

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

2023 ANNUAL REPORT OF THE STATE TRAILS ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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



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Acronyms

CTB – Commonwealth Transportation Board

CSX – CSX Transportation

DCR – Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation

DEQ – Virginia Department of Environmental Quality

DRPT – Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation

DWR – Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources

FHWA – Federal Highway Administration

FY – Fiscal Year

LWCF – Land and Water Conservation Fund

NPS – U.S. National Park Service

NS – Norfolk Southern

ROW – Right-of-Way

RTP – Recreation Trails Program

SCORP – Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan

STAC – State Trails Advisory Committee

USGS – U.S. Geological Survey

VDOT – Virginia Department of Transportation

VOP – Virginia Outdoors Plan

VPRA – Virginia Passenger Rail Authority

Preface

This report has been prepared in accordance with the requirements of [§ 10.1-204.1](#) 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 (DCR) 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 State Trails Advisory Committee (STAC) 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.

This report summarizes staff initiatives and STAC work for Fiscal Year (FY) 2023, including progress for (1) current and future plans for a statewide system of attractive, sustainable, connected, and enduring trails and (2) recommendations from the Committee that will be incorporated into the Virginia Outdoors Plan as specified in [§ 10.1-204.1, Section C](#).

The first section of the report will cover the progress of each state agency toward creating a statewide system of trails across the Commonwealth through their respective responsibilities, as well as external initiatives related to trails. The second section of the report, titled "*Committee Progress Report*," will summarize the two STAC meetings of FY23.

Staff Progress Report

Introduction

Multiple state agencies play a role in the Commonwealth's planning and administration of trail-related work. The Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) coordinates with the State Trails Advisory Committee (STAC) on trail-related topics. DCR is also responsible for leading the submittal process for Rails-with-Trails project proposals, the administration of the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) Recreational Trails Program, and the creation of the Virginia Outdoors Plan (VOP).

STAC was first established in 2015; since that time, other bodies, including the newly created State Trails Office within the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) and the Virginia Passenger Rail Authority (VPR), have become involved. Each agency's role in trail development and management continues to evolve as specific responsibilities are identified. VPR was established in 2020 to "promote, sustain, and expand the availability of passenger and commuter rail service in the Commonwealth."¹ The State Trails Office was established in 2022 by the General Assembly with directives for the following initial tasks:

- Develop a state trails plan, and state trails information clearinghouse, consistent with recommendations in the January 2022 Report of Virginia Multi-Use Trails Initiative²
- Coordinate with the STAC and the Department of Conservation and Recreation

Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR)

Rails with Trails

The Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT) *Report 404: Rails with Trails/Pedestrian Crossing Project Initiation, Coordination, and Review*³ provides guidance on project development and design considerations for Rails with Trails and Pedestrian Crossings along active rail right-of-way (ROW). Report 404 identified DCR as the agency responsible for receiving and reviewing project proposals from advocacy groups regarding Rails with Trails proposals and coordinating with the DRPT, Department of Wildlife Resources (DWR), and the railroads managing active rail lines. Active rail lines in Virginia include those owned or operated by CSX Transportation (CSX), Norfolk Southern (NS), VPR, and numerous short-line railroads.

Beginning in December 2019, as part of the VPR Transforming Rail in Virginia program, an ongoing \$4 billion rail initiative that creates a path forward to connecting communities and increasing economic opportunities through strategic investments in rail, VPR purchased railroad track and ROW for more than 250 miles of track across multiple segments in the Commonwealth. Although VPR owns rail ROW throughout Virginia and within portions of Washington, D.C., and North Carolina, many segment deeds contain restrictions against recreational uses and cannot be considered for rails-with-trails transportation and recreation project proposals.

¹ Virginia Passenger Rail Authority, *About*, <https://vapassengerrailauthority.org/about/>

² Office of Intermodal Planning and Investment, *Virginia Multi-Use Trails Initiative*, 2022.

³ Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation, *Rails with Trails/Pedestrian Crossing Project Initiation, Coordination, and Review*, 2009.

DCR is currently aware of and monitoring the following Rails with Trails initiatives:

County of Albemarle. In 2022, the County of Albemarle was awarded a Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE) grant through the U.S. Department of Transportation for just over \$2 million to conduct a feasibility study to identify potential alignments for a shared use path from the Blue Ridge Tunnel through Crozet to the City of Charlottesville. VRPA's corridor in this area, which extends from Doswell to Clifton Forge, is 164.22 miles and is not under consideration as recreational uses are restricted in the ROW that VRPA purchased from CSX.

Roanoke County. Norfolk Southern is working with Roanoke County and VRPA to examine the feasibility of a rail trail connecting the Roanoke River Greenway to Montgomery County; this study began in 2022 and is expected to run through 2023. Roanoke County plans to follow the DRPT Report 404 process once the feasibility study is complete.

City of Franklin and the Town of Courtland. Staff were contacted regarding potential interest in a trail on the discontinued NS rail line between the City of Franklin and the Town of Courtland. This 10-mile segment is part of a larger 53-mile segment discontinued in 2014 that could fill a gap in the statewide Beaches to Bluegrass Trail in Southampton and Brunswick counties. The Beaches to Bluegrass Trail is a shared-use path and multi-use trail intended to connect communities between the Virginia Beach oceanfront and Cumberland Gap and will provide southern Virginia residents and visitors with increased opportunities to walk, bike, and ride horseback.

Shenandoah Valley Rail Trail. Staff have been contacted several times regarding the proposed Shenandoah Valley Rail Trail, including from VDOT, Virginia Cooperative Extension, and the Shenandoah Valley Rail Trail Exploratory Partnership, an 18-member coalition of towns, counties, planning district commissions and several nonprofits who share a vision of a multi-use Shenandoah Valley Rail Trail, regarding the desire of some constituencies to develop rail with trail along this corridor. However, due to the early stage of this project, the DRPT Report 404 process has yet to be initiated.

Virginia Outdoors Plan

The Virginia Outdoors Plan (VOP) is Virginia's comprehensive outdoor recreation plan, or Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP)⁴, and is required by the Land and Water Conservation Act of 1965 to ensure DCR's eligibility for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), a grant program administered by the DCR on behalf of the U.S. National Park Service (NPS).

The NPS distributes apportionments from this program to state agencies and localities each year and is the authorizing body when approving applications from DCR on behalf of the state and local applicants. These funds are distributed as a match reimbursable grant process and require a 50/50 match for park development and to protect lands in perpetuity for public outdoor recreation.

⁴ U.S. Department of the Interior National Park Service. *Land and Water Conservation Fund State Assistance Program Federal Financial Assistance Manual*, Volume 71, 2021. <https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/recreational-planning/document/lwcf-requirements.pdf>

The VOP must be updated every five years and aims to organize many topics in a usable resource for planners throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia to consider multiple dimensions of public recreation in proposed parklands. It provides state agencies and localities with the information they need when preparing competitive grant applications. Efforts are underway to move the VOP to a digital platform to enhance audiences' ability to utilize the plan and its data.

The VOP will incorporate input from regional planning districts, other state agencies, and STAC in the next update, published in FY24. A description of the suggestions and key priorities provided by the Committee is presented in the Committee Program Report in the following pages.

Recreational Trails Program Grant Round

The Recreational Trails Program (RTP) is a Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) federal reimbursement program utilizing Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act funds for building and rehabilitating trails and trail-related facilities. It is administered at the state level by the DCR. It is one of the only grant programs to fund both new trail construction and existing trail maintenance and amenities. Historically, trail maintenance and amenity projects have not competed well against new trail construction projects in the open RTP grant rounds.

