

**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 2020**

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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). 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 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 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 2020, the State Trails Advisory Committee will have met twice; both virtual meetings were scheduled in the fall due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the guidance on virtual meetings provided by the Attorney General's office, these meetings provided information only. Committee feedback has been solicited by email and survey.

Along with staff, the Virginia Trails Alliance has been active. They continue to push for a Governor's Conference on Greenways, Blueways and Trails and other items outlined in this report.

STAFF PROGRESS REPORT

Although a STAC meeting scheduled for May was postponed by the pandemic, remote work during the spring enabled staff to focus on planning for the James River Heritage Corridor, a state trail network that is an important part of the state trail system.

Middle James Segment Plan

Last year, the Committee directed staff to focus in on the Middle James to close gaps in the James River Heritage Trail, a braided trail network including land and water trails. Following the model developed by the National Park Service for the Lower James, staff developed the Middle James Segment Plan. The draft document identified focus areas within the James River Watershed between Lynchburg and Maidens that have heritage, agritourism and outdoor recreation assets. The plan also identified action items that would augment these special places and build interest in the watershed as a whole. The draft Middle James Segment Plan is available at this link: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1bNyoGTORhnVweDDx-wYK8Ppl6pNievz7/view>.

James River Heritage Corridor Strategic Plan

Not to lose sight of the big picture, staff also developed a draft strategic plan for the watershed based on a series of stakeholder interviews and a draft concept plan developed in 2011. The draft James River Heritage Corridor Strategic Plan Vision, Goals and Objectives are available at this link: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1boxZCiERup_IthBhD8MubadVeTcYNsN4/view?usp=sharing. Comments on both plans are due Nov. 24, 2020.

James River Heritage Corridor Hub Site

A work in progress is a community engagement platform that captures information provided by various state agencies that manage or monitor watershed data or attractions. Draft web pages are currently structured around the concepts *Have Fun* (recreation), *Explore* (heritage) *Go Safely* (advisories) *Protect* (resource protection) and *Tributaries* (information on other land and water trails in the watershed). This platform also offers a robust calendar feature, so an Events page could be developed. Dashboard features could report progress on scenic-river miles designated, acres of land conserved, acres of buffers added, gaps closed in trail networks, and other metrics important to stakeholders. Legitimate criticism from other agencies centers on staff's ability to keep this platform up to date and responsive to community input. To be successful, this effort may need sponsorship independent of any particular state agency.

Trails Collaboration Page

Because collecting and updating data on trails from trail partners has been challenging, DCR is experimenting with a community engagement platform where federal, state, regional and local GIS staff can upload and edit trails data within their purview. To gain access to the site to upload and edit features, partners will have to join the Hub community, but existing trail data can be downloaded by anyone in its beta form at <https://trails-vdcr.hub.arcgis.com/>. This fall, planning district staff and state and federal agencies will be asked to update their trail data so the Hub site can be officially launched next year. This site also has a dashboard feature that reports on total trail segments and trailheads collected.

Through DCR's enterprise agreement, [ESRI](#) provided the technical assistance to launch this Hub site and set up the structure for the James River Heritage Corridor Hub site.

COMMITTEE PROGRESS REPORT

The General Assembly voted to extend legislation mandating the State Trails Advisory Committee to 2027 (originally set to expire January of 2021). New committee members have been invited to participate to expand the diversity of the committee. Since virtual meetings allow for more participation, no effort has been made to sunset existing members to make room for new members. GoToMeeting software recorded 63 participants in the September meeting, although there was double counting if people dropped off and called back in, or participated by phone and computer.

September 2020 STAC Meetings

The first 2020 STAC meeting was held virtually on September 17. DCR staff opened the meeting acknowledging the impact of the pandemic on outdoor recreation facilities. In some DCR parks and preserves use has been overwhelming--like at Leesylvania State Park, where 400-900 cars a day were turned away due to capacity issues.

The Virginia Trails Alliance provided an update on their work, and the East Coast Greenway Alliance reported on state and federal advocacy efforts. Virginia is the only state in the 15-state corridor that does not have an agreement with the Alliance on signage, and there is an effort underway to develop an MOU with VDOT to sign the route.

After an update on the DCR grant rounds and staff progress, nine presenters provided lightning talks about a dozen trail projects in various stages of development from concept to feasibility to miles on the ground. ESRI staff provided information on the Trail Hub site, and staff provided information on future conferences. [Minutes](#) are available on Town Hall.

October 2020 STAC Survey

DCR solicited feedback from STAC members on the Greenways and Trails E-newsletter. Responses were very favorable, in fact, one member said "this was one of the very first state produced e-newsletters that I was aware of and am always so impressed how professional it is and how much great information is included!" All respondents felt the information was useful or very useful. Members were evenly divided on whether the quarterly E-newsletter should be released more often (monthly). All responses received are provided in the attachment.

Future Meetings and Conferences

The committee will meet again virtually on November 17, 2020. In addition to an update on agency diversity efforts, a panel will discuss partnerships with utilities for trail development and maintenance. With hundreds of miles of potential trail corridor in the state, there may be opportunities to partner with utilities to help address trail development and maintenance costs. Virginia Tourism will discuss their agency's support of trail development efforts and another series of lightning talks will touch on technology and trails.

