

PREPARED BY:



EQUINOX

WITH ASSISTANCE FROM:

Don Owen with Lands Trails & Parks LLC,
Dr. Melissa Weddell, and Andy Williamson

One Trail, by the Hands of Many

The
**VIRGINIA
CREEPER TRAIL**

*A Master Plan to
Guide and Sustain Our Trail*

2022

The VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL MASTER PLAN

WHAT IS THIS PLAN ABOUT?

The primary purpose of this plan is to guide and sustain the Virginia Creeper Trail. To do this, it will assist the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy (the VCTC, or the Conservancy), the non-profit partner to the trail, to envision its work supporting the trail for the next 10-20 years. The Conservancy is the mechanism by which the long term sustainability of the Virginia Creeper Trail is ensured. Critical to the success of this plan is input from the Conservancy's partners.

This plan will look at the VCTC's work through the lens of 5 pillars. It will help prioritize and strategically align the VCTC's work with its partners. This plan was developed by Equinox, a firm specialized in outdoor recreation, based out of Asheville, North Carolina.

WHAT THIS PLAN IS NOT:

Trail and management needs will be assessed, but this will NOT be a prescriptive plan telling trail management partners how to manage their section of their trail. Rather, it will be a partner-driven collaboration on priorities for the trail and how the VCTC can support those priorities.

THE VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL
CONSERVANCY



THE FRIENDS OF
SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA

TRAIL MANAGERS:

U.S. FOREST SERVICE + TOWN OF ABINGDON
+ TOWN OF DAMASCUS

STAKEHOLDERS:

COMMUNITY LEADERS + BUSINESSES + TRAIL ADVOCATES + PARTNERS +
CONSERVATION ORGS. + VOLUNTEERS + WASHINGTON COUNTY

WHO HAS BEEN INVOLVED:

How Partners Were Engaged

In the Summer of 2021, partners and the community were engaged via a survey as the first means of outreach. The consulting team developed individual virtual focus groups around the different topics/pillars of the plan. Routine feedback by the steering committee, advisory committee, and the trail managers was essential.

PILLARS OF THE PLAN



PARTNERSHIPS

STRATEGIZE WITH PARTNERS
FORMALIZED WAYS TO
COLLABORATE & ACCOMPLISH
GOALS



ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

DEVELOP A PLAN TO
STRENGTHEN THE VCTC AS AN
ORGANIZATION & BUILD ITS
CAPACITY TO SUPPORT THE
TRAIL



TRAIL MANAGEMENT

DEVELOP A PLAN WITH
PARTNERS FOR FUTURE
IMPROVEMENTS AND
MANAGEMENT NEEDS AS WELL
AS TRAIL LANDSCAPE
CONSERVATION



MEASURING IMPACT

DEVELOP A STRATEGY TO
PERFORM THE NEXT IMPACT
ANALYSIS



MARKETING, OUTREACH, & DEVELOPMENT

DEVELOP A STRATEGY TO
MARKET THE VCTC & THE
TRAIL AND RAISE AWARENESS
OF THE VCTC'S MISSION

The VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL

A Master Plan to Guide and Sustain Our Trail

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

DCR	Department of Conservation and Recreation
FSWV	Friends of Southwest Virginia
GIS	Geographic Information System
HRSWCD	Holston Rover Soil and Water Conservation District
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MRPDC	Mount Rogers Planning District Commission
PA	Physical Activity
PDR	Purchase of Development Rights
RCP	Regional Conservation Partnership
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
SWVA	Southwest Virginia
USFS	United States Forest Service
VCTC	Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy
VDOT	Virginia Department of Transportation
VEE	Virginia Environmental Endowment
VOF	Virginia Outdoors Foundation

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Steering Committee:

Matt Crum, *VCTC President*
Lisa Quigley, *VCTC Executive Director*
Gavin Blevins, *Town of Damascus/MRPDC*
Link Elmore, *VOF/VCTC*
Matthew Helt, *USFS*
Greg Meade, *The Nature Conservancy/VCTC*
Cliffreda Read, *VCTC*
Jeff VanCleaf, *VCTC*
Idalina Walker, *FSWVA*
Kevin Worley, *Town of Abingdon*
Ed Wright, *USFS*

An Overview of the VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL MASTER PLAN

One Trail, By The Hands Of Many



THE NEXT GENERATION OF THE VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL: GROWING THE VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL CONSERVANCY, PARTNERSHIPS, PROGRAMS AND A VOICE FOR THE TRAIL

This plan provides a vision for the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy to expand into a broader mission and for the trail and its surrounding landscape to receive a level of stewardship realized through intensive collaboration. This plan is built by pillars that address the future needs of the trail, which were defined by many partners and stakeholders and are outlined in the 10-Year Strategic Plan and detailed for each pillar.

This plan is intended to guide the direction of the Conservancy, in-step and supporting its trail management partners, the United States Forest Service and the towns of Abingdon and Damascus. Following is a summary of the pillars of this plan and the major outcomes this plan proposes.



AN OVERVIEW



THE VCTC ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

RESTRUCTURE, STRENGTHEN, AND BUILD CAPACITY FOR THE ORGANIZATION

Grow the Board, expand committees, hire a cadre of staff for regional advocacy & conservation, and develop strong internal nonprofit best management practices & policies..



PARTNERSHIPS

BUILD & STRENGTHEN EXISTING AND NEW PARTNERSHIPS TO SUPPORT THE TRAIL

Formalize partnerships by developing MOU's, cooperative agreements, and recurring partner-supported dedicated funding that will aid the trail and the VCTC's work. Develop partnerships for regional advocacy and conservation.

AN OVERVIEW



TRAIL MANAGEMENT

STEWARD EXISTING & EXPAND TRAIL INFRASTRUCTURE

Repair trestles, improve trailheads & trail road crossings, & implement a comprehensive signage strategy. Create “one-trail” design standards for signage, the trail’s cross section, and other built features to unify the trail.

ENSURE SAFETY IS PARAMOUNT

Ensure safe & regularly monitored trail infrastructure, a means for crowd-sourced reporting of safety issues (via a text/call highlight or trail app), and work with emergency responders to understand & address safety issues.

STEWARD THE NATURAL, CULTURAL, & SCENIC EXPERIENCE OF THE TRAIL

Implement a multi-prong approach to conservation of the trail & its surrounding landscape. Create a Virginia Creeper Trail Coalition and landowner outreach program. Work with local governments to utilize land use planning & governmental programs to protect the landscape of the trail.

BECOME THE CENTRALIZED TRAIL DATA MANAGER

The Conservancy should become the centralized collector, organizer, & manager of data. This can include trail impact data (counts, surveys, etc), trail conditions & maintenance needs, a contact database for all partners, a VCTC donor/member database, geospatial information, collection of historic or archive info, asset inventory, and more.



TRAIL IMPACT

UNDERSTAND & COMMUNICATE THE TRUE IMPACTS THE TRAIL HAS ON THE ECONOMY, HEALTH, & QUALITY OF LIFE OF THE COMMUNITY

Use impact data to guide decision-making with partners. Implement regular trail counts & business impact surveys, as well as, extensive trail intercept surveys that feed into impact studies. Lastly, implement a dual Economic & Health Impact Study that demonstrates the positive impacts the trail has on the community.



MARKETING, COMMUNICATIONS, & OUTREACH

TAKE THE LEAD IN BEING THE COMPREHENSIVE RESOURCE & DISSEMINATOR OF INFORMATION FOR VISITORS

Collaborate with businesses, community, and trail managers to keep information up-to-date. Become the one-stop shop for the visiting public by growing a website and social media presence, creating a trail mobile application that serves as a resource to the trail and trail-related businesses, and expanding distribution of VCTC merchandise. Take the lead in management of trail events (races, etc.) in-step with partners.

RAISE AWARENESS & SUPPORT OF THE TRAIL & THE VCTC BY ENGAGING WITH THE COMMUNITY, DECISION MAKERS, & BUSINESSES

Roll out a clear and comprehensive brand strategy for the VCTC prior to developing other outreach programs. The VCTC should lead the hosting of End of Year Celebrations and a “State of the Trail” report. Launch a trail volunteer/ambassador program and a Trail-Friendly Business Program that incentivizes business engagement and support of the VCTC and the trail.



VA CREEPER TRAIL CONSERVANCY'S DIRECTION

MISSION, VISION, PILLARS, & GOALS

THE PROPOSED MISSION, VISION, AND GOALS THAT FOLLOW WERE DEVELOPED THROUGH EXTENSIVE FEEDBACK FROM THE VCTC BOARD OF DIRECTORS, TRAIL MANAGEMENT PARTNERS, STAKEHOLDERS, AND THIS PLAN'S STEERING COMMITTEE.

MISSION

OF THE VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL CONSERVANCY

To coalesce the synergy of trail managers, the community, and volunteers for a cohesive trail experience. The VCTC will steward, enhance, and maintain a safe and quality experience for the trail through advocacy, centralized communication, a directed trail stewardship strategy, financial support, and by fostering strong partnerships.

VISION

OF THE VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL CONSERVANCY

The Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy unites trail management partners to foster a cohesive, world-class experience that showcases rural Virginia's beautiful natural and agricultural landscapes, its historic trestles, many trail-side amenities, vibrant trail-based businesses, and towns that are essential to its experience.

GOALS & STRATEGIES

FOR THE VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL CONSERVANCY

The following are recommended goals and strategies based on stakeholders feedback, framed under the Pillars of the Plan:



PILLAR

PARTNERSHIPS

GOAL: Build and strengthen existing and new partnerships to support the trail.

STRATEGIES:

- » **COLLABORATE WITH TRAIL MANAGERS AND OTHER PARTNERS ON POLICY, MANAGEMENT, CONNECTIVITY, AND COMMUNICATIONS.** Formalize relationships and consistent policies through MOU's with partners. Examples of future policy decisions could include capacity and group size management, consistent trail specifications (trail width, surface, and signage), etc. Explore the potential for new long-term partnerships, like regional or county trail authorities. Work with regional and state partners to envision long-term connectivity like the statewide Beaches to Bluegrass Trail. Promote the Virginia Creeper Trail connection to other trails and explore opportunities to make other pedestrian/bicycle connections that would benefit the trail and surrounding communities.

- » **BUILD UPON COLLABORATION WITH BUSINESSES.** Explore new and improved ways of working with the business community that supports the trail through reciprocal and beneficial actions that support management and promotion of the trail (See more about this in the Marketing, Outreach, and Development Pillar).
- » **WORK WITH PARTNERS TO DEVELOP COOPERATIVE AGREEMENTS AND COST-SHARE ARRANGEMENTS. THESE CAN BE USED TO FUND VCTC PROGRAMS, STAFF, MAINTENANCE, AND EVENT MANAGEMENT FOR THE TRAIL.** Develop cooperative agreements and explore opportunities to cost share or implement other types of ongoing “fixed” funding that will help the VCTC steward the trail and expand capacity.
- » **BUILD A VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL CONSERVATION COALITION.** Work with local, state, and national partners to prioritize outreach to high-priority landowners for land protection and explore ways that land use planning can help protect the trail.



PILLAR

TRAIL MANAGEMENT

GOAL: Partner to promote trail safety, to steward the trail, and to conserve the trail landscape experience.

STRATEGIES:

- » **STEWARD EXISTING AND EXPAND TRAIL INFRASTRUCTURE.** Develop a comprehensive capital and maintenance plan and a schedule that each identify roles for partners. These should include land managers, the VCTC, and volunteers. (Note: see Appendices for stakeholder survey results and maps displaying infrastructure priorities)
- » **VIGILANCE OF SAFETY FOR TRAIL USERS IS PARAMOUNT.** Ensure that current trail infrastructure is safe and regularly monitored to address safety concerns. Develop a more comprehensive and collaborative approach to emergency response (incidents and safety repairs) with clear roles for partners, improved communications, and education of trail users. (Note: see Appendices for stakeholder survey results)
- » **STEWARD THE NATURAL, CULTURAL, AND SCENIC EXPERIENCE OF THE TRAIL.** Collaborate with trail management partners to protect the trail’s most critical resources including important viewsheds and natural and cultural resources, as well as expand the corridor where needed to protect it from encroachments and provide the best user experience possible.



PILLAR

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

GOAL: Build the VCTC’s board, committees, volunteers, and staffing to support its mission.

STRATEGIES:

- » **RESTRUCTURE, STRENGTHEN, AND BUILD CAPACITY FOR THE ORGANIZATION.** Improve upon board governance and nominating committees, develop working committees, develop a President’s Council, update governance rules and best practices, and expand the volunteer base of the Conservancy.
- » **EXPLORE EVOLVING INTO A LAND TRUST THAT IS A “PASS THROUGH” CONSERVATION ORGANIZATION.** Work with conservation partners to expand conservation of the trail landscape. Focus on community and landowner outreach, and seek partnerships with others to conserve the trail landscape (See more about this in the Trail Management Pillar).
- » **BECOME THE UNIFYING FORCE FOR “ONE TRAIL”.** Become the lead coordinator to assist in management and maintenance, fundraising for trail-wide projects, management of trail-wide data, and coordinate external communications.



PILLAR

GOAL: Understand and communicate the true impacts the trail has on the economy, health, and quality of life of the community.

PILLAR

Use impact data to guide decision making with partners.

STRATEGIES:

- » **DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT A STRATEGY TO ASSESS THE IMPACT OF THE TRAIL.** Work with trail managers and businesses to collect information that will inform this assessment. Intercept surveys, trail counters, and outfitter customer data, can help to holistically tell the story of the trail’s positive impact.



- » **IMPLEMENT MEANS FOR TRAIL COUNTS THAT CAN BE DONE BY THE VCTC AND PARTNERS.** Implement trail counters in phases to collect user counts that can be shared to partners and the public.
- » **COLLECT DATA OBSERVATIONALLY, THROUGH ONLINE RESOURCES, OR VIA BUSINESSES.** This would require the VCTC to build capacity in order to oversee the data collection effort. This data can be used to communicate economic impact, user counts, and quality of life impacts.
- » **IMPLEMENT A LONG-TERM STRATEGY FOR A FULL ECONOMIC AND HEALTH IMPACT STUDY.** Pursue funding for a more comprehensive economic and health impact study that would be overseen by an expert.



PILLAR

MARKETING, OUTREACH, AND DEVELOPMENT

GOAL: Lead the way in advocacy, promotion, communication, and community outreach for the Trail.


STRATEGIES:

- » **TAKE THE LEAD IN BEING THE COMPREHENSIVE RESOURCE AND DISSEMINATOR OF INFORMATION FOR VISITORS.** Maintain the official website and social media platforms for the trail dedicated to providing promotional and non-promotional info for partners and trail users. Continue to build on the resources


provided to visitors. Collaborate with businesses, community, and trail managers to keep information up-to-date and accurate. This includes important info on rules and safety, emergency closures and info, maintenance needs, and other input. *(Note: developing a phone app, improving/streamlining online information, and consistent trailhead information were mentioned by stakeholders)*

- » **RAISE AWARENESS OF THE WORK AND VALUE OF THE TRAIL AND THE VCTC AND ENGAGE WITH THE COMMUNITY.** Build awareness regionally about the value of the trail and the VCTC through consistent branding, communications, and ways to engage. Find ways to engage businesses and landowners adjacent to the trail, and grow the volunteer base. *(Note: stakeholders indicated in the survey their desire for increases in communicated info about the VCTC's meetings and its work).* Work with local municipal, county, and government employees and elected officials to ensure the value of the trail and the VCTC is communicated and that priority needs of the trail are supported. Measure the trail demand and impact, and use this as a key message.
- » **BECOME THE LEAD FUNDRAISER AND FIDUCIARY SPONSOR FOR TRAIL-WIDE PROJECTS.** Take the lead in pursuing funding for trail-wide projects or assist partners with matching funds. Consider implementing stewardship fees to supplement trail maintenance costs. Work with trail owners to seek budgeted public funds and to leverage influence to acquire funding.


TOP TEN CHALLENGES FACING THE TRAIL AND THE VCTC


1. **THE VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL SHOULD BE BETTER UNIFIED AS “ONE TRAIL” FOR BOTH PARTNER AND PUBLIC BENEFIT.**  Implement a role for VCTC to be the unifying “glue” and create a core message of “one trail” to help unify multiple trail management partners, enhance visitor experience by streamlining public information, provide outreach with businesses, and coordinate trail upgrades and data management.


2. **VCTC CAPACITY AND FUNDING NEEDS TO BE EXPANDED.**  While the Conservancy currently receives great accolades for all it does, it is pulled in many directions. In order to address much of what is desired, the VCTC will need to grow significantly through staff, board, working committees, and volunteer time to implement new initiatives.


3. **MULTIPLE TRESTLES NEED TO BE REPAIRED WITH COSTS LIKELY REACHING INTO THE MULTI-MILLIONS.**  To keep the trail open, this needs to be a top priority for trail management partners and VCTC.


4. **THE TRAIL LANDSCAPE EXPERIENCE IS RELATIVELY UNPROTECTED.**  Currently no land trusts are actively working to protect the trail’s landscape and only a third of the trail is protected by adjacent US Forest Service lands. The remaining two-thirds has only a 20 to 80-foot protected corridor. Zoning that allows for incompatible development adjacent to the trail could be detrimental to the trail experience.

5. **VCTC HAS LOW NAME RECOGNITION AMONG THE PUBLIC.**  Most visitors and even some stakeholders are unaware of the role of VCTC. VCTC is in need of a solid brand, significantly promoting what it does and what goals it accomplishes.

6. **TRAIL SAFETY AND MAINTENANCE IS CHALLENGING GIVEN THE NUMBER OF MANAGEMENT PARTNERS INVOLVED AND THE NEED FOR QUICK RESPONSE.**  Efforts to streamline coordination of response time and trail need is imperative. Emergency responders, trail management partners, trail volunteers, and VCTC should have an established feedback loop to quickly address trail maintenance issues and to strategize long-term upgrades to improve emergency response communications.

7. **POSITIVE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL IMPACT OF THE TRAIL IS NOT BEING COMMUNICATED, DUE IN LARGE PART TO LACK OF DATA.**  The existing economic impact data is very outdated. For elected officials, funders, and the public to truly know its value, this information should be updated and expanded and used regularly in communications.

8. **THE TRAIL IS FACING OVERUSE AND THIS INCREASE OF USE HAS NOT BEEN ACCOMPANIED BY AN INCREASE IN MAINTENANCE FUNDING.**  In the trail’s peak season, overuse can diminish the experience. Maintenance of the trail and education to trail users are needed to mitigate these impacts.

9. **TOURISM PROMOTION OF THE TRAIL IS UNCONSOLIDATED.**  There is no organization filling the role as the single entity coordinating public information. Businesses are looking to VCTC to help improve this as it directly impacts their business.

10. **THERE IS A NEED TO FORMALIZE PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN VCTC AND ITS TRAIL MANAGEMENT PARTNERS.**  Current relationships are positive and interactions and collaboration are informal between the VCTC and its partners. Formalizing these relationships would help ensure the long-term sustainability of the Creeper Trail and the success of the Conservancy as it grows.

