

Virginia Association for Parks

Championing and advocating for Virginia's parks.

Launched in 1997, the Virginia Association for Parks (VAFP) champions all parks in the Commonwealth. We actively advocate park issues at the local, regional, state, and national level, and seek funds to be directly invested in parks. We passionately pursue dedicated and sustainable funding streams for our parks. Additionally, as a membership-based organization, VAFP offers free technical assistance and training to those who wish to strengthen or form new (park) Friends Groups. We also conduct semi-annual conferences to facilitate collaboration amongst the park community.

2024 LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

**As of January 29, 2024.*

1. Implement sustainable funding for parks.

PROBLEM: Unlike parks in 20 other states, Virginia's parks do not have a *dedicated* source of funding. Operations are funded mostly by the annual statewide (General Fund) budget. Funding appropriations vary from year to year and ample funding is not guaranteed. Long-term operational planning is hindered by the lack of a consistent funding source. The park system funding shortfall has resulted in over \$300 million in deferred maintenance that adds to the inventory of inoperative park infrastructure and compromises the overall visitor experience. The funding situation is especially critical at Breaks Interstate Park in that state appropriations and staffing are not at a level comparable to other state parks with similar facilities.

SOLUTION: [SB 451](#) (Marsden) and [HB 660](#) (Kilgore) would dedicate 5% of the Virginia Corporation Income Tax to state parks. This is not a new fee nor tax, but rather an existing revenue source. This revenue stream would not only provide sustainable funding for our parks, but also make our parks more accessible for diverse populations by eliminating daily visitor parking fees statewide. This is especially helpful for those with a limited income. And it is also equitable in that it does not favor select groups but would instead be available to all visitors.

2. Include Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) conservation officers in the Virginia Law Officers' Retirement System (VaLORS).

PROBLEM: Despite receiving the same police training as other law enforcement (LE) officers and having more responsibilities than some groups who qualify for the VaLORS benefit, DCR Conservation Officers (COs) are not currently included. COs encounter and effectively resolve some of the same incidents as other sworn state and county police officers and sheriff deputies, and hence are entitled to this benefit.

SOLUTION: [HB 1312](#) (Orrock), which recently passed in the House Appropriations Sub-Committee for Compensation and Retirement with a 7-0 uncontested vote, calls for the inclusion of DCR COs in VaLORS moving forward. This will better enable DCR to recruit and retain LE staff and reduce the loss of highly trained LE personnel to other LE agencies that are able to provide earlier retirement due to the risks and physical demands of the job. Passage of this bill will only cover COs hired next fiscal year and not those already in place, thus reducing the bill's impact on the budget. Hopefully this bill will pass in the House Appropriations Committee and have support in the Senate.

3. Support funding for additional park staff positions with increased appropriations.

PROBLEM: The Governor's budget adds funding for only new park positions. But the state park system has been significantly understaffed for many years. A JLARC study identified 601 full-time (FTE) positions needed to manage and administer state parks. The current Mandatory Employment Level (MEL) is 318 positions, which is only 53% of the professional work force needed to operate the park system. As a result, the parks have relied on hundreds of hourly temporary personnel. But due to the low wage scales and lack of benefits, there is constant turnover in these positions resulting in continual operational inefficiencies and additional workload for existing staff.

SOLUTION: While incredibly helpful overall, a sustainable funding source (#1 above) will not enable additional positions, such as project and procurement officers. Only separate legislation authorizing a specific number of new permanent positions will result in solving this ongoing dilemma. No bills have been introduced at this time.

4. Approve funding for all-terrain motorized wheelchairs in parks.

HB 1186 (Tran) supports initial funding to acquire all-terrain motorized wheelchairs that will provide citizens with physical disabilities and mobility limitations access to trails and other natural areas that are not accessible by conventional wheelchairs.

5. Support passage of amendment prohibiting proximity to children by sex offenders.

SB 666 (Diggs) and **HB 1368** (Taylor) close a loophole in current law by adding state parks as an area that prohibits convicted sex offenders of having contact with children.

6. Enable State Parks procurement exception for certain goods.

HB 1523 (Higgins) includes state parks in existing legislation to buy items for resale from local vendors without competitive sealed bidding. This will enable operational efficiencies and support local economies.