

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

# 2024 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  
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## **Acronyms**

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**CTB** – Commonwealth Transportation Board

**DCR** – Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation

**FHWA** – Federal Highway Administration

**FY** – Fiscal Year

**LAD** – Local Assistance Division

**LWCF** – Land and Water Conservation Fund

**NPS** – U.S. National Park Service

**PRR** – Planning and Recreation Resources Division

**RTP** – Recreation Trails Program

**SCORP** – Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan

**SOP** – Standard Operating Procedure

**STAC** – State Trails Advisory Committee

**STO** – State Trails Office

**TMPD** – Transportation and Mobility Planning Division

**VDOT** – Virginia Department of Transportation

**VOP** – Virginia Outdoors Plan

**VPRA** – Virginia Passenger Rail Authority

## Preface

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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) 2024, including progress for current and future plans for a statewide system of attractive, sustainable, connected, and enduring trails.

The first section of the report will cover the progress of the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) and DCR 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 FY24.

# Staff Progress Report

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## 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).

The STAC was first established in 2015; since that time, other bodies, including the State Trails Office within the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) and the Virginia Passenger Rail Authority (VPRA), have become involved. Each agency's role in trail development and management continues to evolve as specific responsibilities are identified. VPRA was established in 2020 to "promote, sustain, and expand the availability of passenger and commuter rail service in the Commonwealth."<sup>1</sup> 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 Initiative.<sup>2</sup>
- Coordinate with the STAC and the DCR.

## Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR)

### *Virginia Outdoors Plan*

The Virginia Outdoors Plan (VOP) is Virginia's Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP)<sup>3</sup>, 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.

The VOP must be updated every five years, as required by the Land and Water Conservation Act. It aims to organize many topics into a usable resource for planners throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia to consider multiple dimensions of public recreation in proposed parklands. It also provides state agencies and localities with the information they need when preparing competitive grant applications.

The 2024 VOP will be presented in a digital format to enhance audiences' ability to utilize the plan and its data. The next update, which is anticipated to be published during Fiscal Year 2025, will incorporate input from

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

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

<sup>3</sup> 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>

regional planning districts, other state agencies, and STAC.

### *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 round. DCR Planning and Recreation Resources (PRR) staff managing grants and trails received feedback from localities and nonprofits about the need for trail maintenance funding. In response, the DCR is alternating eligibility with new trail construction eligible in even years and trail maintenance and amenities eligible in odd years.

For the 2024 RTP grant round, \$2.1 million in funding was available to support construction projects and twenty-nine applications were received. The following projects received RTP grants:

- **Creepier Trail Bridge Rehabilitation**, Town of Abingdon, \$236,630.54
- **Lehigh Portland Park Motorized Trail System**, Family Off-Road Riders of Prince William County, \$637,887.58
- **Little Fork Episcopal Church Interpretive & Recreational Trail**, Little Fork Episcopal Church, \$168,780
- **Pollocks Branch Trail Bridge**, City of Charlottesville, \$307,639.69
- **Roanoke River Blueway: Memorial Bridge Access Point**, City of Roanoke Parks and Recreation Department, \$331,652.64
- **Sunset Park Natural Surface Trails**, City of Waynesboro, \$241,463.10
- **Wolf Creek Greenway Accessible Restroom Facility**, Town of Vinton, \$177,217.78

The next grant round will be in the spring of 2025.

### **Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT)**

#### *State Trails Office*

The State Trails Office (STO) 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 and 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 which include the program manager, administrator, and the program coordinator.

As directed by the General Assembly, the STO 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 Initiative<sup>4</sup>
- Coordinate with the STAC and the Department of Conservation and Recreation

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<sup>4</sup> Office of Intermodal Planning and Investment, *Virginia Multiuse Trails Initiative*, 2022.



The first phase of the Statewide Trails Plan is under review and awaiting final approval before being made public. The second phase of the plan is currently underway and is expected to be completed by fall 2024.

The initial data collection of multiuse trails to inform the development of the Resource Hub is complete. Approximately 1500 miles of existing and 3000 miles of planned multiuse trails from local, regional, and state partners across the state. Data collection for all other types of trails is scheduled to start in early fall and be complete by winter this year. The public facing interactive trails database for the Resource Hub is projected to be finalized by early next year.

The development of context-sensitive trail design guidelines and specifications for a wide variety of trail types across the Commonwealth is also underway. Staff are developing the scope and identifying VDOT divisions, other state agencies, and potential external partners who will participate in the process.

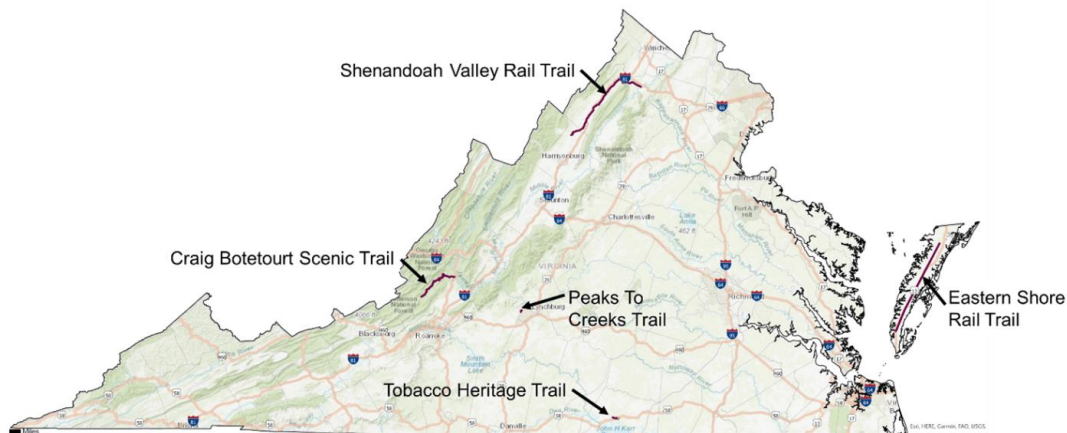
The STO will continue to coordinate and collaborate with DCR and STAC members as projects progress.