WHERE DO THESE CHALLENGES & BIG IDEAS GET ADDRESSED IN THE PILLARS OF THE PLAN?

PARTNERSHIPS & CAPACITY



ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE



TRAIL MANAGEMENT








MARKETING, OUTREACH, & DEVELOPMENT



MEASURING IMPACT



TOP TEN BIG IDEAS FOR “ONE TRAIL, BY THE HANDS OF MANY”

- BEGIN AN IMMEDIATE TRANSITION WITHIN VCTC TO BUILD CAPACITY TO SUPPORT THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL MASTER PLAN.**  The top priority should be to increase capacity at the staff (full and seasonal), board, and volunteer levels. To complete any significant part of this plan, this capacity will need to be the major focus.
- DEVELOP A PARTNER COST-SHARE PROGRAM AND COOPERATIVE AGREEMENTS WITH PARTNERS TO SUPPORT THE VCTC’S OPERATIONS—EXPLORE OTHER FIXED REVENUE SOURCES.**  These agreements would create a routine maintenance and/or operations fund, allowing the Conservancy to respond quickly and work with partners to address needs. This program would also include a recreation/stewardship fee, a voluntary donation at businesses (round up to nearest dollar, or opt-out donation), or a small cent tax on tourist-related items (food, beverage, or gear) to help generate revenue to address long-term maintenance needs.
- PRIORITIZE TRESTLES NOW.**  Based on multiple engineering reports, some trestles need immediate repair. Action needs to be taken to ensure the trail is not partially closed due to major safety issues. The future viability of this key economic and tourism driver for SWVA is dependent on the trestles being repaired and maintained.
- POSITION VCTC TO SERVE AS THE CENTRAL HUB FOR “ONE TRAIL.”**  VCTC is the only entity that is devoted entirely to protecting and managing the Virginia Creeper Trail. As the “glue for the trail,” VCTC can become the “one-stop shop” for information about the trail for the public, businesses, and partners. As VCTC’s capacity expands, staff should be go-to liaisons coordinating with the public, businesses, partners, and visitors.
- DEVELOP A TRAIL-WIDE VOLUNTEER STRATEGY.**  Volunteers can address routine maintenance, patrol the trail, provide visitor outreach and education, serve as trail ambassadors, identify and report safety concerns, and develop

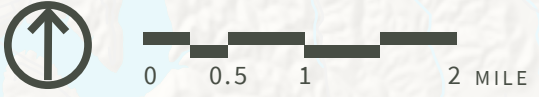
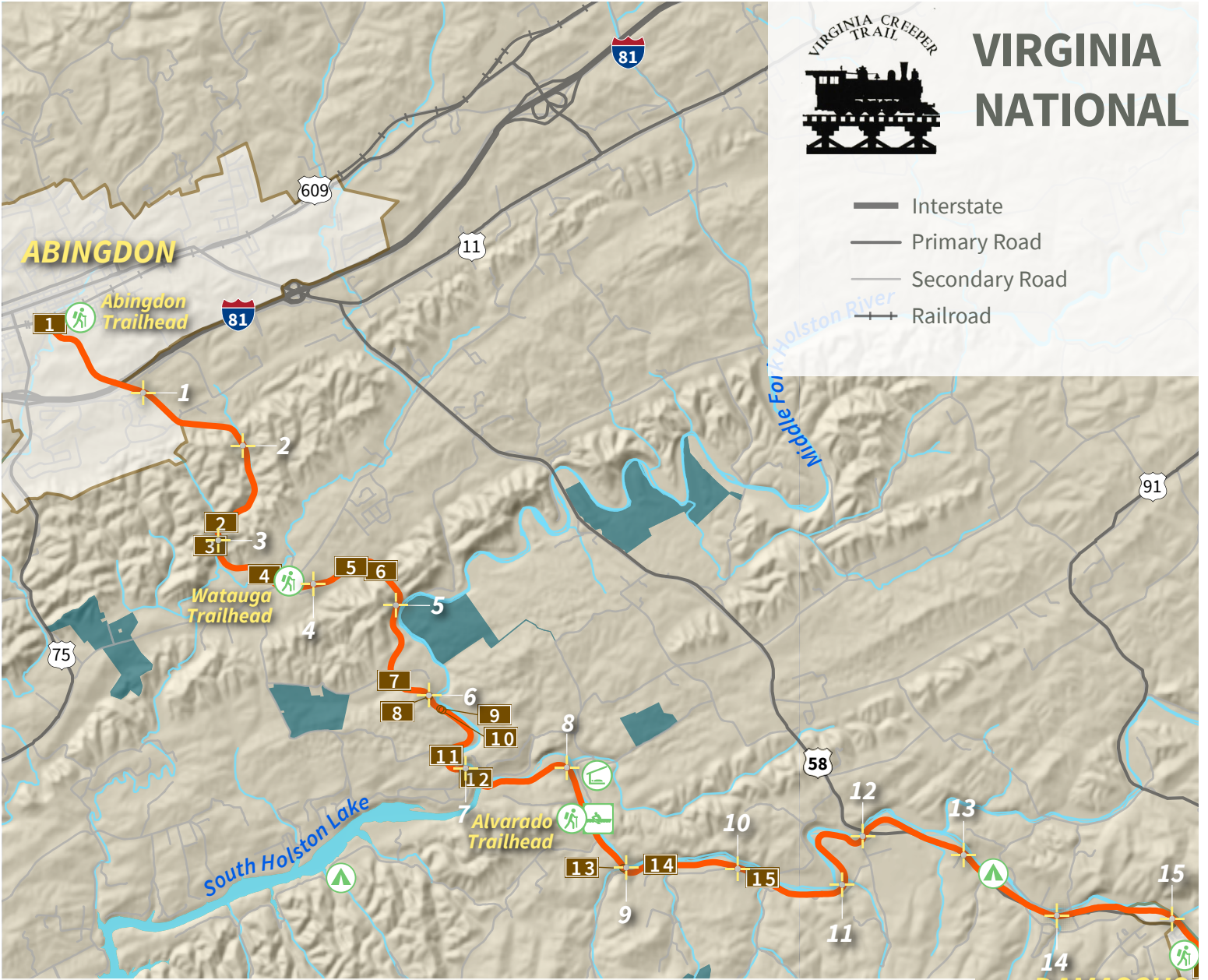
“professional volunteers” and/or working committees to help implement this plan.

- IMPLEMENT FULL BRANDING FOR THE VCTC, WITH THE IDEA THAT IT WILL TRANSITION TO BE THE KEY PUBLIC INFORMATION RESOURCE ON THE TRAIL.**  Branding and the value proposition of the VCTC are needed to fully execute the work. This will be critical for the Conservancy to take the lead in information services for the trail, to gain community support and influence major decision makers, and build awareness of what the VCTC does. All external outreach and marketing should be built on this cornerstone.
- TELL A COMPELLING STORY OF VCTC AND THE TRAIL’S IMPORTANCE.**  Communicate this information annually using trail impact numbers (including economic impacts), major updates on trail initiatives, and major wins for the trail. Early trail impact measurements can be made that will begin to tell this story.
- STANDARDIZE “ONE TRAIL, BY THE HANDS OF MANY” FEATURES ACROSS THE TRAIL FOR CONSISTENCY, SAFETY, AND BRAND REINFORCEMENT.**  Top priority for this includes implementing user experience upgrades, including signage, surface, width, and amenities.
- BUILD A VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL CONSERVATION COALITION TO IMPLEMENT PROTECTION OF THE LARGER TRAIL LANDSCAPE.**  This coalition can be made of partners like land trusts who can help conserve the trail, local governments who can support through land use planning, and community partners who can help in messaging to the local community. Early landowner outreach should concentrate on large acre/high conservation priority parcels identified in the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservation Plan. *A key challenge will be to find long-term partners willing to hold easements.*
- BUILD A TRAIL COALITION OF REGIONAL PARTNERS WITH STRONG SUPPORT FROM THE COUNTY, ELECTED OFFICIALS, AND STATEWIDE INFLUENCERS, BEGINNING INFORMALLY AND GROWING INTO FORMALIZED PARTNERSHIPS OVER TIME.**  This partnership can look at ways that the towns, Washington County and/or the Mount Rogers Planning District, or others can apply for funding that is only available to local governments and leverage state or federal funding. Build coalitions with other trail partners to advocate for joint funding. Other opportunities like the formation of a Regional or County-based Trail Authority should be explored.











VIRGINIA NATIONAL







- Interstate
- Primary Road
- Secondary Road
- Railroad

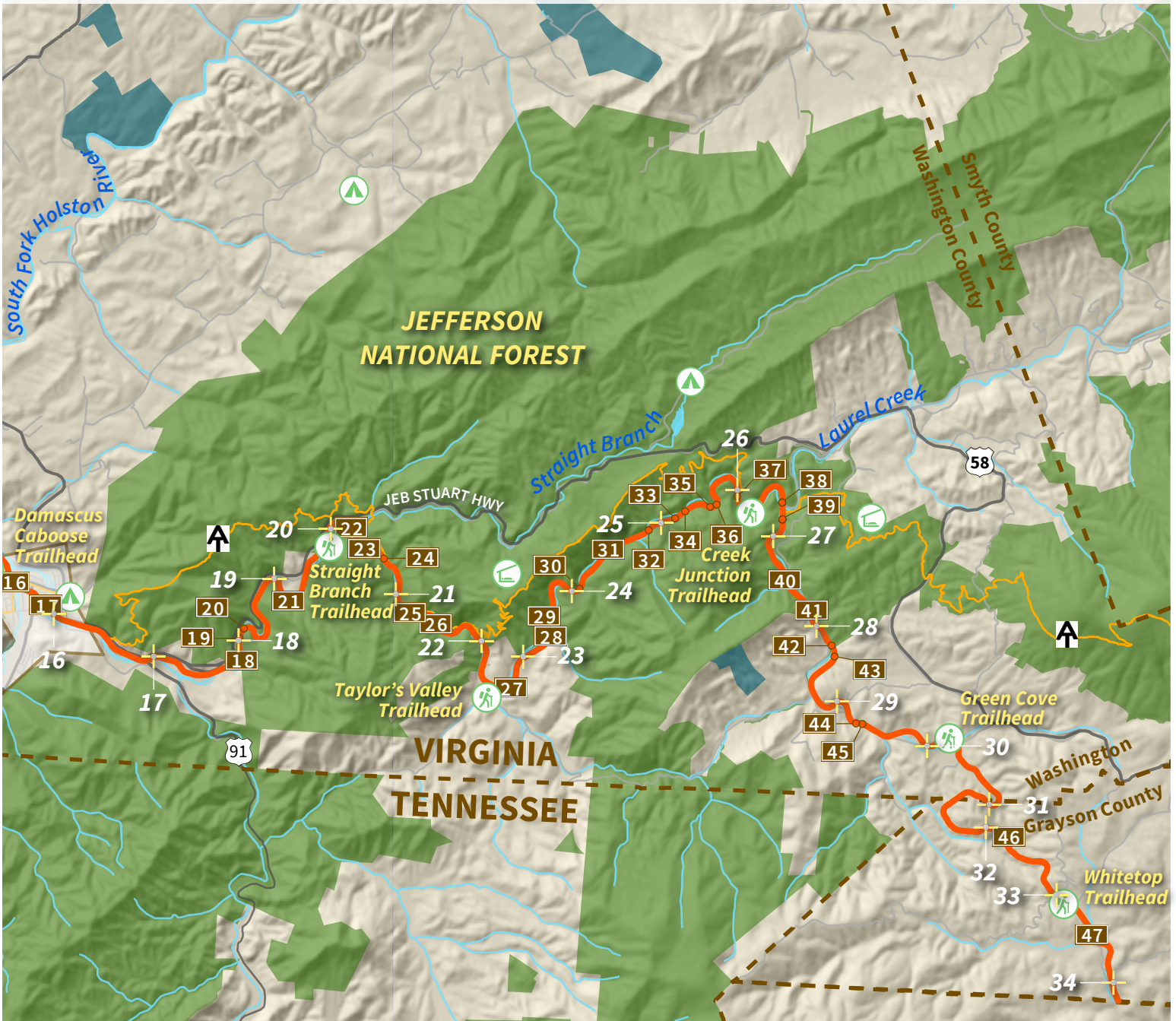


CREEPER RECREATION TRAIL

-  National Forest Land
-  Conservation Easement Land
-  Waterbody
-  River

-  Virginia Creeper National Recreation Trail
-  Appalachian National Scenic Trail
-  Abingdon or Damascus Town Boundary
-  State/County Line

-  Mile Marker
-  Trestle with Number
-  Trailhead
-  Shelter
-  Campground
-  Kayak Launch





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SECTION 1
VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL MASTER PLAN

THE STRATEGIC PLAN

STRATEGIC PLAN TIMELINE

ANNUAL ACTIONS

PARTNERSHIP BUILDING

- Prioritize funding for VCTC capacity building, trail maintenance costs, and capital improvement projects.
- Pursue grants to implement this plan on at least an annual basis.
- Continue to build on Virginia Creeper Trail Conservation Partnership with relationship building with land trusts and agencies.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

- Meet with Trail Management Partners to plan for next fiscal year priorities.
- Meet individually with President's Advisory Council members each 1 to 3 times a year.
- Staff and board trainings and retreats.

TRAIL MANAGEMENT

- Maintain a database of funding opportunities for conservation.
- Emergency response incident analysis: Set up method to collect quarterly or yearly trail emergency response incidents from emergency responders. Respond immediately to address issues and summarize quarterly to address systematic issues or "problem areas".
- Continue to collect data annually & disseminate as needed.
- Assess emergency responders data to understand potential safety concerns and management needs.
- Fundraise for trestle repairs (ongoing).
- Implement "One Trail" design standards .
- Collect and catalogue geospatial data.

MEASURING IMPACT

- Annual recurring data collection (business survey & trail counter collection) to create & distribute an annual trail impact report.
- Collect trail counts 4x quarterly & create yearly report.
- Collect economic data via a business survey.
- Create annual reports of tracking to be utilized in Trail Economic Impact Study.
- Collect business trail impact data from survey yearly.

MARKETING, OUTREACH, & DEVELOPMENT

- Continue to refine "One Stop Shop" event management program yearly based on trail management partners and event sponsor feedback. Hold at least one annual event planning meeting with all partners and trail managers to develop a Virginia Creeper Trail "Master" calendar (starting in 2024).
- Hold volunteer orientation annually or semi-annually outlining new process and refining handbook annually, working with trail partners (starting in 2024).
- Build VCTC Annual End of Year Celebration & Volunteer Recognition Event into budget & work plan.
- Host business stakeholder specific meetings periodically. Have annual or twice a year meetings with businesses to provide updates on the trail, launch new programs, inform them of upcoming events, get feed back on trail related topics, and engage them on key issues . Hold regular member & business engagement (meetups/e-blasts,etc)(starting in 2023).
- Update & distribute maps & VCTC info more broadly and consistently.
- Maintain official website and social media platforms as essential elements of centralized communication.

THE VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL CONSERVANCY

2022

2023

Organizational Structure

Strengthen & expand the Board of Directors
 Establish a President's Advisory Council
 Update the VCTC's bylaws & implement non-profit organizational best practices
 Establish committees: Marketing & Outreach Committee, Nominating Committee, Volunteer Committee, Development & Fundraising Committee
 Hire an Administrative & Visitor Information Assistant
 Hire a Bookkeeping Assistant or Contractor

Integrate/recruit new board members **ONGOING**
 Hire a Marketing, Branding, & Communications Coordinator **ONGOING**

Partnerships

Develop a long-term MOU & co-op agreement w/ trail management partners and review annually
 Implement a Conservation Fee
 Build a VA Creeper Trail Conservation Partnership
 Prioritize funding/work with partners on grant applications

Explore the feasibility of a Regional Trail Coalition **ONGOING**
 Prioritize coordination of grants/funding received **ONGOING**

Trail Management

Conservation Projects
 Begin brainstorming with conservation partners to create a Virginia Creeper Trail Conservation Partnership to conserve land—become a “true conservancy” that builds a conservation coalition to explore ways existing land trusts can hold easements to benefit the trail
 Prioritize top landowners to reach out to & explore options for what partners may be able to assist in outreach
 Develop a database of conservation funding opportunities
 Explore a match seed fund w/ conservation partners, identify a President's Council member or partner organization who can help

Launch Landowner Outreach Program: Begin to reach out to highest priority landowners for conservation easement or fee simple land purchases
 Formalize a partnership w/ local governments to envision land use planning policy & ways to partner to protect the trail landscape (i.e. explore reinvigorating the Purchase of Development Rights Program, potential zoning amendments, etc.)