DCR Planning and Recreation Resources (PRR) staff managing grants and trails have received feedback from localities and nonprofits about the need for trail maintenance funding. In response, the DCR split eligibilities for the 2023 RTP grant round, with only projects proposing trail maintenance, repair, and amenities on existing land and water trails eligible for funding consideration.

This maintenance and amenity round was very well received by potential applicants, with the DCR receiving 25 applications via email after announcement of the grant round and posting materials was made in the 1-2 months ahead of the application deadline.

Moving forward, the DCR plans to alternate eligibility with new trail construction eligible in even years and trail maintenance and amenities eligible in odd years. Funding available in the latest round was \$1.4 million, and applicants will receive notification in September and October 2023.

The next grant round will be in the spring of 2024.

Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT)

State Trails Office

The State Trails Office is housed within the VDOT Division of Local Assistance (LAD) and Transportation and Mobility Planning (TMPD). An allocation of \$800,000 was made for the establishment of this office, as well as for the development of the Statewide Trails Plan and Information Clearinghouse or Trails Resource Hub.

As part of the offices' creation, the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) allocated three staff positions. VDOT initially decided to fill two positions in a matrixed setting, with one position in TMPD and the other in LAD. After considering additional needs for the office and complimentary skill sets, the third position will be recruited.

As directed by the General Assembly, the State Trails Office has the following initial tasks:

- Develop a state trails plan and state trails information clearinghouse, consistent with recommendations in the January 2022 Report of Virginia Multi-Use Trails Initiative⁵
- Coordinate with the STAC and the Department of Conservation and Recreation

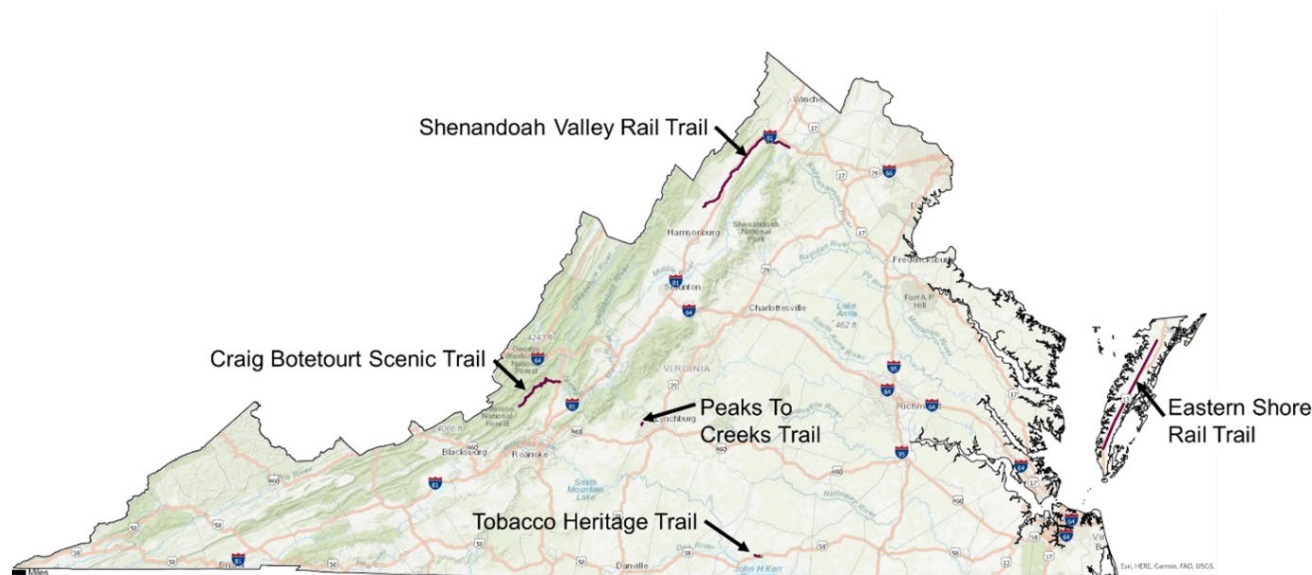
Both tasks identified above are in the scoping phase, with procurement of consulting services complete and public outreach upcoming for the state trails plan. Data gathering to inform the development of the information clearinghouse is also underway. More information on the State Trails Office can be found on their website⁶.