### Priority Trails

In 2022, the General Assembly considered the funding needs for five specific trails<sup>5</sup>. 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

The Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) initially allocated up to \$1 million per trail to support project scoping, ROW acquisition, and construction planning. At the April 2023 CTB meeting, initial costs for each of the five trails were presented. The STO has completed validation of cost estimates for four of the five trails, except

<sup>5</sup> 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](https://www.ctb.virginia.gov/resources/2022/sept/pres/15_multi-use_trails_-_trails_office_2.pdf).

for the Shenandoah Valley Rail Corridor, for which a corridor assessment study is currently underway. To date, the CTB has allocated additional funding to complete construction of the Tobacco Heritage Trail and the Peaks to Creeks Trail, complete sections of the Craig Botetourt Scenic Trail and the Eastern Shore Rail Trail.

### *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 trails<sup>6</sup>The \$14 million was allocated to 18 trail projects, with priority given to new regional trails, projects improving the connectivity of existing trail networks, and those furthering geographic diversity in trail location.

## **Committee Progress Report**

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The State Trails Advisory Committee (STAC) met twice during Fiscal Year (FY) 2024. The first meeting was held virtually on October 24, 2023. The second was held in person at the Virginia United Land Trusts' (VaULT) Land and Conservation Greenways Conference in Fredericksburg on May 15, 2024. Holding one virtual meeting each year allows broader participation.

### **October 2023 STAC Meeting**

The October 2023 STAC meeting hosted 19 members and 6 DCR staff. The meeting included updates on VDOT's State Trails Office (STO), the STO website, the State Trails Plan, and the work of the consultant conducting the statewide survey. The STO reported on changes to the state trails definition to encompass a wider variety of skills. Further the STO reported on future public engagement forums and a final step of small focus groups.

Survey feedback for the Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) was discussed. The SOP addresses policies, procedures, and roles to help guide the future of STAC. Further discussion was planned for the Spring 2024 meeting, and specific proposals will also be discussed at that time.

### **April 2024 STAC Meeting**

Over 50 people attended the STAC meeting in Fredericksburg on May 15; 14 of the attendees were STAC members. VDOT staff introduced new staff and provided an update on the State Trails Plan and the Trails Resource Hub, which is a resource site for all types of trails in Virginia. VDOT staff also presented information on trail design and cost guidelines, including context-sensitive design guidelines.

Following VDOT's updates, DCR staff and several STAC volunteers facilitated two breakout sessions. In the first, attendees were separated into seven groups to discuss topics related to revising sections of the SOP that were previously highlighted by membership discussion. Those topics were the demographics of the STAC membership, the number of meetings per year, and the formation of subcommittees. Each group was assigned a topic to discuss and then reported back to the general attendees about the discussion.

Key findings from these discussions included:

- Exploring ways to be inclusive of a broader range of trail user groups, such as people with varying levels

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<sup>6</sup> 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/>

of ability, youth, the agricultural and farming community, industry representatives, tribal groups, and regional stakeholders.

- The number of meetings seems adequate; however, additional meetings may be helpful based on STAC priorities and needs. These additional meetings could be held outside of DCR-facilitated events.
- Supporting the formation of subcommittees with STAC members as chairs. These subcommittees should meet and communicate independently between STAC meetings, reporting their outcomes as part of STAC meetings and including these outcomes in the annual report.
- Identifying the key focus areas for subcommittees, which might include trails education, legislation, and funding opportunities.

These key findings were noted as being important as they contribute to the STACs future success by ensuring inclusivity, improving meeting efficiency, enhancing specialized focus, and providing strategic direction. Implementing these findings can lead to more effective operations, better stakeholder engagement, and ultimately more successful trail projects and initiatives.

Based on these discussions and previous feedback on the SOP, the revised draft will be voted on at the STAC meeting in Fall 2024.

Breakout groups were also tasked with selecting key focus areas for the coming year from the list of STAC legislative priorities. Each group reported back to the main body, presenting their chosen focus areas and explaining their rationale.

The priorities from the legislation that the group selected were:

- options to close the gaps in a statewide 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
- strategies to encourage and create linkages between communities and open space
- strategies to foster communication and networking among trail stakeholders

Items with the highest support were related to funding, communication and networking. Discussion noted that funding is foundational because it directly impacts the ability to develop and maintain trails. Communication was also noted as important as it ensures that stakeholders are informed and engaged, fostering support and transparency. Finally, networking builds the collaborative relationships necessary for effective planning, resource sharing, and implementation. Prioritizing these areas will help STAC address critical needs and support the successful realization of trail system goals.

At the conclusion of the breakout group discussions, plans were made for the Fall STAC meeting, which is expected to include an update from the VDOT State Trails Office, a vote on the finalized Standard Operating Procedure, and further definition of the subcommittees, including their purpose, needs, and next steps in their

formation.

### Future STAC Meetings

The next STAC meeting will be held virtually in the fall of 2024 and will be followed by an in-person meeting in the spring of 2025. Spring meetings are held in conjunction with the Land Conservation and Greenways Conference.

### Conclusion

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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 financial, staff, and advocacy investments in Virginia trails, with multiple agencies working toward establishing new trails and filling gaps in existing trail networks.

Commonwealth staff supported trail development through the Recreation Trails and Transportation Alternatives programs. As the VDOT State Trails Office progresses on the state trails plan and other initiatives, DCR will continue to provide guidance and lead coordination with them and other partners.