Capital Projects, Maintenance, & Safety

Repair trestles of highest priority / seek funding for next phase of trestle repair
 Coordinate w/ VDOT to strategize implementing warning signage for all DOT road crossings and seek funding
 Finalize 'One Trail' design standards & implement w/ all trail projects moving forward. Develop a trail signage guide & implement signage, with majority of signs installed in 2022
 Become centralized trail data manager
 Implement Watauga Trailhead Upgrades

Raise \$ for Damascus Road Crossing Study & other at grade road crossings, if possible, before going to VDOT for funding. **ONGOING**
 Implement a 'Trail Hotline' for maintenance issues **ONGOING**
ONGOING (IF NEEDED)

Measuring Impact

Kick-off an Annual Business Survey
 Implement a low level trail count
 Implement a direct observation strategy
 Fundraise for Economic Impact Study -> Create an Annual Report

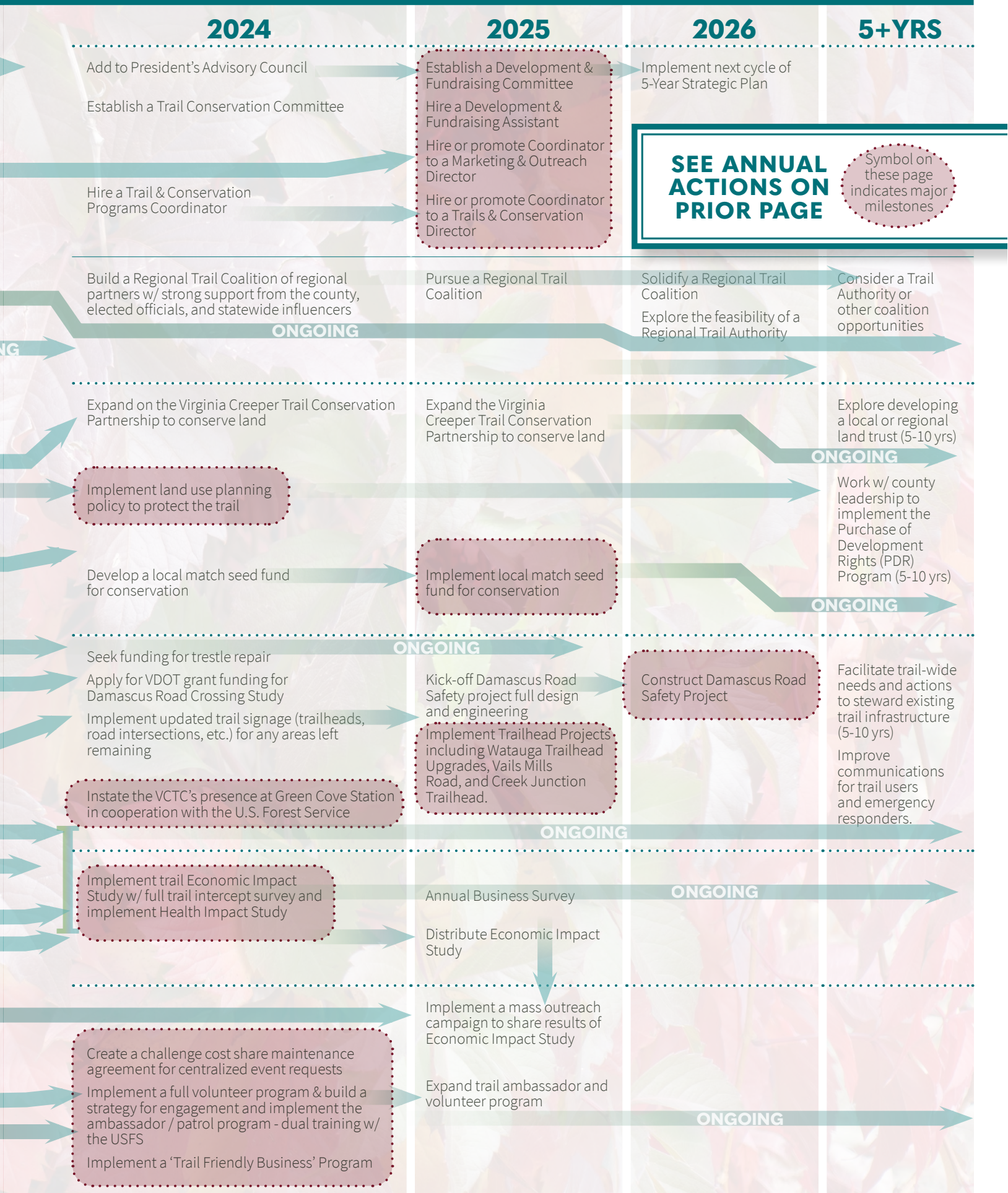
Implement high level trail counts
 Implement trail observation studies w/ volunteers or hired staff
 Pursue /receive funding for Economic Impact Study and Health Impact Study **ONGOING**

Marketing, Outreach, & Development

Develop & roll out a clear & comprehensive branding strategy
 Update & distribute maps & VCTC info more broadly & consistently
 Update website & social media/ become “One Stop Shop” for social media for all trail users
 Host inaugural end of year celebration & volunteer recognition event
 Become the “One Stop Shop” for trail event management program: define roles & challenge cost share w/ trail management partners

INTEGRATE BRAND STRATEGY INTO ALL OUTREACH
 Develop comprehensive volunteer engagement program & volunteer needs list --> Strategize a volunteer ambassador/patrol program
 Map out a “Trail Friendly Business” Program
 Build & launch a “One Stop Shop” trail app

STRATEGIC PLAN (5-YEAR PLAN)





VCTC ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE & PARTNERSHIPS STRATEGIC PLAN



SEE FULL PILLAR ON PAGE 41

THE FOLLOWING IS A DETAILED OUTLINE FOR THE STRATEGY TO EXPAND THE VCTC'S ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND BUILD PARTNERSHIPS TO INCREASE CAPACITY

GOAL: Build the VCTC's board, committees, volunteers, and staffing to support its mission.

GOAL: Build and strengthen existing and new partnerships to support the trail.

2022 (ORG. STRUCTURE)

STRATEGY: Restructure, strengthen, and build capacity for the organization.

ACTIONS:

IMPLEMENT YEAR 1 CAPACITY BUILDING.

Implement early steps to strengthen and expand the capacity for the VCTC. Recruitment should consider the diversity of needs and broad representation of the board in championing the pillars of the plan. *See the Organizational Structure Road Map on pages 19-20.*

- **Increase staffing:** Transition Executive Director into a salaried with benefits position. Expand administrative and bookkeeping hours and volunteer coordination.
- **Establish new committees:** Create and charter a Development & Fundraising Committee and Volunteer Committee, and establish a Marketing & Outreach Committee.
- **Establish a President's Advisory Council:** Create a council of prominent local citizens, recently retired elected officials, potential large donors, past board members, and others who do not have the time or inclination to serve on the board.
- **Implement nonprofit organizational best practices:** See recommendations in the Guided Organizational Assessment Report.
- **Establish and empower a permanent Nominating Committee:** Create and charter a Nominating Committee to seek, vet, and nominate new board members and assist in their orientation and training.

Partners: The VCTC's current board

Measurements of Success: # of new volunteers and hours, # of staff hours, # of board members

2022 (PARTNERSHIPS)

STRATEGY: Work with partners to develop cooperative agreements and cost-share arrangements to fund VCTC programs for the trail and/or staff & maintenance of the trail.

ACTIONS:

PRIORITIZE DEVELOPMENT OF MOU'S, COOPERATIVE AGREEMENTS, AND PURSUE RECURRING FUNDING AS A MAJOR FOCUS.

Develop MOU's and then cooperative agreements with each trail management partner. Priorities are as follows:

MOU's: These MOU's give broad overarching agreements of the VCTC's role and responsibilities and the MOU would be long-term and self-renewing.

Cooperative Agreements: These are specific to tasks that should be completed and are more contractual in nature, with inclusion of cost paid to the Conservancy for services.

Pursue Conservation Fee: Work with towns to pursue a conservation fee that adds a small fee on top of bike rentals. This fee would be managed by the VCTC and a cooperative agreement would be outline how it should be used.

Raise Funds: Prioritize funding for trestles, grant writing, and fundraising for future staff expansion and to support the strategic plan. Consider partnering with municipalities, counties, the U.S. Forest Service and other regional or state partners to pursue grants. Consider assigning a specific partner to take the lead in grant writing and management if the Conservancy cannot be the applicant.

Partners: Washington County, Grayson County, FSWV, MRPDC, and trail management partners

Measurements of Success: \$ raised, % win rate

Next Steps: Continue to build on fundraising and grant writing yearly.

BUILD A VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP TO CONSERVE LAND. Work with partners to begin to envision how to implement conservation of the Virginia Creeper Trail, with the master plan being the guide. The VCTC should serve as the lead to facilitate the work.

Partners: Trail management partners, Virginia Outdoors Foundation, the Department of Conservation and Recreation, The Nature Conservancy, Holston River Soil and Water Conservation District, and others brought on board.

Measurements of Success: Initial steps taken to implement the VA Creeper Trail Conservation Plan, i.e. outreach to landowners, etc.

Next Steps: *See more about this in the Trail Management Strategic Plan.*

2023 (ORG. STRUCTURE)

STRATEGY: *Restructure, strengthen, and build capacity for the organization.*

ACTIONS:

IMPLEMENT YEAR 2 CAPACITY BUILDING.

Implement steps to strengthen and expand the capacity for the Conservancy. Work with trail management partners to determine and what should be funded for this capacity building, and how. *See the Organizational Structure Road Map on pages 21-22.*

- **New staff:** Add a Marketing, Branding, and Communications Coordinator.
- **Integrate/recruit new board members.**
- **Add to President’s Advisory Council.**
- **Begin to build a comprehensive Volunteer Engagement Strategy and Trail-Friendly Business Program** (*see more about this in the Marketing and Outreach Strategic Plan*).
- **Implement nonprofit organizational best practices:** *See recommendations in the Guided Organizational Assessment.*

Partners: Trail management partners

Measurements of Success: # of new volunteers and hours, # of staff hours

2024 (ORG. STRUCTURE)

STRATEGY: *Restructure, strengthen, and build capacity for the organization.*

ACTIONS:

IMPLEMENT YEAR 3 CAPACITY BUILDING.

Implement steps to strengthen and expand the capacity for the Conservancy. *See the Organizational Structure Road Map on pages 23-24.*

- **Establish new committees:** Establish the Trail Conservation Committee.
- **Integrate/recruit new board members.**
- **Add to President’s Advisory Council.**
- **New staff:** Add a Trail and Conservation Coordinator.
- **Implement nonprofit organizational best practices:** See recommendations in the Guided Organizational Assessment.

Partners: Trail management partners.

Measurements of Success: # of new volunteers and hours, # of staff hours

2023-2024 (PARTNERSHIPS)

STRATEGY: *Work with partners to develop cooperative agreements and cost-share arrangements to fund VCTC programs and/or staff & maintenance of the trail.*

ACTIONS:

PRIORITIZE FUNDING AND COORDINATION WITH GRANTS/FUNDING RECEIVED.

Work with trail management partners, counties, and the MRPDC to pursue and/or manage grants.

Partners: Washington County, Grayson County, Mount Rogers Planning District Commission

Measurements of Success: \$ raised, results of funding, % win rate

Next Steps: Continue to build on fundraising and grant writing yearly.

STRATEGY: *Build a Virginia Creeper Trail Conservation Partnership.*

ACTIONS:

EXPAND THE VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP TO CONSERVE LAND & DEVELOP A CONSERVATION “SEED FUND”.

Work with partners to begin to envision how to implement conservation of the Virginia Creeper Trail, with the master plan being the guide. The VCTC should serve as the lead to facilitate work. Begin to develop a seed fund.

Read more about this in the Trail Management Strategic Plan.

Partners: Trail Conservation Partners, private philanthropists
Measurements of Success: # of partners involved, \$ raised
Next Steps: See Trail Management Strategic Plan

STRATEGY: Collaborate with trail managers & other partners on policy, management, connectivity, and communications.

ACTIONS:

BUILD A TRAIL COALITION OF REGIONAL PARTNERS—EXPLORE THE IDEA OF A REGIONAL TRAIL AUTHORITY OR OTHER COALITIONS. Work with Washington County and other partners to explore a regional authority or other partnerships that have benefit to the trail.

Partners: Washington County, Grayson County, MRPDC, trail management partners, other regional trail organizations
Measurements of Success: Forward progress, amount of VCTC inclusion in the process.
Next Steps: Implement in 2025-2026

2025 (ORG. STRUCTURE)

STRATEGY: Restructure, strengthen, and build capacity for the organization.

ACTIONS:

IMPLEMENT YEAR 4 CAPACITY BUILDING. Implement steps to strengthen and expand the capacity for the Conservancy. Work with trail management partners to determine and what should be funded for this capacity building, and how. **See the Organizational Structure Road Map on pages 25-26.**

- **Establish new committees:** Expand the Development and Fundraising Committee’s responsibilities.
- **Integrate/recruit new board members.**
- **Add to President’s Advisory Council.**
- **New staff:** Add a Development and Fundraising Assistant.
- **Expand and implement Volunteer Engagement Strategy and Trail-Friendly Business Program** (see the Marketing and Outreach Strategic Plan for more).
- **Implement nonprofit organizational best practices:** See recommendations in the Guided Organizational Assessment.

Partners: Trail management partners.
Measurements of Success: # of new volunteers and hours, # of staff hours.

2025-2026 (PARTNERSHIPS)

STRATEGY: Work with partners to develop cooperative agreements and cost-share arrangements to fund VCTC programs and/or staff & maintenance of the trail.

ACTIONS:

TRANSITION CAPACITY OF GRANT WRITING AND MANAGEMENT TO THE VCTC. Work with trail management partners, counties, the FSWV, and the MRPDC, but transition the Conservancy into a greater role of grant writing and management with the Development and Fundraising Assistant.

Partners: Washington County, Grayson County, MRPDC, trail management partners
Measurements of Success: \$ raised, results of funding
Next Steps: Continue to build on fundraising and grant writing yearly.

STRATEGY: Build a Virginia Creeper Trail Conservation Partnership.

ACTIONS:

BEGIN TO FULLY USE THE VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP TO CONSERVE LAND & BUILD ON THE CONSERVATION “SEED FUND”. Work with partners to begin to envision how to implement conservation of the trail, with the master plan being the guide. The VCTC should serve as the lead to facilitate work. Begin to develop a seed fund. **Read more about this in the Land Management Strategic Plan.**

Partners: Trail Conservation Partners, private philanthropists
Measurements of Success: # of partners involved, \$ raised

STRATEGY: Collaborate with trail managers & other partners on policy, management, connectivity, and communications.

ACTIONS:

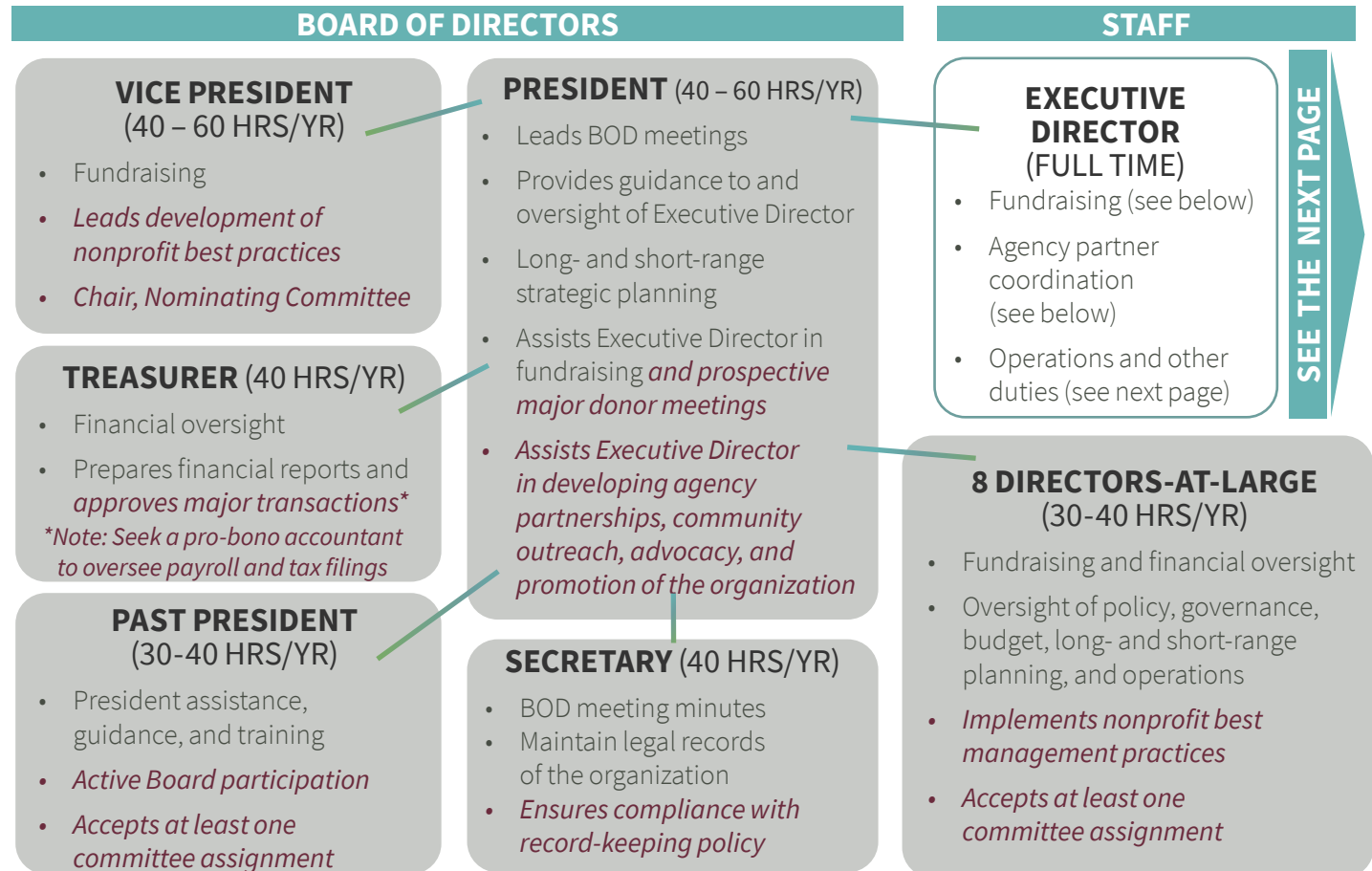
WORK WITH COUNTY TO ENACT A REGIONAL TRAIL AUTHORITY, IF DEEMED USEFUL TO THE TRAIL. Work with Washington County and State Legislature to enact a regional authority.

