and to develop a **State Trails Plan** and **State Trails Information Clearinghouse** consistent with the January 2022 "Report of Virginia Multi-Use Trails Initiative" established pursuant to subsection G of this item. In developing the initial State Trails Plan, the State Trails Office shall coordinate with the State Trails Advisory Committee and the Department of Conservation and Recreation to ensure consistency with the Virginia Outdoors Plan.*
- *House Bill 30 Item 452, Item 1 and 2. Included in these amounts, \$41,500,000 the first year from the general fund is provided for the establishment of the State Trails Office within the Department of Transportation, consistent with the recommendations of the January 2022 report on the "Virginia Multi-Use Trails Initiative." In addition, the Board shall set-aside \$7,000,000 in the first year and \$7,000,000 in the second year from funds received for the Transportation Alternatives Program pursuant to 23 USC 133(h) for regional multi-use trails. Priority shall be given by the Board to new regional trails, projects to improve connectivity of existing trail networks, and geographic diversity in the use of such funds. Funds may be awarded through a competitive solicitation conducted by the Board.*

Prior to July 15, 2022, up to \$800,000 of these amounts shall be transferred to Item 451 to support the initial operational overhead costs of establishing the State Trails Office and for the

*development of a **State Trails Plan** and **State Trails Information Clearinghouse**. In developing the initial State Trails Plan, the State Trails Office shall coordinate with the State Trails Advisory Committee and the Department of Conservation and Recreation to ensure consistency with the Virginia Outdoors Plan.*

October 2021 STAC Meeting

At a virtual meeting on October 26, 2021, Emily Stock (DRPT) described the state rail plan process and focus on policy development, including climate change, equity, multimodal access, passenger rail stations, and economic development (the rail-trail policy). Christopher Douwes, Community Planner with the Federal Highway Administration, discussed a report released in May, 2021 entitled [Rails with Trails: Best Practices and Lessons Learned](#).

Three panelists representing the Eastern Shore Rail Trail, the Dahlgren Railroad Heritage Trail and the Tobacco Heritage Trail discussed some community concerns with regard to rail trails (nostalgia, security and agriculture concerns, and failure to see the economic reality of the rail trail). Other challenges include securing funding, managing liability and insurance, completing maintenance work (especially with severe storm events), and addressing facility needs, including expanding parking and bridge maintenance.

Ralph Buehler, Professor and Chair of Urban Affairs and Planning in the School of Public and International Affairs at Virginia Tech's Research Center in Arlington discussed his book, [Cycling for Sustainable Cities](#), co-edited with John Pucher. He summarized that safe cycling infrastructure is crucially important. An integrated package of programs and policies is needed to complement bikeways, including parking; land-use; traffic calming; enforcement; education; integration with transit; wayfinding, push factors for drivers; and pull factors for bikes. Cycling is for everyone: infrastructure should be built for all along with inclusive cycling cultures. Planning processes must prioritize the inclusion of vulnerable, risk-averse, and disadvantaged groups at every stage.

Ronique Day, the Deputy Director of the Office of Intermodal Planning and Investment (OIPI), provided an update on the Multiuse Trails study and invited Committee members to attend a work group meeting to review the draft report recommendations.

Among other updates, Cat Anthony reported that the Virginia Trails Alliance developed white papers on trails published by the Virginia Conservation Network and helped coordinate the Virginia Outdoor Caucus meetings. David Brickley, Founder and President Emeritus, provided an update on the newly designated [September 11th National Memorial Trail](#). Staff from the Northern Virginia Regional Commission (NVRC) outlined upcoming work on the Potomac Heritage Trail Equity and Economic Impact Study and briefed the group on Prince William County's [Trails Aspirational Map](#).