All spring 2020 conferences were postponed due to the pandemic. The River Management Symposium has been rescheduled for May of 2021. The virtual Virginia Land Conservation & Greenways Conference, which included a [track for trails](#), was held virtually from July through September.

DCR is partnering with Virginia Tourism, the Virginia Department of Agriculture and the Department of Housing and Community Development to host a conference on agritourism, farmer's markets and trails in the fall of 2021. With roughly a year available to plan this event, this could be a candidate for sponsorship from the Governor's office if there is interest.

CONCLUSION

In spite of challenges this year due to the pandemic, progress has been made to advance trail networks throughout the state. Bicycle sales are way up and a new cohort of users is experiencing the joy of spending time in nature as they exercise and de-stress on trails. There is a growing community of individuals advocating for additional trail resources. The Great American Outdoors Act was passed, offering hope for more funding resources in the future. Trail projects are underway in every planning district as demand for these facilities continues to grow. The committee looks forward to more successes over the next seven years.

Constant Contact Survey Results

Survey Name: STAC Survey

Response Status: Partial & Completed

Filter: None

Oct 28, 2020 10:04:08 AM

1. How often do you read our newsletter?

	Number of Response(s)	Response Ratio
Always (every quarter)	6	66.6%
Frequently (2 or more times a year)	3	33.3%
Sometimes (once each year)	0	0.0%
Never	0	0.0%
No Responses	0	0.0%
Total	9	100%

2. How useful do you find the information in the newsletter?

	Number of Response(s)	Response Ratio
Very useful	7	77.7%
Useful	2	22.2%
Somewhat useful	0	0.0%
Not useful	0	0.0%
No Responses	0	0.0%
Total	9	100%

3. Rate your satisfaction with the following features of this newsletter.

Top number is the count of respondents selecting the option. Bottom % is percent of the total respondents selecting the option.

	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
Length	4 44%	5 56%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%
Design	2 22%	7 78%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%
Content	5 56%	4 44%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%
Images	3 33%	6 67%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%
Color	4 44%	4 44%	1 11%	0 0%	0 0%
Layout	2 22%	6 67%	1 11%	0 0%	0 0%
2 Comment(s)					

4. Rate the following content items in the newsletter based on their importance.

Top number is the count of respondents selecting the option. Bottom % is percent of the total respondents selecting the option.

	Very Important	Fairly Important	Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Advocacy	5 56%	2 22%	1 11%	1 11%	0 0%
Grants	6 67%	3 33%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%
Planning	5 56%	3 33%	1 11%	0 0%	0 0%
Management	3 33%	5 56%	1 11%	0 0%	0 0%
Trail Happenings	0	6	3	0	0

	0%	67%	33%	0%	0%
Webinars	0	7	1	1	0
	0%	78%	11%	11%	0%
Calendar	1	3	5	0	0
	11%	33%	56%	0%	0%
Articles	4	2	2	1	0
	44%	22%	22%	11%	0%

5. If staff resources were available to publish more often, how often would you like to receive our newsletter?

	Number of Response(s)	Response Ratio
Every two weeks	0	0.0%
Monthly	5	55.5%
Quarterly (keep it as is)	4	44.4%
Once a year	0	0.0%
No Responses	0	0.0%
Total	9	100%

6. When is the optimal day to receive this newsletter?

	Number of Response(s)	Response Ratio
Monday	1	11.1%
Tuesday	2	22.2%
Wednesday	0	0.0%
Thursday	0	0.0%
Friday	3	33.3%
Saturday	0	0.0%
Sunday	0	0.0%
No Responses	3	33.3%
Total	9	100%

7. When is the optimal time to receive this newsletter?

	Number of Response(s)	Response Ratio
Morning	4	44.4%
Afternoon	2	22.2%
Night (after work hours)	1	11.1%
No Responses	2	22.2%
Total	9	100%

8. What can we do to improve?

4 Response(s)

9. What would you like to see in future newsletters?

2 Response(s)

Constant Contact Survey Results

Survey Name: STAC Survey

Response Status: Partial & Completed

Filter: None

Oct 28, 2020 10:04:08 AM

3. Rate your satisfaction with the following features of this newsletter. - Comments

Answer

This was one of the very first state produced e-newsletters that I was aware of and am always so impressed how professional it is and how much great information is included!

Respondent

Anonymous

The grant opportunities at the bottom are very important but are easily overlooked due to the layout.

Anonymous

4. Rate the following content items in the newsletter based on their importance. - Comments

Answer

Respondent

[No Responses]

8. What can we do to improve? - Responses

Answer

Respondent

Day and time of receipt don't matter to me.

Anonymous

Thank you for this service.

Anonymous

No preference on day or time to receive the newsletter

Anonymous

Love the content and find it very helpful. Only suggestion is highlighting the grant opportunities a bit more and maybe moving them up higher in the newsletter.

Anonymous

9. What would you like to see in future newsletters? - Responses

Answer

Respondent

It's pretty good the way it is; don't have any particular suggestions. (sort of the old maxim: if it ain't broke, don't fix it!)

Anonymous

I really don't have any suggestions - this is a really well produced newsletter and I enjoy receiving it

Anonymous