Partners: Washington County, Grayson County, MRPDC, trail management partners, other regional trail organizations
Measurements of Success: Forward progress, amount of VCTC inclusion in the process

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE ROAD MAP

VCTC STAFFING & GOVERNANCE

New positions and duties are shown in red italics



BOARD COMMITTEES



PRESIDENT’S ADVISORY COUNCIL

- Create a “President’s Advisory Council” consisting of prominent local citizens, recently retired elected officials, potential large donors, past board members, and others who don’t have the time or inclination to serve on a board.*
- The Council’s purpose is to provide advice and counsel to the President on community contacts, potential funding opportunities, and business and government partnerships. The President can convey this information to the Executive Director, or invite the Executive Director to meetings between the President and Council members.*

STAFF

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR (FULL TIME)

- *Fundraising, including major donor cultivation and development, grant writing (at least half-time, 1,000+ hrs/yr)*
- *Agency partner coordination, including development of MOU and cooperative agreements*
- *Development of a permanent funding mechanism for deferred maintenance (trestles)*
- *Annual budget preparation, financial audit coordination*
- Networking with funders, influencers, elected officials, etc. and foster relationships with trail-related businesses
- Trail conservation, launching Conservation Plan
- Website development and social media oversight including “revamping” website
- Trail safety (quarterly reports, coordination with safety issues)
- Staff supervision
- Membership: guide membership growth and strategy
- High-level coordination with business community
- Public relations
- Advocacy and outreach to elected officials
- Support for Board of Directors/*connect with President’s Advisory Council*
- Chairs the Virginia Creeper Trail Advisory Board
- Assist in coordination of maintenance issues, centralizes communication

ADMINISTRATIVE AND VISITOR INFORMATION ASSISTANT (30-40HRS/WK)

- *Receipt and acknowledgment of donations*
- *Merchandise ordering, shipping, inventory tracking, local delivery*
- *All administrative tasks*
- *Visitor information*
- *Tourism and promotion*
- *Maintenance of membership and donor database*
- *Volunteer coordination, recruitment, training, and management*
- *Special projects and events*
- *Website monthly updates*
- *Social media coordination*
- *Attends Virginia Creeper Trail Advisory Board, prepares agenda and takes minutes, and disseminates*
- *Assist in grant writing*
- *Assist in implementing low level (first phase) trail counter strategy*

BOOKKEEPING ASSISTANT OR CONTRACTOR (20HRS/WK)

- *Maintains financial records of all transactions*
- *Invoices and accounts payable*
- *Prepares draft financial reports for Executive Director and Treasurer*
- *Weekly summary to Executive Director and Treasurer*
- *Payroll and tax filings**

**Note: Seek a pro-bono accountant to oversee payroll and tax filings*

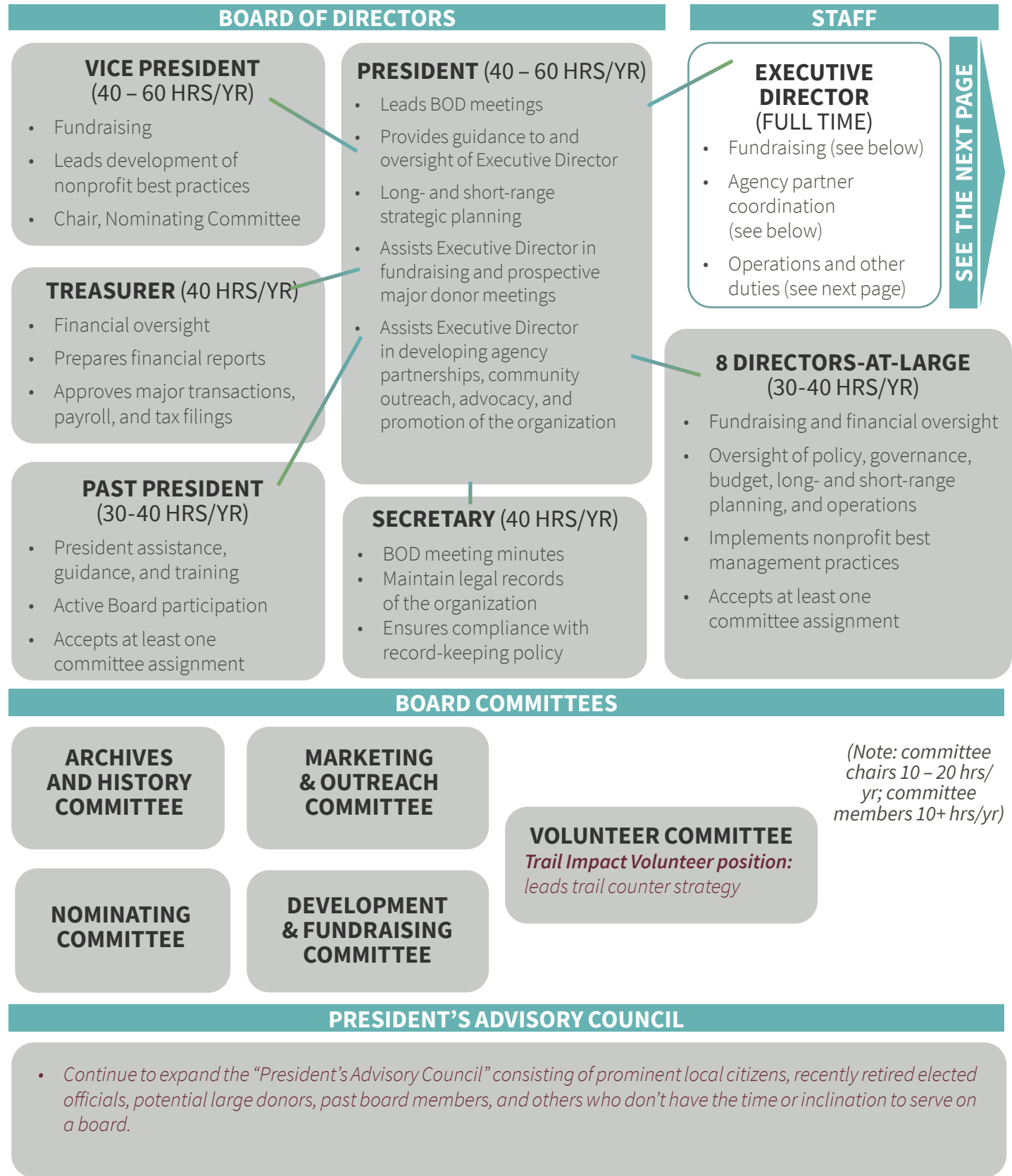
INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES CONTRACTOR (AS NEEDED)

- *Advise on technology needs*
- *Work on technology issues and hardware updates*
- *Ensure security measures are in place for all computers*
- *Consults on standardizing storage and use of online servers/storage*

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE ROAD MAP

VCTC STAFFING & GOVERNANCE

New positions and duties are shown in red italics



SEE THE NEXT PAGE

(Note: committee chairs 10 – 20 hrs/yr; committee members 10+ hrs/yr)

VOLUNTEER COMMITTEE
Trail Impact Volunteer position: leads trail counter strategy

STAFF

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR (FULL TIME)

- Fundraising, including major donor cultivation and development, grant writing (at least half-time, 1,000+ hrs/yr)
- Agency partner coordination, including development of MOU and cooperative agreements
- Development of a permanent funding mechanism for deferred maintenance (trestles)
- Annual budget preparation, financial audit coordination
- Networking
- Implement Conservation Plan
- *Staff support for Nominating, Development, and Volunteer Committees*
- Trail safety
- Staff supervision
- Membership
- High-level coordination with business community
- Website development and social media management
- Public relations
- Advocacy and outreach to elected officials
- Support for Board of Directors/connect with President's Advisory Council
- Assist in coordination of maintenance issues, centralizes communication

ADMINISTRATIVE AND VISITOR INFORMATION ASSISTANT (20HRS/WK)

- Merchandise ordering, shipping, inventory tracking, local delivery
- All administrative tasks
- Visitor information
- Tourism and promotion
- Maintenance of membership and donor database
- Volunteer coordination, recruitment, training, and management
- Special projects and events
- Assist with grant writing and trail impact

BOOKKEEPING ASSISTANT OR CONTRACTOR (20HRS/WK)

- Maintains financial records of all transactions
- Invoices and accounts payable
- Receipt and acknowledgment of donations
- Prepares draft financial reports for Executive Director and Treasurer
- Payroll and tax filings

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES CONTRACTOR (AS NEEDED)

- Advise on technology needs
- Work on technology issues and hardware updates
- Ensure security measures are in place for all computers
- Consults on standardizing storage and use of online servers/storage

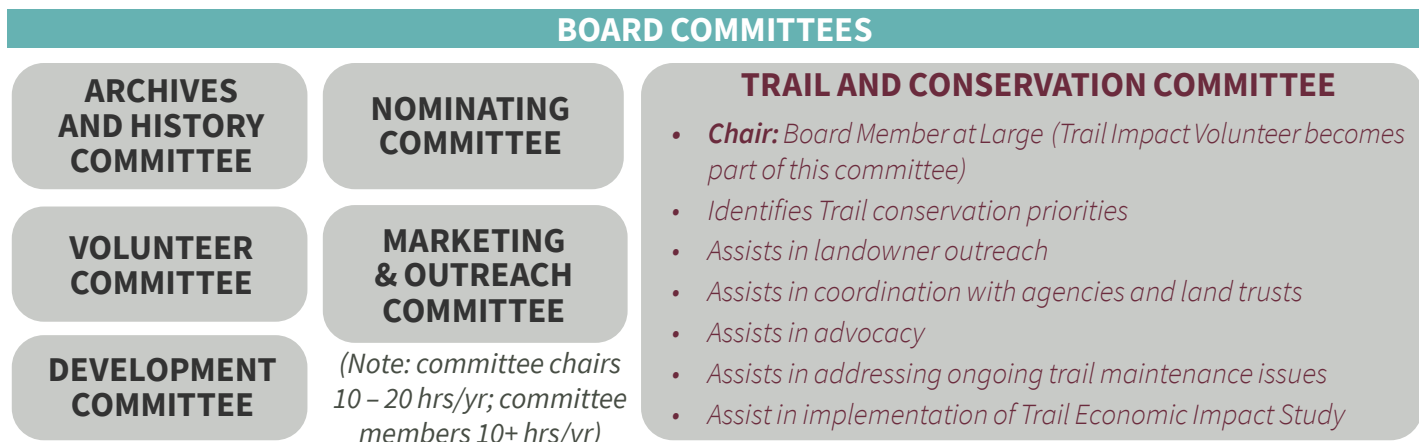
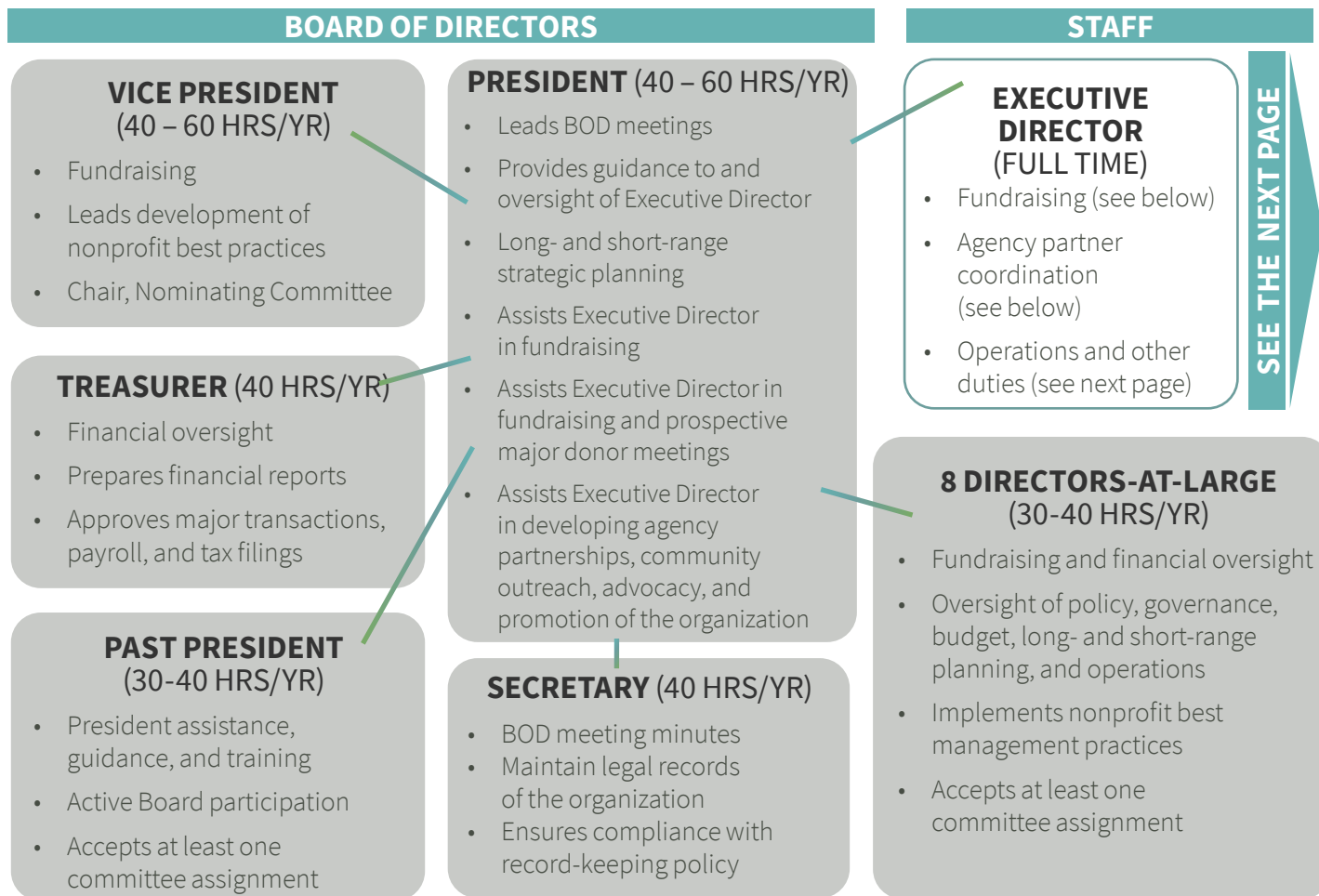
MARKETING, BRANDING, AND COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR (20-30 HRS/WK)

- *Provides staff support for Marketing and Outreach Committee*
- *Public Relations*
- *Response to all visitor use inquiries*
- *Community engagement*
- *Communications and public relations*
- *Website management*
- *Social media management*
- *Special projects and events*
- *Develop and oversee Trail-Friendly Business Program*
- *End of Year Banquet*

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE ROAD MAP

VCTC STAFFING & GOVERNANCE

New positions and duties are shown in red italics



PRESIDENT’S ADVISORY COUNCIL

- Continue to expand the “President’s Advisory Council” consisting of prominent local citizens, recently retired elected officials, potential large donors, past board members, and others who don’t have the time or inclination to serve on a board.*

New positions and duties are shown in red italics

STAFF

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR (FULL TIME)

- Fundraising, including major donor cultivation and development, grant writing (at least half-time, 1,000+ hrs/yr)
- Agency partner coordination, including development of MOU and cooperative agreements
- Development of a permanent funding mechanism for deferred maintenance (trestles)
- Annual budget preparation, financial audit coordination
- Networking
- Implement Conservation Plan
- Staff support for Nominating and Development Committees
- Trail safety
- Staff supervision
- Membership
- High-level coordination with business community
- Website development and social media management
- Public relations
- Advocacy and outreach to elected officials
- Support for Board of Directors/connect with President’s Advisory Council
- Assist in coordination of maintenance issues, centralizes communication
- Oversight of the Economic Impact Study

ADMINISTRATIVE AND VISITOR INFORMATION ASSISTANT (20HRS/WK)

- Merchandise ordering, shipping, inventory tracking, local delivery
- All administrative tasks
- Visitor information
- Tourism and promotion
- Maintenance of membership and donor database
- Special projects and events

BOOKKEEPING ASSISTANT OR CONTRACTOR (20HRS/WK)

- Maintains financial records of all transactions
- Invoices and accounts payable
- Receipt and acknowledgment of donations
- Prepares draft financial reports for Executive Director and Treasurer
- Payroll and tax filings

TRAIL AND CONSERVATION PROGRAMS COORDINATOR (40 HRS/WK)

- *Identifies and addresses trail maintenance and safety priorities*
- *Identifies trail conservation projects*
- *Landowner outreach and coordination with agencies and land trusts*
- *Assist with trail grant management (trestles, etc.)*
- *Volunteer recruitment & management*
- *Trail data management*
- *Trail protection*
- *Trail safety*
- *Oversee implementation of Impact Studies*
- *Staff support for Volunteer Committee*

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES CONTRACTOR (AS NEEDED)

- Advise on technology needs
- Work on technology issues and hardware updates
- Ensure security measures are in place for all computers
- Consults on standardizing storage and use of online servers/storage

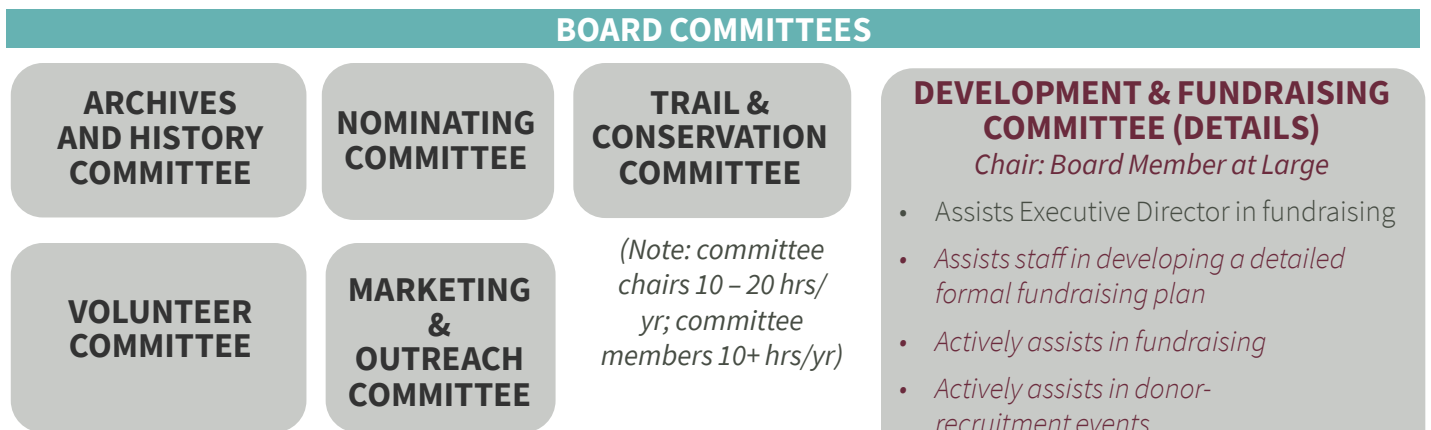
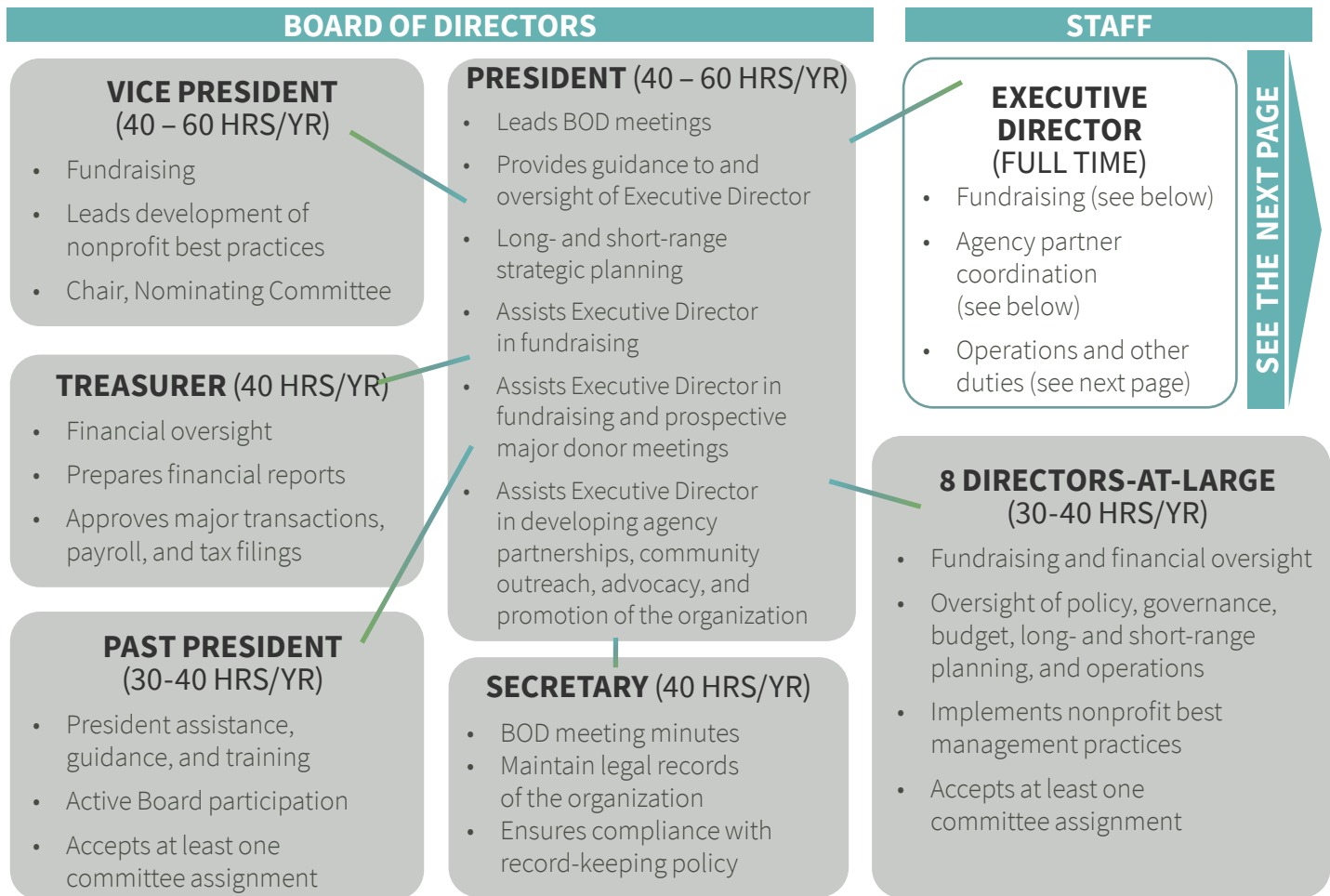
MARKETING, BRANDING AND COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR (40 HRS/WK)