April 2022 STAC Meeting

Guest speakers at the STAC meeting on April 28th included staff from regional organizations who provided some background on the regional government's role in trail development. They shared their interactive maps showcasing different regional trails accessed at the following links:

- [Appomattox River Trail](#) (Friends of the Lower Appomattox River)
- [Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail](#) (Northern Virginia Regional Commission)
- [Fall Line](#) (PlanRVA and Friends of the Fall Line)

The committee was also briefed on the results of the [Equity and Economic Impact Study](#) for the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail, showcased by online [dashboards](#) and infographics on the four pillars of the study:

- Detailed information about the health impacts of the trail on local residents;
- The role of the trail in economic development in the region;
- An analysis of the equity of health, economic, and safety outcomes for residents along the trail; and
- A review of the transportation benefits provided by the trail.

The study utilized trail counters, Strava, and Streetlight data to estimate trail usage. The methodology used for the study is explained in presentations available on the [Northern Virginia Regional Commission website¹](#).

A panel of professionals in the health system discussed the importance of walking and walkability to address equity, chronic disease and mental health issues. STAC members were encouraged to connect outdoor recreation resources to the people who need these resources and find other ways to support this work:

- Fund and support joint initiatives including walking, physical activity, social connectedness, and mental health programs;
- Collaborate on webinars;
- Include health, equity, and inclusive language and goals in trail plans/planning processes;
- Include more public health professionals on boards and committees; and
- Join as a PATHS member or a Virginia Walkability Action Institute team member.

Members also provided feedback on Trail Chapter recommendations, the State Trails Map, and the State Connecting Trails Map for the Virginia Outdoor Plan update. Their highest-ranked recommendation involved the development of strategies to enhance trails in communities and close

¹ [Equity and Economic Impact Study - Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail | Northern Virginia Regional Commission - Website \(novaregion.org\)](#)

the gaps in the statewide system of trails as described in the Code of Virginia, §10.1-204.

- Complete a **statewide-trails plan** to summarize the work of STAC and guide trails development and priorities for grant awards.
- Develop multi-state trails connectivity goals and strategies in the statewide trails plan.
- Create a central **clearing house of information** to close statewide trail system gaps.
- Consider an interagency Memorandum of Understanding to facilitate information sharing.
- Obtain funds for a statewide-trails needs assessment showing costs for system development.
- Connect local and regional trail providers with health partners.

Future Meetings and Conferences

The second STAC meeting is scheduled to convene on October 27th, 2022. Invited guest speakers include Nick Donohue, Capitol Transportation Consulting, to provide some background on the Commonwealth Transportation Board and Wayne Clark to discuss the economic impact of the Cisco presence in Raleigh Triangle, North Carolina. Reed Perry will provide an update on the Chesapeake National Recreation Area, and Emily Stock will update everyone on the State Rail Plan. Shane Sawyer is invited to speak on the State Trails Office, and Cat Anthony will provide an update on the Virginia Trails Alliance. The draft agenda includes time for an update on the VOP, an update on the Dahlgren Railroad Heritage Trail study and information on DCR-sponsored grants.

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 Farm Bureau and the National Park Service to host a 2022 winter virtual conference (December 6-7) and a 2023 spring in-person conference (Blacksburg, March 28-30) focused on agritourism. Staff will plan the portions of both conferences that focus on trails.

The Virginia Land Conservation and Greenways Conference will be held April 25-27, 2023, in Harrisonburg. This conference will also have a trails track.

A Governor's Conference on Active Transportation and Health could result from an action plan under development with Prioritizing Active Transportation, Health and Safety (PATHS). A future collaboration could involve the Virginia Department of Health (VDH), Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT), other state agencies, nonprofits, and advocacy groups throughout the Commonwealth. With National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates indicating that pedestrian fatalities were up thirteen percent and bicyclist fatalities were up five percent in 2021, interagency coordination has become increasingly important.

CONCLUSION

Trail enthusiasts were gratified to see the historic investment in trails in the current state budget. The State Trails Office, once staffed and fully operational, will address other long-term needs identified by the STAC over the years, including a State Trails Plan and State Trails Clearinghouse. Through InteractVTrans and the new trails office, agencies will begin ramping up coordination efforts this fall, as the need for safe, connected, clearly marked facilities for recreation and active transportation accelerates. The recommendations prioritized by the Committee for incorporation into the Virginia Outdoors Plan centered on developing strategies to enhance trails in communities and close the gaps in the statewide system of trails.