Priority Trails

In 2022 the General Assembly considered the funding needs for five specific trails⁷, which were championed by various members of the General Assembly. These priority trails are as follows:

- Shenandoah Valley Rail Trail
- Craig Botetourt Scenic Trail
- Tobacco Heritage Trail
- Peaks to Creeks Trail
- Eastern Shore Rail Trail

Figure 1. Priority Trails



Source: Virginia Department of Transportation

Initially, \$1 million per trail was allocated by the CTB, from the \$89 million the General Assembly directed towards the State Trails Office, to support project scoping, ROW acquisition, and construction planning. At the

⁵ Office of Intermodal Planning and Investment, *Virginia Multiuse Trails Initiative*, 2022.

⁶ Virginia Department of Transportation, *Virginia State Trails Office*, https://www.virginiadot.org/programs/virginia_state_trails_office.asp.

⁷ Virginia Department of Transportation, *Multi-Use Trails Funding State Trails Office*, https://www.ctb.virginia.gov/resources/2022/sept/pres/15_multi-use_trails_-_trails_office_2.pdf.

April 2023 CTB meeting, initial development costs for each trail were presented. Next steps include completing scope validation, schedules, and cost estimates and determining preliminary engineering and environmental review requirements.

Transportation Alternatives Program

VDOT also administers the federal reimbursement-based Transportation Alternatives Program, which occurs every two years and funds projects that expand non-motorized travel choices, such as pedestrian and bicycle facilities. The 2022 State Budget directed that the CTB set aside \$7,000,000 in FY23 and \$7,000,000 in FY24 from funds received for the Transportation Alternatives Program pursuant to 23 USC 133(h) for regional multi-use trails⁸. The \$14 million was allocated to 16 trail projects, with priority given to new regional trails, projects that improve connectivity of existing trail networks, and those that further geographic diversity in trail location.

External Initiatives

Collaborating for Trails Geospatial Data

First identified as a recommendation in the 2018 VOP, the need remains for a central clearinghouse of recreational trails data to support closing statewide gaps and creating linkages between communities. Previous efforts have relied on land managers or government agency staff to supply the data, but quality and consistency varied due to staff capacity, unfamiliarity with technology, and access to technological resources. Previous and current recreational trail data efforts are below:

- 2009-Virginia Tech Trails Inventory
- 2013-VOP Mapper Update
- 2018-VOP Mapper Update
- 2020-VDCR Trails Collaboration Page⁹ (developed by ESRI)
- 2022-DCR Regional Trails Map

Feedback from these efforts has highlighted the importance of involving regional representation early in database design to develop agreed-upon data standards and definitions, providing skills training, and developing a product that is easy to use and available to users who access the free version of the ArcGIS online software. The development of a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) amongst regional Planning Districts, other contributing partners and technical experts, and state agencies including the DCR and VDOT, may be explored that defines partner roles and responsibilities for keeping data current.

Many local governments submit data to OpenStreetMap US, a nonprofit that accepts volunteer data submissions to support a free, open-source map. Through its Trails Stewardship Initiative, OpenStreetMap US is leading efforts to support responsible mapping of trails on recreational land in the United States¹⁰. Working within existing crowd-sourced platforms and utilizing new technology may offer a solution for long-term maintenance of a complicated, often changing dataset that is a low priority for local governments.