- Provides staff support for Marketing and Outreach Committee
- Public Relations
- Response to all visitor use inquiries
- Community engagement
- Communications and public relations
- Website management
- Social media management
- Special projects and events/ race event management
- Develop and oversee Trail-Friendly Business Program
- End of Year Banquet

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE ROAD MAP

VCTC STAFFING & GOVERNANCE

New positions and duties are shown in red italics



New positions and duties are shown in red italics

STAFF

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR (FULL TIME)

- Fundraising, including major donor cultivation and development, grant writing (at least half-time, 1,000+ hrs/yr)
- Agency partner coordination, including development of MOU and cooperative agreements
- Development of a permanent funding mechanism for deferred maintenance (trestles)
- Annual budget preparation, financial audit coordination
- Networking
- Implement Conservation Plan
- Oversight of staff support for all committees
- Trail safety
- Staff supervision
- Membership
- High-level coordination with business community
- Website development and social media management
- Public relations
- Advocacy and outreach to elected officials
- Support for Board of Directors/connect with President’s Advisory Council
- Assist in coordination of maintenance issues, centralizes communication
- *Initiates next strategic planning cycle (2026 – future date)*

ADMINISTRATIVE AND VISITOR INFORMATION ASSISTANT (20HRS/WK)

- Merchandise ordering, shipping, inventory tracking, local delivery
- All administrative tasks
- Visitor information
- Tourism and promotion
- Maintenance of membership and donor database
- Volunteer recruitment, training, and management
- Special projects and events

BOOKKEEPING ASSISTANT OR CONTRACTOR (20HRS/WK)

- Maintains financial records of all transactions
- Invoices and accounts payable
- Receipt and acknowledgment of donations
- Prepares draft financial reports for Executive Director and Treasurer
- Payroll and tax filings

TRAIL AND CONSERVATION PROGRAMS DIRECTOR (FULL TIME)

- Identifies and addresses trail maintenance and safety priorities
- Identifies trail conservation projects
- Landowner outreach
- Coordination with agencies and land trusts
- Volunteer recruitment and management
- Trail data management
- Trail protection
- Trail safety

MARKETING, BRANDING AND COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR (FULL TIME)

- Provides staff support for Marketing and Outreach Committee
- Public Relations
- Response to all visitor use inquiries
- Community engagement
- Communications and public relations
- Website management
- Social media management
- Special projects and events
- Develop and oversee Trail-Friendly Business Program
- End of Year Banquet

DEVELOPMENT & FUNDRAISING ASSISTANT (20HRS/WK)

- *Fundraising assistance to Executive Director*
- *Membership and donor database management*
- *Grant research and grant writing*
- *Support for Development and Fundraising Committee*

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES CONTRACTOR (AS NEEDED)

- Advise on technology needs
- Work on technology issues and hardware updates
- Ensure security measures are in place for all computers
- Consults on standardizing storage and use of online servers/storage

TRAIL MANAGEMENT STRATEGIC PLAN



SEE FULL PILLAR ON PAGE 53

THE FOLLOWING IS A DETAILED OUTLINE FOR TRAIL MANAGEMENT, INCLUDING TRAIL MAINTENANCE & CAPITAL PROJECTS, TRAIL SAFETY, AND CONSERVATION OF THE TRAIL LANDSCAPE

GOAL: Partner to promote trail safety, to steward the trail, and to conserve the trail landscape experience.

2022

STRATEGY: Steward the natural, cultural, and scenic experience of the trail.

ACTIONS:

BECOME A “TRUE CONSERVANCY” THAT BUILDS A CONSERVATION COALITION TO EXPLORE WAYS EXISTING LAND TRUSTS CAN HOLD EASEMENTS TO BENEFIT THE TRAIL. BEGIN LANDOWNER OUTREACH. ESTABLISH A DATABASE OF CONSERVATION FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES. Work to formalize a partnership with conservation organizations to pursue land conservation along the trail. Further actions can be pursued based on partner interests. Create a database of potential conservation funding opportunities. Begin to engage highest priority landowners, with official launch in 2023. Determine the best strategy for how easements and fee simple lands will be held or transferred. ***See the Trail Conservation Priority Analysis Map on pages 57-58 for further info.***

Partners: The Virginia Outdoors Foundation, The Nature Conservancy, USFS, Washington and Grayson Counties, Abingdon, Damascus, and others

Measurements of Success: # of partners involved, strategies and actions implemented by partners to support the trail, # of landowners engaged

Next Steps: Launch a full landowner outreach program in year 2023.

STRATEGY: Steward existing & expand trail infrastructure

ACTIONS:

FUNDRAISE FOR AND REPAIR TRESTLES. FIND FUNDING TO ASSESS REPAIR NEEDS FOR REMAINING UNSTUDIED TRESTLES.

Partners: Trail management partners, partners who can manage construction grants, state funding partners

Measurements of Success: \$\$ fundraised, # of trestles repaired

Next Steps: Continue to implement yearly.

See the Trail Management Maps on pages 73-76 for more info

FINALIZE AND BEGIN TO IMPLEMENT “ONE TRAIL” DESIGN STANDARDS. Work with partners to:

- Integrate a uniform trail design standard into any maintenance/trail surface upgrades moving forward.
- Implement a trail signage guide and install signage, starting with the USFS section of the trail and then moving on to Damascus and Abingdon areas.
- Upgrade treatment of trestles egresses. Fix “drop-offs” on either side of trestles.

Partners: Trail management partners

Measurements of Success: # of linear feet upgraded, # of signs installed, \$ fundraised for signage

Next Steps: Continue to implement yearly.

ADDRESS UNSAFE ROAD CROSSINGS. The following actions for crossing improvements will occur: *See the Trailhead & Road Crossing Needs Map for more info.*

- **Watauga Trailhead**, which includes road crossing and entrance redesign early in year.
- **Damascus Road Safety Project/SR 58 Crossing.** Fundraise for a planning study that looks at providing an alternative route to the Damascus Trail Center and a safer crossing of SR 58.
- **Callahan's Crossing Upgrades.** Upgrade crossing which is currently confusing and difficult. Will need collaboration with VDOT.

See the Trail Management Maps on pages 73-76 for more info

Partners: VDOT, the USFS, Damascus, and Abingdon

Measurements of Success: Perception of increased user safety, \$ spent, reduction of vehicular and pedestrian/bicyclists conflict

Next Steps: Damascus Road Safety project and Watauga Trailhead improvements should be completed in 2025.

UPGRADE TRAILHEADS. The following actions should occur:

- **Watauga Trailhead**, with funding pursued for upgrades in late 2022. Upgrades will include a new restroom, bike repair and hydration station.
- **Alvarado Trailhead**, new trailhead and parking configuration

THE VCTC BECOMES THE CENTRALIZED TRAIL DATA MANAGER. The following actions should occur:

- **Emergency response incident analysis.** Set up method to collect quarterly or yearly trail emergency response incidents from emergency responders. Respond immediately to address issues and summarize annually to address systematic issues or "problem areas."
- **Create a standard operating procedure for the collaboration, creation, cataloging, and sharing of geospatial (GIS) Information.** Explore methods to catalogue and continue to collect geospatial data to become the "one-stop shop" for trail data.

Partners: Emergency responders (County Sheriff's Office, Town police, fire/rescue), Washington County GIS department, hospitals, trail management partners

Measurements of Success: # safety issues addressed, amount of data streamlined

Next Steps: Continue to collect above data annually and disseminate as needed.

2023

STRATEGY: *Steward the natural, cultural, historic, and scenic experience of the trail.*

ACTIONS:

FORMALIZE A PARTNERSHIP WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENTS TO ENVISION LAND USE PLANNING POLICY AND WAYS TO PARTNER TO PROTECT THE TRAIL LANDSCAPE.

Work with Washington and Grayson Counties to explore ways to use land use policies (ordinances, plan revisions, etc.) to help protect the trail. Explore with Washington County reinvigorating the Purchase of Developments Right (PDR) Program.

Partners: Washington County, and the Holston River Soil & Water Conservation District (who originally was setup to manage the PDR program), Towns of Abingdon & Damascus

Measurements of Success: # of new and revised policies in place to help protect the trail landscape

Next Steps: Work with county to have a PDR program by year 2027.

LAUNCH LANDOWNER OUTREACH PROGRAM TO REACH OUT TO THE HIGHEST PRIORITY LANDOWNERS FOR CONSERVATION EASEMENTS OR FEE SIMPLE LAND PURCHASES.

Working with land conservation partners, reach out to the highest priority landowners and priority landscapes per the trail conservation parcel prioritization. Target engaging 3-5 landowners a year moving forward.

Partners: VA Creeper Trail Conservation Partnership

Measurements of Success: # of landowners engaged, # of acres conserved

Next Steps: Consider in the long-term (year 2027+) when/if it makes sense for the VCTC to become a land trust.

STRATEGY: *Steward existing and expand trail infrastructure.*

ACTIONS:

CONTINUE TO FUNDRAISE FOR AND REPAIR TRESTLES. FIND FUNDING TO ASSESS REPAIR NEEDS FOR REMAINING UNSTUDIED TRESTLES.

See the Trail Management Maps on pages 73-76 for more info

Partners: Trail management partners

Measurements of Success: \$\$ fundraised, # of trestles repaired,

Next Steps: Continue to fundraise.

See the Trail Management Maps on pages 73-76 for more info

IMPLEMENT “ONE TRAIL” DESIGN STANDARDS.

Work with partners to:

- **Implement trail signage any remaining sections based on sign standards developed in 2022.**

Partners: Abingdon and Damascus

Measurements of Success: # of signs installed

Next Steps: Continue to implement if all signage has not been installed by the end of 2024.

THE VCTC BECOMES THE CENTRALIZED TRAIL DATA MANAGER.

The following action should occur:

- **Implement a “Trail Hotline” for maintenance issues.**

This could be an email and/or text option advertised to users or outfitters to report safety and management issues.

- **Standardize reporting and follow-up protocol.**

Partners: Trail management partners

Measurements of Success: # of trail issues reported and/or addressed

Next Steps: Integrate trail hotline info into Trail App (see Marketing and Outreach Strategic Plan) developed in 2023 See Marketing, Outreach and Development Strategic Plan (year 2024 for more about this).

2024

STRATEGY: Steward the natural, cultural, and scenic experience of the trail.

ACTIONS:

IMPLEMENT LAND USE PLANNING POLICIES TO PROTECT THE TRAIL LANDSCAPE.

Work with Washington and Grayson counties to roll-out and codify land use policies. Work with Washington County to have PDR program back up and running around year 2027.

Partners: Washington and Grayson counties, and the Holston River Soil & Water Conservation District (who originally was setup to manage the PDR program)

Measurements of Success: # of new and revised policies in place to help protect the trail landscape

Next Steps: Start utilizing Washington County PDR program by 2027.

STRATEGY: Steward existing and expand trail infrastructure.

ACTIONS:

FUNDRAISE FOR AND REPAIR TRESTLES. FIND FUNDING TO ASSESS REPAIR NEEDS FOR REMAINING UNSTUDIED TRESTLES.

Partners: Trail management partners, partners who can manage construction grants, state funding partners

Measurements of Success: \$\$ fundraised, # of trestles repaired

See the Trail Management Maps on pages 73-76 for more info

ADDRESS UNSAFE ROAD CROSSINGS. The following actions for crossing improvements will occur:

- **Damascus Road Safety Project/SR 58 Crossing.** Coordinate with VDOT to apply for planning/construction grant money
- **Callahan’s Crossing Upgrades.** Upgrade crossing which is currently confusing and difficult. Will need collaboration with VDOT.

Partners: VDOT, Damascus, USFS

Measurements of Success: Perception of increased user safety, \$ spent, reduction of vehicular and pedestrian/bicyclists conflict

Next Steps: Complete Damascus Safety Road project in year 2026.

INSTATE THE VCTC’S PRESENCE (POSSIBLE FUTURE LEASE) OF GREEN COVE STATION. :

Advocate and position the VCTC to have a presence or even manage Green Cove Station in the future as the major non-profit partner to the trail. The Conservancy should ensure there would be an adequate volunteer staffing strategy in place and think creatively how Green Cove could be used to support the trail.

Partners: USFS

Measurements of Success: \$ raised for the trail at Green Cove Station, # of visitors educated, increased brand recognition for the Conservancy.

2025

STRATEGY: Steward the natural, cultural, and scenic experience of the trail.

ACTIONS:

SET UP LOCAL MATCH SEED FUND FOR CONSERVATION. Explore means to establish a “seed fund” through private philanthropic means, so that a local match can be used for any grants applied for to conserve the trail landscape.

Partners: VA Creeper Trail Conservation Partnership

Measurements of Success: \$ raised, acres conserved

Next Steps: Continue to build seed fund.

STRATEGY: Steward existing and expand trail infrastructure.

ACTIONS:

ADDRESS UNSAFE ROAD CROSSINGS. The following actions for crossing improvements will occur:

- **Kick-off Damascus Road Safety Project/SR 58 Crossing and fundraise any remaining amounts needed to construct it.** Planning, design, and full construction documents developed. Fundraise for any additional cost, once final cost-estimates are developed.
- **Whitetop Road Crossing,** as part of a VDOT project.

See the Trail Management Maps on pages 73-76 for more info

Partners: VDOT, Damascus, and Washington County

Measurements of Success: Perception of increased user safety, \$ spent, reduction of vehicular and pedestrian/bicyclists conflict

Next Steps: Complete Damascus Safety Road project in year 2026.

UPGRADE TRAILHEADS. The following actions should occur:

- **Upgrade Vails Mill Road Crossing & Parking (if determined needed).** Formalize unofficial parking area if determined needed after several years of monitoring.
- **Creek Junction Trailhead.** Provide better access to parking and signage on SR 58.

Partners: Abingdon and Damascus

Measurements of Success: \$ fundraised, level of use.

2026

STRATEGY: Steward existing and expand trail infrastructure.

ACTIONS:

ADDRESS UNSAFE ROAD CROSSINGS. The following actions for crossing improvements will occur:

- **Construct Damascus Road Safety Project/SR 58 Crossing and celebrate.** Construct project and celebrate with partners a “trail grand opening” at the Damascus Trail Center.

Partners: VDOT and Damascus

Measurements of Success: Perception of increased user safety, \$ spent, reduction of vehicular and pedestrian/bicyclists conflict.

2027 & BEYOND

STRATEGY: Steward the natural, cultural, and scenic experience of the trail.

ACTIONS:

- **Explore developing a local or regional land trust** (5-10 years out).
- **Implement PDR program with Washington County,** to receive occasional funding from county for land conservation.

STRATEGY: Steward existing and expand trail infrastructure.

ACTIONS:

- **Identify top trail needs and actions to steward trail in next 5-10 years.**

STRATEGY: Ensuring the safety of trail users is paramount.

ACTIONS:

- **Improve communications for trail users and emergency responders.** Explore opportunities to increase radio repeaters or other means for better cellular service. Improve on messaging to users on what to do in case of an emergency.

TRAIL IMPACT STRATEGIC PLAN



SEE FULL PILLAR ON PAGE 91

THE FOLLOWING IS A DETAILED OUTLINE FOR THE STRATEGY TO MEASURE TRAIL IMPACT

***GOAL:** Understand and communicate the data-supported impacts that the trail has on the economy, health, and quality of life of the community. Use impact data to guide decision making with partners and for funding purposes.*

2022

STRATEGY: Implement means for trail counts that can be done by the Conservancy and partners.

ACTIONS:

IMPLEMENT FIRST PHASE (LOW LEVEL) OF TRAIL COUNTERS. Implement the first phase of trail counters at some of the main entrances to the trail. Data should be collected seasonally in all four quarters of the year. **A volunteer or staff position should routinely collect and manage the data.** Proposed counter locations include:

- Between MM1 and trail entry from Abingdon Sports Complex
- Near the Orchard Hill Rd Crossing in Damascus
- Straight Branch Trailhead
- Green Cove Station
- Continued use of trail counters currently in place

Partners: The USFS, Abingdon, Damascus and VDOT (help with acquiring trail counters), Trail Counts Volunteer Coordinator

Measurements of Success: # of trail counts, quarterly data has been collected on-target which have a baseline of usage data each year to guide decision making

Next Steps: Create annual reports, tracking yearly. Utilize as data input in the Trail Economic Impact Study in 2024. Ensure there is a dedicated volunteer or staff person to oversee gathering trail counts.

STRATEGY: Implement a long-term strategy for a Full Economic Impact Study.

ACTIONS:

BEGIN TO FUNDRAISE FOR TRAIL IMPACT STUDY.

Full funding for an economic impact study, which would also include a trail intercept survey launch, is needed. This work would utilize existing data being gathered leading up to the implementation of the study.

Partners: Seek funding assistance from and coordinate with trail management partners

Measurements of Success: \$\$\$ received

Next Steps: Implement Trail Economic Impact Study in 2024.

STRATEGY: Collect data observationally, through online resources, or via businesses.

ACTIONS:

IMPLEMENT DIRECT OBSERVATION STRATEGY.

Direct observation is a methodology to classify users trail activities (walking, running, biking, group size/make up, dogs, horses, etc.) in distinct categories in order to be analyzed. It is recommended to use the System for Observing Play and Activity and Recreation in Communities (SOPARC) as the instrument (McKenzie & Cohen, 2004). Examples include collecting data on:

- Females and Males
- Perceived age
- Perceived ethnic groupings
- Family size, children, dogs, etc.
- Entries for day, temperature, area accessibility, area usability
- Classification of organized activity

Partners: Seek funding assistance from and coordinate with trail management partners

Measurements of Success: # of users observed

Next Steps: Utilize as data input in the Trail Economic Impact Study in 2024.

STRATEGY: Develop and implement a strategy to assess the impact the trail has.

ACTIONS:

IMPLEMENT ANNUAL BUSINESS SURVEY.

Implement an annual survey that polls outfitters and other businesses that can illustrate economic impact and trail user counts for the trail. This survey can be done annually and data shared in an annual report. The Trail Impact Volunteer could assist with this, and coordinate future (2023+) surveys. Examples include:

- What were your annual/quarterly sales?
- How many bikes did you rent each month?
- How many visitors did you shuttle each month?
- How many shuttles did you run?
- How many visitors did you send to Whitetop/Abingdon or other locations?
- What were other activities visitors asked about?
- What trends are you seeing?

