

Date: November 9, 2007

To: Senator Emmett Hanger, Chairman  
Joint Subcommittee to Study Long-Term Funding Sources for  
the Purchase of Development Rights to Preserve Open-Space  
Land and Farmlands

From: Northern Virginia Park Directors that have acknowledged  
support of this as of the date of this memo are listed below.  
More Directors may be added to the list of signatures in the  
coming weeks.

Michael McCarty – City of Fairfax	Paul Gilbert – No.Va. Regional Park Auth.
Cindy Roeder – Town of Herndon	Larry Butler – Reston Association
Jay Ellington – Prince William County	Cathy Salgado – Town of Vienna

Subject: New Funding Sources for Northern Virginia Parkland  
Acquisition

We would like to express our gratitude to your study group for meeting with many directors of area park agencies on August 30, 2007 at Algonkian Regional Park. We believe it was an excellent discussion on park needs in Northern Virginia and potential funding mechanisms to assist with parkland acquisition. This memorandum is intended to follow up on some of the ideas discussed at that meeting. We hope that these ideas can be reflected in the final report produced by your committee.

#### **Need for Northern Virginia Parkland**

In a public opinion poll recently conducted in Northern Virginia, 59 percent of the public were very supportive, and 80 percent were somewhat to very supportive, of purchasing land to preserve open space and natural areas. This was also the park-related activity that the public was most willing to support with their tax dollars.<sup>1</sup>

Based on the findings of the 2006 *Virginia Outdoors Survey* (VOS), the top most popular outdoor activities in the region include walking for pleasure, visiting historic sites, visiting natural areas, swimming, sunbathing and beach use, fishing, picnicking, using a playground and boating. In support of the finding that access to recreational waters is the most needed facility, four of the top 10 activities are water dependent—swimming, sunbathing and beach use, fishing and boating. The second most needed facilities identified in the survey were trails.

The types of open spaces available for parkland acquisition vary greatly based on their location within the region. However, every community in Northern Virginia has a need for more parkland. In the more urban communities, park and trail interconnectivity is a key interest, as we look for ways to have recreation and transportation alternatives that are less dependent on automobiles. In the outer suburbs, there are still large parcel properties

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<sup>1</sup> Leisure Vision Park Needs Survey of 1,000 households in Loudoun County, Fairfax City and Falls Church City. Commissioned by the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority, 2007.

available that need to be acquired today if we are going to have adequate public parkland in the future. Water access and historic sites are of the highest priority, since the number of such sites is limited, and the public benefit of preserving such sites is so high.

### **Parkland Funding Suggestions:**

Based on the dialog we had with the committee on August 30<sup>th</sup>, the following are some of the most promising initiatives that could expand the funding available for parkland acquisition.

### **Modify Conservation Tax Credit**

The conservation tax credit is the most effective tool the Commonwealth has for preserving open space. As effective as this tool has been, it does not give conservation-minded landowners an incentive to donate their land for public parkland or to donate public access trail easements across their land. The incentive is not there because under the current tax credit, landowners get the same 40% tax credit for the value of conservation easements, donation and/or bargain sales, whether it has public access or not. To encourage the donation of parkland and trail access easements, a 60% tax credit could apply to properties donated for public parkland, or for the portion of a property with a public access trail easement that furthers the trail's goals in the local Comprehensive Plan. This measure has tremendous potential to encourage expansion of trail systems and public parkland.

### **New Funding for Riparian Parkland**

Where the water meets the land is the most important place for public parkland. River and stream corridors offer the kind of linear parks that lend themselves to interconnected trail networks, recreational boating and fishing, as well as watershed protection.

In urban/suburban areas, local water and sewer agencies bill residents and businesses for water and sewer usage. The General Assembly could authorize such agencies and authorities to add a "watershed protection" fee that would be used to acquire public parkland along rivers, streams and reservoirs that are public drinking water sources.

Benefits:

- More parkland in the areas of high population density.
- Improved drinking water quality, thanks to a natural buffer provided by parkland.
- The development of new trails.
- Chesapeake Bay protection.

Authorizing legislation would give local communities another option to fund additional riparian parkland. Few ideas have as much potential to enhance the environment and provide recreation as this one. In both the Virginia Outdoor Survey as well as local park needs surveys trails consistently are ranked as the number one most valued park and recreation facility.

### **New State Park Bond**

The last State Park and Natural Areas Bond was issued in 2002 and is now nearly fully expended. Creating a new State Park Bond, and dedicating some portion of it to a matching grant program to buy local and regional parks that meet priorities identified in the Virginia Outdoors Plan, would be a way for the Commonwealth to leverage its resources. This initiative would help the Commonwealth meet the open space

conservation goals expressed by the Governor. Partnering with local and regional park agencies to acquire land in Northern Virginia could help reduce the deficit in state parkland for Northern Virginia, which is now over 19,000 acres.<sup>2</sup> The partnership model could also reduce the operating cost to the state of having more parkland in Northern Virginia, since local partners could help operate the parks.

### **Tourism**

Tourism is an enormous and growing economic engine for Virginia. Domestic travelers spent nearly \$16.5 billion in Virginia during 2005, and \$17.7 billion in 2006. The 2007 commemoration of Virginia's 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary proved to be the biggest year yet in Virginia's Tourism market.

The driving force of this economic engine is restored historic sites. Many of these sites are owned and operated by local and regional park agencies. Sites like Colvin Run Mill, Aldie Mill, Carlyle House, Sully Plantation, Mt. Zion Church, Ball's Bluff Battlefield, Gadsby's Tavern and many other historic sites make Northern Virginia a hub of historic tourism. The Virginia Outdoor Survey listed visiting historic sites as the second most popular outdoor recreational activity of the public.

In 2006, tourism generated \$706.8 million in state taxes and \$503 million in local tax revenue. To reinvest in this economic engine, the General Assembly could dedicate some percentage of state tourism-related tax revenues. Those funds could be used for expansion and development of "destination parks," like historic sites and other venues that would attract visitors from out-of-state, expanding Virginia's role as a leader in tourism. One way to accomplish this would be to set up a state grant program targeted to the acquisition and restoration of historic sites by public agencies. While historic sites open to the public generated a great deal of revenue in the community from lodging, restaurants and shopping, most historic sites operated at a loss. To meet this public need and reinvest in this important part of the economy, funds from the tourism economy need to be dedicated to the acquisition and restoration of more historic sites.

### **Virginia Resource Authority**

The 2007 General Assembly Session saw the addition of land acquisition as a permitted public amenity for financing by VRA. This is a great new financing opportunity for land acquisition, and the General Assembly is to be commended for this positive move. To enhance the benefit of this measure, the General Assembly could add park infrastructure development to the list of items that can be financed through VRA. With this addition, an agency could not only acquire the land but also put the necessary infrastructure in place to open the land to the public, and do so with one set of financing from VRA.

### **Conclusion**

We believe each of these ideas has great merit and could help the Commonwealth expand open space and public parkland. We commend the work of your study group and thank you for your leadership in this critical issue. We hope that our suggestions will be incorporated into the findings of your study and result in legislation that furthers the cause of open space conservation for the public's benefit and enjoyment.

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<sup>2</sup> Virginia Outdoor Plan, Table IX-3, Parkland surplus/deficit based on 10 acres per 1,000 people.