⁸ Commonwealth of Virginia Legislative Information System, *State Budget 2022 Special Session I Budget Bill – HB30 (Chapter 2)*, <https://budget.lis.virginia.gov/item/2022/2/HB30/Chapter/1/452/>

⁹ ArcGIS Hub, *DCR Trails Concept Site*, <https://trails-vdcr.hub.arcgis.com>

¹⁰ OpenStreetMap US, *Trail Stewardship*, <https://www.openstreetmap.us/our-work/trails>

A remaining unknown is how state datasets will interact with the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) Trail Explorer. The USGS Nationwide Digital Trails dataset, developed in response to the U.S. Department of Interior (DOI) vision to expand recreational opportunities on the nation's public lands, is part of the USGS Transportation data theme and can be downloaded from the National Map Viewer and viewed in the USGS Trail Explorer. USGS aggregates trail data from authoritative federal and state sources, where available, to be included in the USGS Nationwide Digital Trails Dataset. USGS trail dataset uses schema based on the Federal Geographic Data Committee's Federal Trail Data Standards, scheduled to be finalized by the end of 2023.

Land Conservation and Greenways Conference

From April 25-27, 2023, 275 people gathered in Harrisonburg, VA, for the seventh annual Land Conservation and Greenways Conference hosted by Virginia's United Land Trusts (VaULT). The trails track included sessions on planning and developing urban and regional trail networks, the life cycle of trails, partnerships, placemaking, and remediation. A roundtable session explored creating linear park/trail experiences

Agritourism Conference

From March 28-30, 2023, 90 people gathered in Blacksburg, VA, to learn how trails, main streets, and agritourism complement each other as part of successful entrepreneurial economic development. Tours of businesses across the road from the Huckleberry trailhead at Heritage Community Park and Natural Area reinforced how these partners cooperate and benefit from each other. The conference highlighted how a trail system can promote tourism, provide economic opportunities, revitalize forgotten spaces and increase equitable access to destinations.

Committee Progress Report

The State Trails Advisory Committee (STAC) met twice during Fiscal Year (FY) 2023. The first meeting was held virtually on October 27, 2022, and the second meeting was held in person at the VaULT Land and Conservation Greenways Conference on April 26, 2023. Holding one virtual meeting each year ensures participation from across the state.

October 2022 STAC Meeting

The October 2022 STAC meeting hosted 76 attendees. It included updates on VDOT's State Trails Office and related funding, the VDOT State Trail Plan, and the feasibility study for the Dahlgren Railroad Heritage Trail. Staff from the Chesapeake Conservancy, a nonprofit organization focused on the conservation and restoration of the natural and cultural resources of the Chesapeake Bay watershed, provided information on the proposed Chesapeake National Recreation Area. Former Virginia Deputy Secretary of Transportation Nick Donohue spoke about the Commonwealth Transportation Board, which is charged with allocating funding for multi-use trails.

A portion of the STAC meeting was also dedicated to discussing STAC members' feedback on the VOP and continuing the dialogue between a diverse group of partners and DCR staff that began primarily in FY22. Members reviewed and ranked the prioritization of the 2018 VOP recommendations and provided the DCR with new recommendations and clarifications to help the DCR staff prioritize future work. In doing so, they identified the following needs for prioritization in the 2023 VOP:

- Put attention towards completing long-distance, priority trails in Virginia, i.e., the East Coast Greenway;
- Emphasize the importance and inclusion of natural surface, sustainable multiuse public trails, especially in parks;
- Build relationships between DCR and the VDOT State Trails Office;
- Identify mechanisms to put in place so STAC can be a resource for the formation and structure of the VDOT State Trails Office;
- Conduct a needs assessment that puts a price on needed maintenance for trails, as well as what it will cost to build all the proposed routes;
- Develop a comprehensive map of current and proposed trails; and
- Take a fresh look at the trails program's strategic plan from an accessibility and equal opportunity lens, neighboring properties.