Partners: Outfitters and other businesses

Measurements of Success: Survey response from business, trail impact #'s

Next Steps: Implement annually. Utilize as data input in the Trail Economic Impact Study in 2024

2023

STRATEGY: Implement means for trail counts that can be done by the Conservancy and partners.

ACTIONS:

IMPLEMENT SECOND PHASE (HIGH LEVEL) OF TRAIL COUNTERS.

Implement the second phase of trail counters. Data should be collected seasonally in all four quarters of the year. **A “Trail Impact” Volunteer position**

should be established by 2022 to collect and manage the data. Additional counter locations include:

- Watauga Trailhead
- Alvarado Station
- Taylors Valley Trailhead
- Creek Junction Trailhead

Note: The First Phase included between MM1 and the Abingdon Sports Complex, near the Orchard Hill Rd Crossing in Damascus, Straight Branch Trailhead, and Green Cove Station.

Partners: The USFS, Abingdon, Damascus, and VDOT (help with acquiring trail counters), Trail Impact Volunteer Coordinator

Measurements of Success: # of trail counts, quarterly data has been collected on-target and have a baseline of usage data each year to guide decision making.

Next Steps: Continue to develop annual reports, tracking yearly. Utilize as data input in the Trail Economic Impact Study in 2024.

STRATEGY: Develop and implement a strategy to assess the impact the trail has.

ACTIONS:

IMPLEMENT THE VISITOR SURVEY.

A visitor survey provides current data that informs marketing and business decisions. A single season approach looking at the peak summer travel period can benefit communities in understanding who visitors are, where they come from, and travel motivations. Surveying during non-summer travel times can offer additional insight and help to allocate resources and more varied market potential for year around visitors. A four-season study allows for comparative analyses, pointing to traveler or seasonal differences. Surveys are used to collect information by intercepting visitors in the various locations (e.g., lodging properties, restaurants, retail shops, gas stations and outdoor trailheads, etc.) they may visit. Example survey questions can include:

- What’s their age and other demographic information (race, gender, etc.)?
- Where are they coming from?
- How long do they stay? How many nights?
- Where do they go to get travel information?
- What do they like to do when they come?
- What are their travel party characteristics (single, family, composition, age, income)?
- How much do they spend while they are here?
- What section of the trail did they use?

Partners: Outside consultant and trail stakeholders in survey development and intercept locations

Measurements of Success: Completed survey collection

during peak season ensuring the most accurate snapshot of visitors, and a final report presented to community stakeholders to guide future decisions

Next Steps: Hire an outside consultant to create a survey catered to the stakeholder needs. Work with trail stakeholders to set-up visitor intercept locations, hire survey collectors, and work with consultant to get data analyzed and reports after data collection is complete.

CONTINUE ANNUAL RECURRING DATA COLLECTION (BUSINESS SURVEY & TRAIL COUNTER COLLECTION) AND COMPILE INTO A REPORT. Develop an annual report with all trail impact numbers.

Partners: Outfitters and other businesses, the USFS, Town of Abingdon, Damascus, and VDOT (help with acquiring trail counters), Trail Counts Volunteer Coordinator

Measurements of Success: Survey response from business, trail impact #'s

Next Steps: Implement annually.

2024

STRATEGY: Implement a long-term strategy for a Full Economic Impact Study.

ACTIONS:

IMPLEMENT TRAIL INTERCEPT STUDY & TRAIL ECONOMIC IMPACT STUDY. Recreation assets generate benefits for their communities in attracting visitors who would otherwise not be there. Visitors who come for a particular activity or event spend money in the local economy. Direct spending by visitors includes restaurants, grocery stores, retail shops, and on transportation and lodging. Uses of recreation-based impact analysis includes using the data to apply for grants, marketing, local support, and decision making. Using collected data from trail counts, direct observation, and business surveys along with visitor profiles will be required to assess economic impact. A staff person or volunteer willing to dedicate many hours will be needed to be the main liaison with all aspects of this study working with an outside consultant.

Trail Intercept Study. A more extensive demographic study can be initiated but would likely require paid individuals who are adequately trained in data collection methods. This study can more deeply measure demographics of trail users and assess user expenditures.

Trail Economic Impact Study. This study would be an

update of the original 2004 impact study. This study is comprehensive and includes analyzing many different kinds of economic impacts and methods for analysis. This study typically requires software modeling which requires a highly trained economic modeler (consultant).

Partners: Trail management partners to coordinate enacting intercept survey (USFS would be dependent on receiving approval, as this typically required additional efforts), consultant to oversee study, consultant team or university system to assist with staffing trail intercept surveys, staff or volunteer to be the main liaison and coordinator of studies

Measurements of Success: # of intercept surveys taken, economic impact #'s, reach externally to tell the story of the trail's impact (reach to elected officials, decision makers, etc.)

Next Steps: Develop summary into communications/marketing material to use when communicating to elected officials, decision makers, and funders.

HEALTH IMPACT STUDY. Parks and trails can improve health in several ways including increased physical activity, improved mental health, environmental benefits, and community interaction. This study will analyze activity and impact to health in the region with the possibility of being funded and of importance to organizations like Ballad Health.

Partners: Health organizations and trail management partners

Measurements of Success: External reach to elected officials, decision makers, etc.

STRATEGY: Develop and implement a strategy to assess the impact the trail has.

ACTIONS:

CONTINUE ANNUAL RECURRING DATA COLLECTION (BUSINESS SURVEY & TRAIL COUNTER COLLECTION) AND COMPILE INTO A REPORT. Incorporate 2024 data collection into the trail economic impact study above.

Partners: Outfitters and other businesses, the USFS, Town of Abingdon, and VDOT (help with acquiring trail counters), Trail Counts Volunteer Coordinator

Measurements of Success: Survey response from business, trail impact #'s

Next Steps: Implement annually.

2025

STRATEGY: *Develop and implement a strategy to assess the impact the trail has.*

ACTIONS:

DEVELOP OUTREACH CAMPAIGN AROUND MESSAGING ABOUT TRAIL IMPACT NUMBERS.

See more about this in the Marketing, Outreach, and Development Strategic Plan.

Partners: Trail management partners to advocate to decisions makers using trail impact numbers

Measurements of Success: External reach to communicate impact to elected officials, decision makers, etc.

2026 & BEYOND

Continue to do annual trail count reports and the business survey. Consider updating the Economic Impact Study every 10-15 years.



*Photo by Alison Williams,
courtesy of Fans of Virginia Creeper Trail*

MARKETING, COMMUNICATIONS, & OUTREACH STRATEGIC PLAN



SEE FULL PILLAR ON PAGE 107

THE FOLLOWING IS A DETAILED OUTLINE FOR THE STRATEGY OF
BRANDING, MARKETING, DEVELOPMENT, & OUTREACH

GOAL: The Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy will lead the way in advocacy, promotion, communication, and community outreach for the Trail.

2022

STRATEGY: *Take the lead in being the comprehensive resource and disseminator of information for visitors.*

ACTIONS:

UPDATE AND DISTRIBUTE MAPS AND VCTC INFO MORE BROADLY AND CONSISTENTLY. Even prior to re-brand, but especially after VCTC re-brand, work on more broadly distributing VCTC merchandise (maps, etc.) to retailers and the public.

Partners: Trail Managers, Local Businesses, Community Partners

Measurements of Success: All of the businesses that want them have the resources for information about the trail or know where to get them if they desire.

Next Steps:

- 1) Identify all current locations and potential future suitable locations, outlets and partners for distribution.
- 2) Leverage volunteers for distribution.

BECOME THE “ONE STOP SHOP” FOR SOCIAL MEDIA. Assess how the VCTC can become the “One Stop Shop” through a market and demand analysis and assess how the VCTC can serve that role. **An immediate need is to consolidate the existing social media presences, working with partners like the Town of Abingdon, Town of Damascus, and the USFS. Currently, there are competing**

Facebook pages and other social media that can confuse visitors and stakeholders. The Conservancy should take the lead in managing social media for the trail but can partner with others on content.

Partners: Trail Managers, Local Businesses, Community Partners, other tourism-related organizations

Measurements of Success: Users and community stakeholders state that there is no longer confusion around who is the go to resource for information about the trail

Next Steps:

- 1) Inventory all social media outlets from different sources.
- 2) Utilize current survey data and information to assess and communicate that there is the confusion on information sources.
- 3) Facilitate a meeting with key partners to identify solutions to the issue.
- 4) Build the solution into future MOU’s and agreements.

STRATEGIZE THE “ONE STOP SHOP” TRAIL EVENT MANAGEMENT PROGRAM. Work with trail management partners to streamline and have the VCTC become the lead coordinator and official for event management on the trail.

Strategize streamlining event management with partners and define the VCTC’s role as leading management of trailwide events. Consider cost share programs with partners that compensate the VCTC for managing events.

Strategize an equitable fee structure.

Initiate Development of Event Planning & Management Process & Standard Operating Procedures with all trail managers and key event promoters in the region.

Create a Communications Plan with all supporting resources, websites, and forms for event managers and partners to clearly understand the new process.

Steps:

- 1) Inventory all existing events.
- 2) Establish a demand analysis of how events are being held, what process they use, how permitting will work, and what the fully-burdened cost of each event is.
- 3) Based on the above analysis, build a clear and equitable fee based structure for events on the Virginia Creeper Trail.
- 4) Identify the management process, tools (software, documents, etc), approval process, planning calendar, etc for events management.
- 5) Hold, at a minimum, one annual event planning meeting with all partners and trail managers to develop a Virginia Creeper Trail “master” calendar.

Partners: Trail management partners.

Measurements of Success:

- 1) All events on the Virginia Creeper Trail are coordinated by one process and one entity (minus a few steps required by trail management partners).
- 2) There is a clear and accessible process for prospective event producers to find and follow.
- 3) There is a revenue generation model to ensure the administration of the process is covered and shared by the key trail managers and stakeholders.
- 4) All event information is disseminated using VCTC “one stop shop” social media.

Next Steps: Adjust program yearly as needed.

STRATEGY: Become the lead fundraiser and financial sponsor for trail-wide projects.

ACTIONS:

DEVELOP A FUNDRAISING PLAN. Develop a fundraising plan in 2022.

Partners: Work with trail management partners, identify priorities for funding based on strategic plan.

Measurements of Success: \$ raised, % win rate.

Next Steps: Set fundraising target goals yearly.

STRATEGY: Raise awareness and support of the trail and the Conservancy by engaging with the community, decision makers, and businesses.

ACTIONS:

ROLL OUT CLEAR AND COMPREHENSIVE BRAND STRATEGY. The VCTC should focus on a clear and consistent branding identity and strategy prior to implementation of any major investments in updates to online media, marketing materials, and other types of outreach. Following a full brand project, update the website, marketing materials, maps, etc.

- 1) Finalize brand brief and value proposition through this phase of the planning process.
- 2) Identify short-term opportunities to enhance the VCTC brand in existing assets and materials prior to a full re-branding project (website, maps, social media, etc) as there is a significant lack of brand representation and reference to the VCTC in those resources.
- 3) Create an ad hoc committee of key stakeholders, partner, and subject matter experts in the VCTC network to help build an request for proposals (RFP) for the full re-brand exercise.
- 4) Facilitate a full branding exercise for the trail and the organization.

Partners: Trail management partners and outfitters to provide updated materials or update shared information

Measurements of Success: Future surveys indicate a better understanding of the role of the VCTC in supporting the trail

Next Steps: Implement branding into all marketing and outreach moving forward.

HOST A VCTC END OF YEAR CELEBRATION AND VOLUNTEER RECOGNITION EVENT.

This banquet could be an awards ceremony and celebration that recognizes and increases volunteers, sponsors, partners, funders, and decision makers to celebrate the VCTC’s and partners’ work each year.

- Form a committee of volunteers and partners to help organize and lead the effort.
- Establish high level goals/outcomes for the first one (keep it simple and grow).
- Build into annual budget and work plan.
- Identify sponsors and in-kind donations to better engage other community stakeholders and businesses.

Partners: Include trail management partners, event sponsors, etc.

Measurements of Success: # of attendees, VCTC brand recognition, \$ raised

Next Steps: Build upon event annually.

PUBLISH ANNUALLY A “STATE OF THE TRAIL”

REPORT. This report can be the key communication tool to the public reporting what has been accomplished and what is needed for the trail. This could include estimated use numbers, trail conditions, trestle conditions, capital investments, fundraising campaigns, etc. Use it as a communication tool to trail management partners, towns/counties, businesses, and elected officials, and post it on the VCTC website.

Partners: Trail management partners, event sponsors, work with media to publish highlights, etc.

Measurements of Success: # of readers and \$ donated.

Next Steps: Publish a report yearly.

2023

***STRATEGY:** Raise awareness and support of the trail and the VCTC by engaging with the community, decision makers, and businesses.*

ACTIONS:

DEVELOP A COMPREHENSIVE VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT PLAN AND PROGRAM AND VOLUNTEER NEEDS LIST.

This program should create clear and easy ways for members of the community to access information and understand how they can support the needs of the trail and the VCTC. Work with trail management partners to:

- **Develop a list of all volunteer needs and roles.** Develop a comprehensive list of trail volunteer needs.
- **Facilitate a volunteer resources inventory.** Take those task/roles and build a Volunteer Resources Inventory Survey asking what skills they have and what skills they'd like to contribute to the VCTC. Solicit from network and volunteers what their interests are in assisting the VCTC. Consider implementing a survey or other types of outreach to gather feedback. Begin to use software to track, communicate with, and collect volunteer hours.
- **Envision the Ambassador/Patrol Program.** Task a volunteer to benchmark other model programs for trail related ambassadors, maintenance, etc. Begin the planning process for a patrol program which will assist the public and align with USFS trail ranger program. Envision with the USFS how these programs can work together for the entire trail.
- **Develop a Volunteer Handbook and Training.** Develop a handbook that creates a standardized process to be facilitate by volunteer leaders, clearly explains

roles and responsibilities, and enables volunteers with the support and tools to allow them to be the best ambassadors for the trail.

Partners: Trail management partners.

Measurements of Success: # of volunteers recruited, # of volunteer hours.

Next Steps: Work with partners to do yearly volunteer trainings.

MAP OUT A “TRAIL-FRIENDLY” BUSINESS PROGRAM AND ENGAGE LOCAL BUSINESSES.

Engage local businesses to build VCTC and community support. Some ways to build a stronger relationship with trail-related businesses could include:

- **Organize a few key businesses currently engaged to help inform and support this effort.**
- **Ask existing businesses who support the VCTC what value they see in supporting the organization** to help frame and articulate your pitch to new businesses.
- **Develop a Customer “Round-up” Program.** This program allows customers to round up to the next dollar to donate to the Trail, with the VCTC being the recipient.
- **Host Business Stakeholder Specific Meetings Periodically.** Have annual or twice a year meetings with businesses to provide updates on the trail, launch new programs, inform them of upcoming events, get feedback on trail related topics, and engage them on key issues.
- **Engage local Chambers of Commerce or other business oriented leadership groups** in gathering a better understanding of how best to coordinate with local businesses. They are the experts.
- **Implement a Business Specific Newsletter.** An e-newsletter can serve the same purpose as the above action but could occur quarterly.
- **Envision a Trail Friendly Business Program.** Local businesses can offer support or discounts to trail users and receive recognition and promotion of their involvement.
- **Involve businesses as sponsors for conservation events and projects**

Partners: Businesses, chamber of commerce, etc.

Measurements of Success: Businesses along the trail become champions for the trail, understand its value, and feel informed and engaged by the VCTC. Measure # of businesses engaged, \$ contributed tied to the program.

Next Steps: Continue to refine the Trail-Friendly business program each year. Implement full program in 2024.

2024

STRATEGY: Take the lead in being the comprehensive resource and disseminator of information for visitors.

ACTIONS:

IMPLEMENT THE “ONE STOP SHOP” FOR TRAIL EVENT MANAGEMENT. Implement the VCTC becoming the lead coordinator and “go-to” for event management, including a cost share agreement with USFS signed. Work with other trail management partners as well.

- **Implement Event Planning & Management Process & Standard Operating Procedures** with trail management partners.
- **Launch Communications Plan** and all supporting resources, websites, and forms.

Partners: Trail Managers, Local Businesses, Community Partners, other tourism-related organizations

Measurements of Success: New Event Management Process and Communication is launched. Survey responses should identify that stakeholders better understand where to go for Virginia Creeper Trail Event Information and Process, and state that the process is more clear. Measure # of events and # of participants the VCTC has helped oversee and quantify compensation directed towards VCTC for event management oversight.

Next Steps: Continue to refine program yearly based on trail management partners and event sponsor feedback.

ACTIONS:

DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT A “ONE STOP SHOP” TRAIL MOBILE APP (APPLICATION). Work with trail management partners, businesses, and tourism partners to develop a Virginia Creeper Trail App that can report trail issues, have an integrated trail map with amenities, and direct trail users to trail-friendly businesses. Create a “Design team” with support of an app developer to help direct design.

Partners: Trail management partners, businesses, and tourism groups to provide input on design and help promote the app.

Measurements of Success: # of downloads of the app, # of users annually, # of people directed towards and supporting of the Conservancy

Next Steps: Work with app developer to refine and adjust for glitches and updates.

STRATEGY: Raise awareness and support of the trail and the VCTC by engaging with the community, decision makers, and businesses.

ACTIONS:

IMPLEMENT A FULL VOLUNTEER PROGRAM, INCLUDING A TRAIL AMBASSADOR PROGRAM.

Implement these programs. Work with the USFS to provide dual training for volunteers through the USFS’s current volunteer training program. Advertise available volunteer positions and actively recruit. Have a volunteer orientation annually or semi-annually.

Launch Volunteer Handbook and Training that is a standardized process facilitated by volunteer leaders, clearly explains roles and responsibilities, and enables your volunteers with the support and tools to be the best ambassadors for the trail.

Partners: Trail management partners

Measurements of Success: The VCTC will host at least one volunteer training with the new process and handbook annually. Measure # of volunteers and volunteer hours.

Next Steps: Annual trainings, work with trail management partners to refine training and volunteer needs annually.

IMPLEMENT THE TRAIL-FRIENDLY PROGRAM

Fully implement program with recruitment of businesses to the program.

- **Finalize the Trail Friendly Business Program** and all supporting resources, incentives, and instructions
- **Build a Communications and Outreach Plan** for the new program to ensure all stakeholders in the business community are aware of and see the benefits and impact of this new program
- **Leverage Newsletter and Business Meeting** to recruit new businesses to the program

Partners: Businesses, chamber of commerce, etc.

Measurements of Success: Program is launched and more businesses are engaged in supporting, promoting, and funding the Virginia Creeper Trail and the VCTC. Measure # of businesses participating in the program, \$ contributed tied to the program.

Next Steps: Refine program as needed.

2025 & BEYOND

STRATEGY: Raise awareness and support of the trail and the VCTC by engaging with the community, decision makers, and businesses.

ACTIONS:

EXPAND ON TRAIL AMBASSADOR AND VOLUNTEER PROGRAM. Continue to build a volunteer base to support needs and available positions.

Partners: Trail management partners

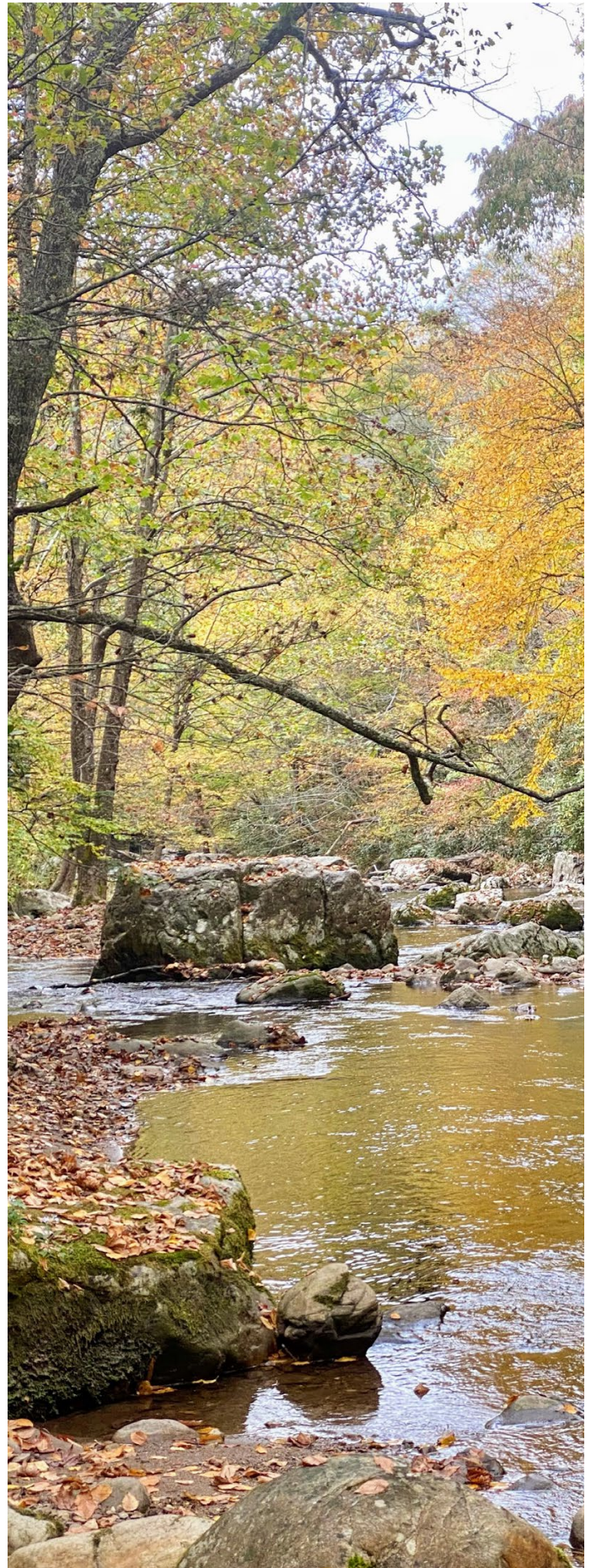
Measurements of Success: Measure # of volunteers and volunteer hours.

IMPLEMENT A MASS OUTREACH CAMPAIGN ABOUT THE RESULTS OF THE ECONOMIC IMPACT STUDY. Implement an outreach campaign to the community and especially decision makers and funders about the results of the Economic Impact Study.

Partners: Work with trail management partners and others to communicate important message related to the trail's impact.

Measurements of Success: # of organizations, elected officials, decision makers, and funders reached to hear key message about the trail's impact

Next Steps: Continue using trail impact numbers as routine messaging in outreach for years to come.



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SECTION 2
VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL MASTER PLAN

THE MASTER PLAN



ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE & PARTNERSHIPS

A PLAN TO BUILD THE VCTC'S CAPACITY & EXPAND ITS PARTNERSHIPS

OVERVIEW

STRENGTHENING THE VCTC'S INTERNAL GOVERNANCE AND OPERATIONS, & BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE FUTURE

BOARD GOVERNANCE

The Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy is an organization in rapid transition from a social trail-maintenance-oriented “club” to a full-fledged trail conservancy with trail-wide duties and responsibilities for creating and building partnerships, facilitating funding of major infrastructure projects, developing and implementing a conservation plan, measuring trail use and economic impact, and marketing and promoting the Virginia Creeper Trail.

The VCTC has already accomplished several critical internal steps and created the broad framework for change. However, much work remains to be done to complete the transition to a conservancy. The VCTC still needs to make

several internal structural changes and many incremental, day-to-day advances in its operations, as well as develop and nurture partnerships with agencies, organizations, and many others.

Organizational change in a nonprofit organization begins and ends with the Board of Directors and Executive Director. The *Guided Organizational Assessment for the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy and the Work Plan* that accompanies the assessment (*See Appendices B and C*) provide a “trail map” of steps that the VCTC can take year after year, for the next five years, to strengthen the organization’s internal operations and build capacity. By assigning tasks to specific individuals (such as the Board president, the chair of a specific committee, or the Executive Director), securing the necessary funding, providing the necessary support, and emphasizing accountability and performance, the Conservancy can achieve dramatic organizational change in a relatively short period of time.



PARTNERSHIPS

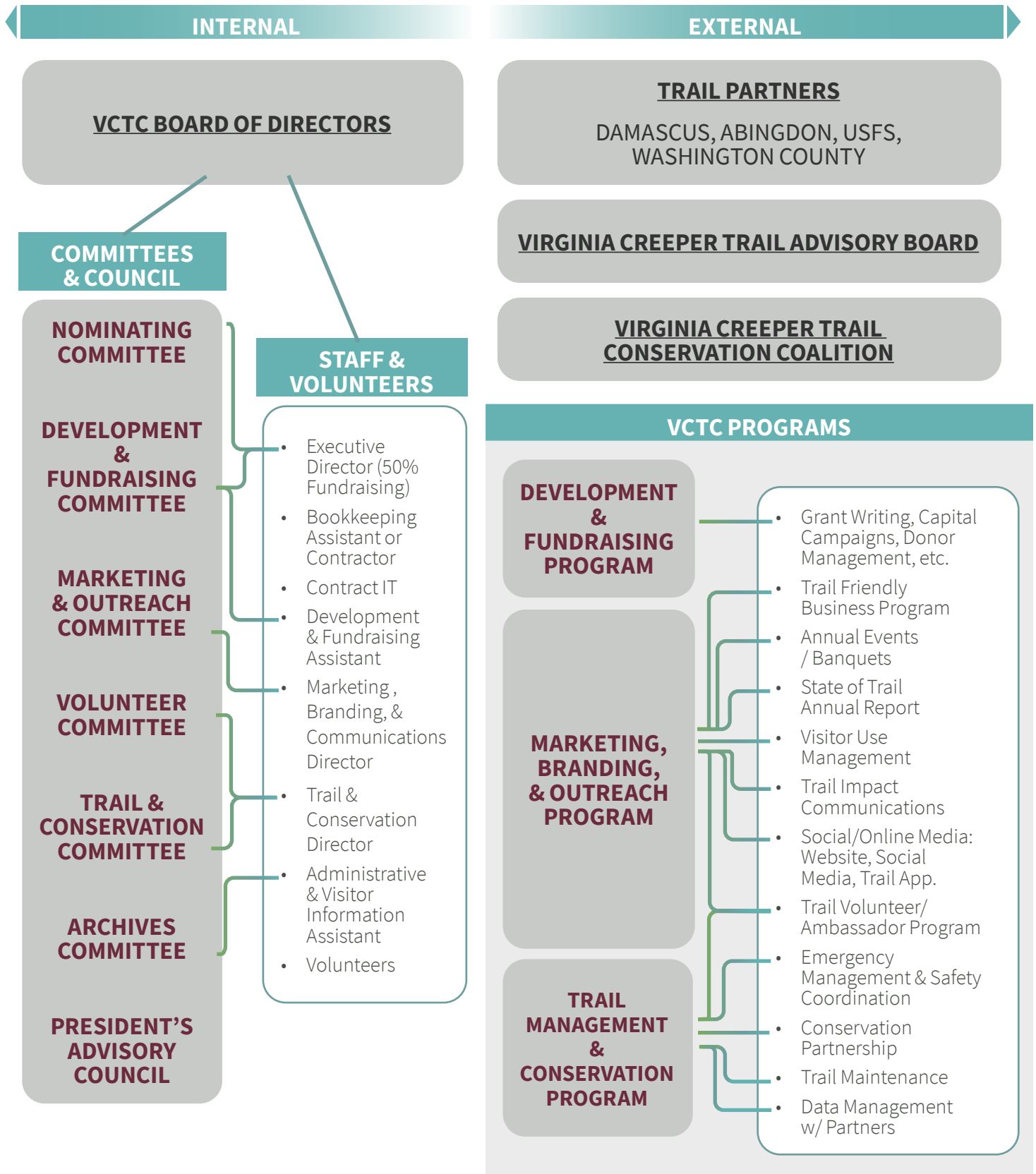
Partnerships are a fundamental necessity for managing a 34-mile long, linear recreational trail involving dozens of agencies and organizations with different roles and responsibilities across multiple jurisdictions. Communications, coordination (particularly in an emergency situation), and overlapping roles present significant challenges. **However, as long as there is one entity that serves effectively as the central coordinator, the combined strengths of multiple partners far outweigh the capabilities of any single agency or organization. The VCTC can fill this coordination role capably, provided roles and responsibilities are well-defined and sufficient resources are available.**

A critically important concept in developing effective partnerships is a written commitment by each partner to provide agreed-upon services. The most common mechanisms to document these commitments and relationships among partners are **memorandums of understanding, cooperative agreements, and cost-share agreements**. These agreements ensure that each partner understands and acknowledges its roles and responsibilities, as well as the roles and responsibilities of other partners. Cooperative and cost-share agreements also allow for funding collaborative programs and projects to promote and protect the trail

The Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy must lead the way to promote & protect a unified trail experience.

PROPOSED VCTC STRUCTURE & PROGRAMS

INTERNAL & EXTERNAL



ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE CHANGE

RESTRUCTURING AND BUILDING THE VCTC'S BOARD, STAFF, & VOLUNTEER CAPACITY

BUILDING THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

The Conservancy needs to take three immediate actions to begin building the capacity of its Board of Directors (all of which will increase capacity or decrease inefficiencies, and none of which require any out-of-pocket expense):

- 1. Create & Empower a Permanent Nominating Committee.** The Nominating Committee is the most critical committee of any nonprofit organization. The committee's charge is, in essence, determining the future leadership of the organization. By implementing a basic recruitment strategy and using a skills matrix to identify Board needs, desired skills, and candidate qualifications, the VCTC's nominating committee can rapidly recruit, vet, nominate and train a cadre of new Board members
- 2. Elect a Vice President & Develop Board Service Expectation Agreements for Officers, Board Members, and Committee Chairs.** A Vice President is an essential complementary position for a President. An active and engaged Vice President can assume responsibility for ensuring that the Board defines and implements nonprofit best management practices. The Vice President also stands in for the President as requested, and often leads the way in managing committee performance and accountability.

Current and new Board members should sign Written Board Service Expectation Agreements along with conflict-of-interest statements annually. These documents are not formal or binding. Rather, they are up-front, informal documentation of agreements between the organization and each Board member about what Board service entails.
- 3. Implement Nonprofit Organizational Best Management Practices.** As soon as possible, the VCTC needs to implement a number of best management practices, from relatively simple matters such as keeping minutes and developing an annual calendar of Board and committee meetings, to more complex tasks such as establishing committees and committee charges, approving annual budgets, and reviewing and approving an externally prepared financial report and federal and state tax filings annually.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Over time, the Conservancy's Board of Directors can implement more than 50 other actions and changes in Board procedures and practices (which are described in *Appendices B & C the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy Guided Organizational Assessment and Work Plan*) that will help streamline Board meetings and communications between and among Board and staff. Not only will these actions and modifications make for improved capacity and greater internal efficiency: they also will help the VCTC obtain grants, gifts, and other funds, and attract and retain top talent for its Board of Directors and staff. Some of these actions and changes include:

Establish & Empower Additional Committees

The Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy should develop and populate an internal committee structure as soon as

resources allow. Although each committee should be led by a VCTC Board member, other committee members may include a mix of Board- and non-Board members. Most committees should be expected to meet at least once between Board meetings, even if meetings are held by conference call or video conference. Meeting minutes are unnecessary, as long as outcomes and follow-up actions and assignments are prescribed in writing. The committee chair should be expected to report out to the full Board in a brief written or oral report at each Board meeting.

In addition to a Nominating Committee, the VCTC should create the following committees (and approve a written charge for each committee):

COMMITTEES

Development & Fundraising Committee:

The Conservancy's future depends in large part on the revenue it raises. This Committee can help the President and Executive Director focus their attention and resources on raising funds. The committee should provide the Executive Director and Board with critical guidance and direction on fundraising, beginning with an outline or basic fundraising plan that addresses opportunities for seeking funds from government agencies, foundation grant programs, corporations, major donors, and membership, and assigns specific tasks and deadlines to individual staff and committee members. A more formal fundraising plan should be developed as soon as staff and financial resources permit.

Marketing & Outreach Committee: A Marketing & Outreach Committee can provide staff with crucial guidance on methods for promoting the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy to different audiences. In addition to helping to craft the Conservancy's outward communications to the public, the committee can help the VCTC's Board and staff broaden its audience and expand its potential for fundraising.

Volunteer Committee: An effective Volunteer Committee can perform many of the functions of staff. This may be particularly important for trail management and conservation programs, as it may take several years before funding can be secured to hire a trail management and conservation staff person. Engaged committee members can also assume many of the responsibilities for recruiting, organizing, training, and supervising volunteers.

Trail & Conservation Committee: This committee can take on the important work of creating the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservation Partnership and ensuring that the VCTC fulfills its obligations for trail management and maintenance activities.

Hold a Membership Meeting

Hold a membership meeting and request a motion to re-elect current Board members and elect any new Board members identified by the Nominating Committee or membership. Until the Bylaws are amended, the Conservancy must follow the current Bylaws and hold a membership meeting to elect or re-elect Board members and elect officers. In the interim, the VCTC may fill vacancies on the Board by appointment for the unexpired term of office by majority vote of the Board of Directors at a special meeting called for that purpose. However, members and officers appointed in this manner may only serve until they are re-elected at a membership meeting.

Develop a Board Manual

Develop, in concert with the executive director, a Board manual to serve as a repository of current Board policies and practices and as an orientation guide for new Board members. This manual should include copies of key governance documents, legal documents, Board-approved policies, financial procedures, committee charges, and annual financial statements and tax filings.

Update VCTC's Bylaws

Update the VCTC's Bylaws to reflect the organization's transition from a "trail club" to a "trail conservancy" with a more corporate structure. As time and resources permit, the VCTC should revise its Bylaws so that it can more effectively operate as a nonprofit organization with a broad scope of responsibilities.

Create a President's Advisory Council

The Board of Directors should approve the creation of a President's Advisory Council as soon as the opportunity arises. In addition, using the Council as a source of advice and counsel, the President can utilize the Council effectively to keep former Board members connected and engaged, serve as special recognition for major donors who wish to give but otherwise not be engaged, and provide for appropriate recognition and appreciation of elected officials and candidates who cannot commit to being on a Board of Directors. Some organizations also use councils of this nature as effective donor cultivation tools. The President is responsible for nominating and communicating with members of the Council and soliciting their advice and counsel, with support from the executive director and staff as warranted.

THE STAFF

In order to increase staff resources, the VCTC will need substantially more revenue. This will require a recalibration of the duties and responsibilities of the executive director at the outset, from the more managerial role currently to a

predominantly fundraising role in the future. Obtaining this additional funding is a crucial first step: as soon as funds are secured, they can be used to implement additional programs that benefit the trail, which in turn will help make the case for more funding.

HIRING STAFF

The following is a logical sequence for hiring staff, so that funds are in place before staff positions are filled (or at least, are paid for by the duties and performance of the hired staff person):

- 1.** The **full-time Executive Director** needs to have a formal job description, with fundraising comprising 50% or more of the director's total time, starting immediately. Performance measures should be written into the job description. The President, and other Board members if invited, should institute a practice of regular meetings with the executive director to review progress and course-corrections as needed. The executive director should work closely with the Development & Fundraising Committee as soon as one has been created and chartered. Together, the director and committee should initially create and implement a fundraising outline, and as soon as time and resources permit, create and implement a full fundraising plan. Additionally, the executive director should assume responsibilities for implementing best management practices for handling money, obtaining an annual financial report, ensuring proper insurance coverages, developing an annual budget, supervising staff and contractors, entering into contractual agreements, and filing proper federal and state tax forms.
- 2.** The **part-to-full time Administrative & Visitor Information Assistant** and the **part-time bookkeeping assistant or contractor** should assume all office-related functions, so that the executive director can devote time and energy to fundraising. A qualified and capable bookkeeper can handle data entry, invoicing, expense reporting, and financial reporting, so that the executive director is only required to review and approve transactions and reports.
- 3.** The **information & technologies (IT) contractor** should assume responsibilities for IT matters. IT services can be provided efficiently by a contractor without significant expense or commitment of staff resources.
- 4.** The **Marketing, Branding, & Communications Coordinator** should market the Virginia Creeper Trail and the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy together, with the dual objectives of providing consistent, high-quality information to the public and making the case for the Conservancy as the voice of the trail and the source of good information about the entire trail.
- 5.** The **Trail & Conservation Programs Coordinator** can implement trail-maintenance programs, visitor safety measures, provide staff support for the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservation Partnership (*see Trail Management*), and oversee impact studies. The trail and conservation programs coordinator can also take over most responsibilities for recruitment, development, training, and support of volunteers.

VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers and volunteer programs are crucial elements of every strong non-profit trail conservancy, and the VCTC is no exception. If asked and supported, volunteers can do far more than just routine trail maintenance: they can organize and host events, meet and greet the public, complete basic and complex capital projects, staff the Welcome Center,

monitor visitor use and trail conditions, fundraise, and make many other contributions. In addition, in the short term before staff are hired, volunteers can assume responsibilities for assisting the executive director in program development for marketing and outreach. See more about this in the *Marketing, Communications, & Outreach on page 107*.

EVOLVING INTO A “PASS THROUGH” CONSERVANCY

Significant financial and personnel resources are needed to develop a land trust capable of holding and stewarding conservation easements, which are – by definition – obligations that must be undertaken in perpetuity. Instead of devoting its currently limited resources to becoming a land trust, the VCTC should seek to engage other established land trusts, use the conservation recommendations provided in the Master Plan as a baseline for strategic conservation planning, and partner with agencies and other organizations to develop a regional conservation partnership focused on conserving the landscape of the Virginia Creeper Trail.