April 2023 STAC Meeting

Over 50 people attended the STAC meeting in Harrisonburg, VA, on April 26. VDOT staff provided an update on the State Trails Office, and STAC members had an opportunity to share comments regarding the proposed state trails plan. This plan will be complimentary to the VOP and comments STAC members made to VDOT at the meeting may also inform needs identified in the VOP. These comments included:

- Define trails so different types of trails, not just shared-use paths, are included.
- Define how linear shared-use paths (spokes) connect to trails systems within land units (hubs).
- Do not use length as a criterion for defining a regional trail, as that may exclude some critical short connections.

- Break down silos that exist between agencies.
- A survey provided by VDOT asks participants to identify their user type, and they can only check one, when many users take advantage of different modes of travel.
- How will the STAC members work with and inform the VDOT State Trails Office?
- A good role for the VDOT State Trails Office could be promoting and funding pilot projects to expand the use of sustainable materials.

A project manager with Alta Planning & Design provided information on sustainable materials for trail construction. Their presentation discussed how innovative projects incorporating sustainable materials may provide diverse benefits, including helping advance technologies and cost-effectiveness and producing more competitive projects to apply for federal funds.

Several panelists described sensory trails they helped develop at Sky Meadows State Park and Pulaski High School, which provide a series of experiences along a route designed to engage different senses and immerse people of all abilities in a multi-sensory journey. Some outcomes panelists highlighted from their work included:

- The trail gave numerous chances for extracurricular activities to different classes in the school.
- Students are constantly discovering new ways to enhance the trail.
- The project fulfilled various learning competencies that were needed.
- For a few students with disabilities, this was their initial experience of getting close to nature.
- Students who took responsibility for specific aspects of trail advancement could put those skills on their resumes.

Four speakers discussed challenges and best practices for navigating water regulations that can add significant costs to trail projects. For example, the engineering for a project near Dutch Gap that included 5,065 linear feet of stone trail, 3,283 feet of boardwalk, and 322 feet of floating boardwalk required civil engineering design, geotechnical borings, wetland and Waters of the United States (WOTUS) delineations, avoidance of threatened and endangered species, Resource Protection Area determination, a Phase 1 Archeological Survey, a water quality impact assessment, a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Joint Permit Application, and No Rise Certification.

Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) staff provided information on the Virginia Stormwater Management Act and Chesapeake Bay Protection Act requirements, both of which can be enforced by local governments. A copy of a DEQ memo developed for the Southwest Regional Recreation Authority to help determine if a permit is needed was shared.

After an update from the Virginia Trails Alliance, a coalition advocating for quality trail systems that benefit all citizens and visitors of the Commonwealth of Virginia, and an update on DCR's grant rounds for the state and local LWCF, Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership Program, and Trail Access grants, the Committee recognized that multiple groups were working toward the same goal without always working together. Future discussions will be helpful in this area. A follow-up survey will be administered, and its results will be discussed at the next STAC meeting.

Future STAC Meetings

The next STAC meeting will be held virtually in October 2023. It will be followed by an in-person meeting in May 2024 at the next Land Conservation and Greenways Conference in Fredericksburg, VA.

Conclusion

The State Trails Advisory Committee (STAC) was first established in 2015 in accordance with the requirements of [§ 10.1-204.1](#) to assist the Commonwealth in developing and implementing a statewide system of attractive, sustainable, connected, and enduring trails. Since that time, the role of trails has continued to evolve. In this last reporting year, as evidenced in the preceding Staff and Committee reports, numerous initiatives have been undertaken, resulting in significant financial, staff, and advocacy investments in Virginia trails, with multiple agencies working toward establishing new trails and filling gaps in existing trail networks.

The STAC met once virtually and once in person in FY23. STAC members provided recommendations to be included in the Virginia Outdoors Plan 2023 update. Commonwealth staff supported trail development through the Recreation Trails, Rails-with-Trails, and Transportation Alternatives programs. As the VDOT State Trails Office progresses on the state trails plan and data clearinghouse, DCR will continue to provide guidance and help coordinate partners. DCR also recommends surveying the Committee to determine the best way to move forward in collaboration with the State Trails Office.