Regional conservation partnerships have flourished in many other areas around the country. They serve to bring conservation organizations, land trusts, and other interested parties together, as well as facilitate land conservation and historic preservation projects, act as a clearinghouse, foster collaboration and cooperation, and create and promote a positive message about land conservation to the general public (*see further discussion under Trail Management*).

In addition to being the coordinator of a regional conservation coalition, the VCTC can and should serve as a “true conservancy” — a “front-end” proponent for land conservation which works with agencies and other organizations to advance protection of the scenic and outdoor recreational resources of the Virginia Creeper Trail.

If the VCTC decides to become active in conserving land itself, it should undertake actual land conservation projects only in instances where these duties can be transferred almost immediately to other land trusts or public agencies. Should the organization decide that it wants to acquire and hold fee simple properties long-term for protection of the Virginia Creeper Trail, it should:

- » Carefully evaluate the costs associated with management and stewardship of these assets, which can be significant.
- » Ensure that the VCTC has adequate liability and D&O insurance.
- » Prepare and carry out management plans for each property.
- » Develop an inspection program to ensure that its properties are inspected for trespass and other issues.
- » Be prepared to document and address management issues, including trespasses and encroachments, in a timely manner, and take action as necessary to defend the organization’s interests.

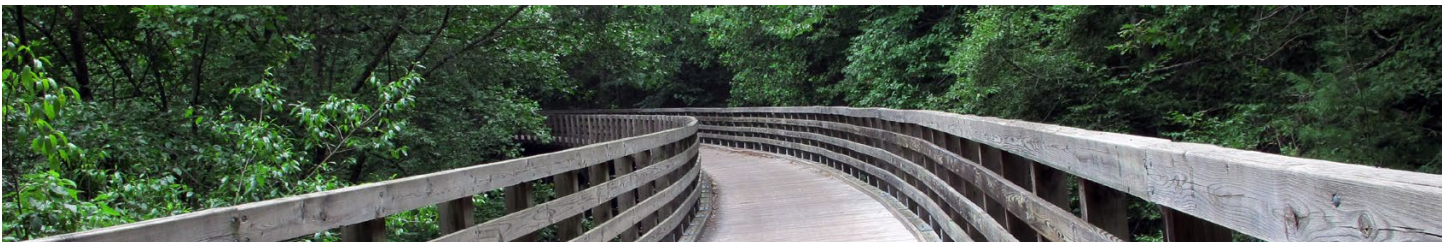
- » Be prepared to obtain an independent appraisal by a qualified appraiser for each transaction, except in extraordinary circumstances.



BECOMING A LAND TRUST

If at some point in the future the VCTC’s Board of Directors decides that the organization should aspire to become a full-fledged land trust that acquires and stewards conservation easements and fee simple properties, it should:

1. File amended articles of incorporation with the IRS and the Virginia State Corporation Commission that state that one of the VCTC’s purposes is to acquire, hold, maintain, conserve, and protect land and/or interests in land in perpetuity within the meaning of I.R.C. §170(h)(4)(A)(i)
2. Carefully evaluate the short- and long-term costs associated with acquiring, holding, stewarding, and defending conservation easements in perpetuity; and
3. Review the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy Guided Organizational Assessment and Work Plan and any current guidance provided by the Land Trust Alliance and Land Trust Accreditation Commission, and ensure that it can, within a relatively short period of time, operate in conformance with Land Trust Standards and Practices.



FUNDING, FUNDING, FUNDING

Building capacity requires funding

Most capacity-defining challenges for nonprofit organizations come back to one issue: can the organization secure sufficient funding to fulfill its mission and implement programs that help achieve that mission? The VCTC is poised on the threshold, with a Master Plan for the future. All that remains to be done is the hard work of raising the money.

As a first step, the organization should seek funding from agency partners and major donors to build internal capacity and carry out programs that benefit the trail and the public. The Conservancy, the USFS, and the towns of Abingdon and Damascus have begun this process and established the basic framework and general terms of agreement for entering into formal cooperative agreements. Establishing a conservation fee arrangement could serve as an important mechanism for funding capital projects and ongoing maintenance (see the more detailed discussion of a renewable conservation fee below under Partnerships).

The VCTC can take the initiative to raise funds from other sources as well. The Organization Structure Road Map in the Strategic Plan recommends that the organization develop a strong fundraising program first; then implement a marketing, branding, and outreach program to create a public image for the VCTC synonymous with the Virginia Creeper Trail (which in turn will significantly expand opportunities for fundraising); and finally, develop trail maintenance and conservation programs. Each sequential step in this structure is an intentional “building block” for the next: The Conservancy’s cash reserves are not unlimited, and the VCTC needs a net positive “return on investment” for each program in succession. In other words, each step is designed to pay for itself as it is being developed, so that there are sufficient financial reserves on hand to keep the organization in the black.

Government grants can provide another source of revenue, although application and reporting requirements are

frequently cumbersome. Government agency grants are sometimes not available for capacity-building; however, overhead and administrative costs can be covered as part of the overall scope of a project.

The adoption of a **conservation fee** can provide a consistent source of funding for capital improvement projects, conservation of the trail corridor, large scale maintenance, new amenities and upgrades, and emergency use.

Major donor programs provide the next most likely source of funds. Donations from individuals are estimated to comprise 70 to 75% of all philanthropic giving.

Membership programs typically cost almost as much to manage as they return. Still, membership is important as a potential source of community awareness and support, and a wellspring for major donor cultivation.

Foundation & corporate grants are more episodic, and often are tied to single-year performance. Foundations in particular prefer to underwrite innovative start-up programs, but do not wish to be committed for more than a year or two.

Finally, the VCTC may wish to approach local businesses that provide services to trail visitors about either an “opt-in,” “opt-out,” or “round-up” provision that would be attached to each transaction. These potential arrangements are discussed in more detail in the Marketing, Communications, & Outreach which begins on page 107.

Diversification of funding is essential

Dependence on a specific funding stream may work in the short term but could be a recipe for disaster in the long term. Over-dependence on funding from a particular source can cause an organizational crisis when funding from that source stops abruptly. An over-dependence on one or two sources can also cause an organization to lose sight of its mission and priorities – by “following the money,” organizations can end up captive to the wishes of a funder. (To the extent that funding is co-aligned with the VCTC’s priorities, this may not be an issue.)

This plan recommends, as a next step, developing a fundraising action plan that strategizes how to diversify funding sources.

BECOME THE UNIFYING FORCE FOR “ONE TRAIL”

Managing a 34-mile long, linear resource across multiple jurisdictions requires collaboration, coordination, & cooperation.

Cooperative management frameworks, also known as public/private partnerships, are common management scenarios for long-distance trails. In fact, due to the unusual geographical nature of long-distance trails, they are almost a necessity, given that a long-distance trail typically traverses multiple jurisdictions and land ownership.

Trail-management partners that own the trail right-of-way, emergency response agencies, town and county government agencies, state agencies, businesses that provide services, land trusts, and other conservation organizations all have roles in promoting, protecting, or funding trail maintenance and management.

However, these types of partnerships require a strong coalescing agency to succeed. As the only entity that has protection and promotion of the trail as its sole mission, and the only entity that has trail-wide responsibilities, the VCTC is uniquely positioned to serve as a catalyst capable of leading and building a strong coalition of trail partners, and to be the unifying force for managing, promoting, and protecting the Virginia Creeper as “One Trail.”

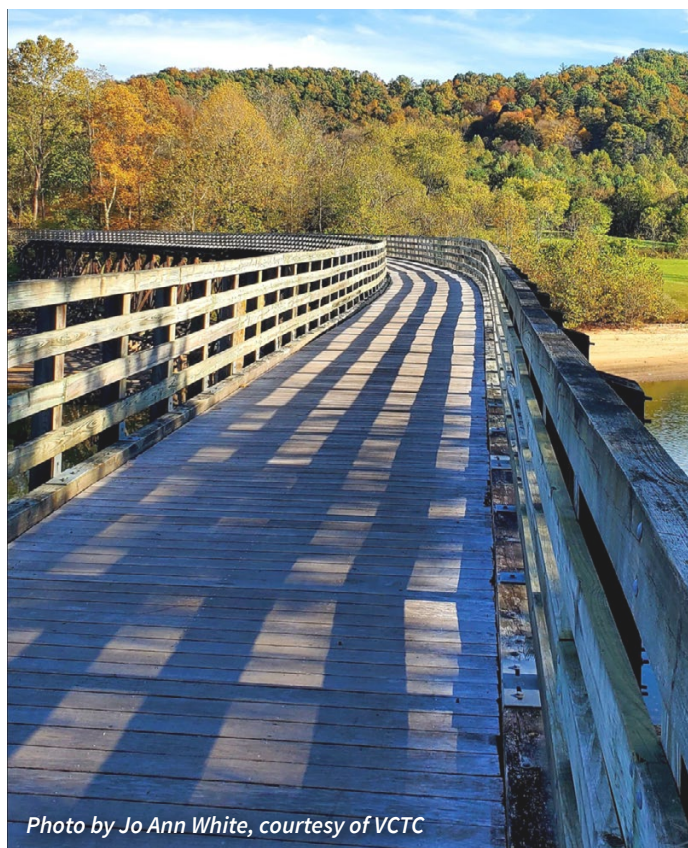


Photo by Jo Ann White, courtesy of VCTC

PARTNERSHIPS

COLLABORATE WITH TRAIL PARTNERS DEVELOP A POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR TRAIL MANAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS UNDER A MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING (MOU)

A trail-wide MOU (or, if necessary, several MOUs) should be developed to establish overarching concepts for trail management and memorialize the VCTC’s role and responsibilities. The MOU(s) would be long-term and self-renewing.

Visitors should be able to enjoy an optimal, safe, and enjoyable experience on the entire length of the Virginia Creeper Trail. The key trail partners – the towns of Abingdon and Damascus, Washington County, the USFS, and the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy – should be the primary signatories to a written document that describes and documents the purpose of the Virginia Creeper Trail and the roles of each party to promote, protect, and manage it for the public’s benefit and enjoyment. Recognizing that each trail management partner has different policies, regulations, and governing structures, the VCTC and the trail management partners can still find common ground on the purpose of the trail and basic concepts for its management. (Statewide MOUs for the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, which often involve dozens of agencies and organizations, could serve as a model.) A trail-wide MOU can emphasize that the parties to the MOU agree to the following principles:

- » All entities agree to collaborate and cooperate in management of the Virginia Creeper Trail.
- » Each entity is responsible for defining and fulfilling its own roles and responsibilities.
- » The MOU does not change any jurisdictional responsibilities, boundaries, or relationships among the signatories, or limit any agency’s authority or management options. The MOU can also establish a process for conflict resolution among partners if areas of disagreement arise.
- » User safety is paramount. Decisions by the VCTC and trail-managing partners should emphasize visitor safety in trail maintenance activities, consistent signage and messaging, and clear and consistent guidelines and policies on safe and appropriate use of the trail.
- » Managers should take steps to ensure coordination and timely response to emergencies and other incidents for the entire length of the Virginia Creeper Trail. The VCTC and trail-managing partners should also establish a

protocol for annual review and assessment of response to reported accidents, injuries, and user conflicts. The MOU can also establish the appropriate agency to serve as the initial point of contact for communications responding to each type of emergency (whether law enforcement, wildland or structural fire, search and rescue, evacuation and recovery, or other incident) on each section of the trail.

- » Conservation of adjoining landscapes is extremely important to the visitor experience provided by the trail. The Conservancy and trail-managing partners should identify natural, scenic, and cultural resources of importance on lands adjacent to the trail and engage and encourage other partners to become actively engaged in conserving lands to protect those resource values.
- » The MOU should emphasize that federal, state, and local government agencies can and should enter into cooperative agreements with the VCTC to provide funding for maintenance, development, oversight, and monitoring of the Virginia Creeper Trail. (See the following discussion of cooperative agreements). The MOU should also state that to the extent that fiscal and other constraints allow, each agency can provide technical and financial assistance for maintenance of parking areas, shelters, trestles, signage, trail surfacing, gates, bollards, and other capital improvements and that, where appropriate, an agency can enter into a cooperative or cost-share agreement with the VCTC to plan for, build, and maintain such improvements.

PRIORITIZE DEVELOPMENT OF COOPERATIVE AGREEMENTS AND RECURRING FUNDING AS A MAJOR FOCUS

Cooperative & Cost-Share Agreements

The VCTC and trail-managing partners should enter into cooperative agreements that are specific to programs and tasks that need to be completed to ensure that the Virginia Creeper Trail is promoted, protected, and well-managed. These types of agreements normally require a level of involvement by both entities and allow for government agencies to provide funding and technical support to the VCTC for services that it renders to benefit the Virginia Creeper Trail and the public. Funding provided under cooperative and cost-share agreements can be used for a variety of programs, including hosting events, administering programs to recruit and train volunteers, providing information and education about the trail to the public, trail maintenance activities, capital projects, and over-all coordination among trail-managing partners and other interested parties.

Pursue Development of a Conservation Fee

Establish a fee structure through a joint effort between the towns of Abingdon and Damascus and the Conservancy to support large scale maintenance, capital improvement projects, new amenities and upgrades, conservation of the trail corridor, emergency use, and the long-term sustainability of the Virginia Creeper Trail. Proceeds from this agreement would be managed by the Conservancy by way of a Memorandum of Understanding between the trail owners/managers and the Conservancy.

Seek Recurring Funding Support

Whether for specific tasks and programs or broader roles, the VCTC should seek multi-year financial commitments for trail programs from all partners. Recurring cooperative agreements, even if subject to annual budgetary cycles, typically provide the most secure levels of year-to-year funding. Federal and state grant programs often provide multi-year funding as well. As a kick-off to building a funding strategy, the Conservancy should meet with partners to determine which parts of this plan they most want to assist or need assistance on funding.

BUILDING AN INFORMAL REGIONAL TRAIL COALITION

Building a broader coalition of the trail-management partners and other parties, including the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT), the Virginia Creeper Trail Advisory Board, the Mount Rogers Planning District Commission (MRPDC), Friends of Southwest Virginia (FSWV), the Mendota Trail Conservancy, the City of Bristol, the USFS, interested land trusts, and other trail organizations can also play a crucially important role. The proposed route of the Beaches to Bluegrass Trail, a multi-use trail proposed by the DCR and VDOT intended to reach from the Virginia Beach shoreline to the Cumberland Gap, incorporates the entire length of the Virginia Creeper Trail, as well as several other existing trails. Both agencies are prioritizing funding for statewide trails. As a result, maintaining regular communications with the DCR and VDOT representatives could be critical to securing significant funding for the Virginia Creeper Trail.

Some of the potential benefits of an informal regional trail partnership could include:

- » **Pooled resources for grant writing.** Several organizations could contract with a professional grant writer.
- » **Assistance in grant writing and grant management.** Since the VCTC cannot apply for many federal and state

grants (for example, transportation funds), it needs a partner to apply for and manage such a grant. Several organizations at the regional level may be able to assist the VCTC in this.

- » **Regional and State Advocacy.** A strong and clear voice of trail organizations and supporting partners can build political support for increased funding and recognition of the trail's value to the local economy and quality of life. Building connections to leadership in the regional national forest offices, with leadership at VDOT, and with Virginia Department of Conservation & Recreation, is critical in having resources funneled to the area.



A REGIONAL RECREATION AUTHORITY

The VCTC, in partnership with Washington County, and the towns of Damascus and Abingdon, could pursue designation as a regional recreation authority under the Virginia Regional Recreation Authority Statute (Virginia Code §15.2-6016 *et seq.*).

As an example, the statute was used to create the Southwest Regional Recreation Authority as a nongovernmental entity to collect user fees accessing a network of motorized and non-motorized trails located primarily on private lands in southwest Virginia. The Authority, d/b/a Spearhead Trails, collects fees from permits issues to recreational users of the trail network. A board of directors leads the authority and can have a larger governing body, all appointed by the member governing body (like a county government). The authority could also be staffed.

Washington County also currently has a Recreation Authority, which has the sole purpose of managing a county-owned campground.

Influencing the bylaws of a regional recreation authority would be critical to ensure that it would truly benefit the trail.

PROS & CONS OF JOINING A REGIONAL RECREATION AUTHORITY

The following are some pros and cons of being part of a regional recreation authority:

PROS:

- The ability to require and charge permit fees, as provided for in the legislation. Can also be the recipient of a goods tax.
- Can issue public bonds to raise money for projects.
- Use of the powers of corporation: the authority could purchase, lead, hold, and transfer lands.
- Can apply to state and federal grants and manage these grants. The Virginia Creeper currently doesn't have a committed partner that can do this.

CONS:

- Liability issues and mechanisms for uniform fee collection may be significant drawbacks. Further analysis is needed to determine whether such an arrangement could be a viable option for the Virginia Creeper Trail.
- The authority would likely need to be broader than just the Virginia Creeper Trail, with the chance of diluting resources to the trail.
- County elected officials might have some control over appointments to the governing body, which may not always be in favor of the trail.

THE VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL CONSERVANCY'S ROLE IN UNITING TRAIL MANAGEMENT

THE VCTC UNITES TRAIL MANAGEMENT PARTNERS IN CONSERVING &
MANAGING THE VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL

The Virginia Creeper Trail is located on lands owned and managed by three separate government entities (the towns of Abingdon and Damascus, and the USFS) in two counties (Washington and Grayson). In addition, the Trail passes through several small communities, and can be accessed at dozens of access points.

Managing a 34-mile-long linear recreational experience across multiple jurisdictions presents a variety of challenges. The Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy (VCTC) is the only entity with trail-wide responsibilities. As a result, it is uniquely and ideally positioned to provide trail-wide coordination and leadership in key areas of conservation, trail maintenance, visitor use, safety, emergency response, access, data management, and a host of other management issues.

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VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL MASTER PLAN

TRAIL MANAGEMENT



TRAIL MANAGEMENT

THE VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL CONSERVATION PLAN

A PLAN TO LEAD & COORDINATE CONSERVATION PLANNING

THE TWO MAIN GOALS OF THE VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL CONSERVATION PLAN

IDENTIFY & PRIORITIZE LARGE ACRE HIGH CONSERVATION VALUE PROPERTIES FIRST

Typically, large properties are the most appealing to land trusts or agency partners. Land trusts will also often have easier access to funding for properties that have high conservation value. The VCTC, fulfilling its role as a conservancy, should engage and lead the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservation Partnership in an analysis of properties adjacent to the trail, and then conduct an outreach program to owners of the highest priority properties. Eventually the VCTC could develop and exercise agreements with willing landowners.

DETERMINE WHO WILL HOLD THESE PROPERTIES OR EASEMENTS

Critical to the implementation of a conservation plan will be to determine if a land trust, a municipality, the county, or the USFS would be willing to assume responsibility for purchasing and managing the property. The USFS represents an important federal partner. However, the agency is limited in its ability to engage landowners outside of the established proclamation boundary or purchase lands or easements with federal funding. State and local government agencies and land trusts are more likely partners for most conservation projects.



CRITERIA FOR CONSERVATION PROJECTS

CREATING A LINK BETWEEN RECREATION & CONSERVATION

The Need for Conservation Criteria

The VCTC Board of Directors, trail management partners, stakeholders, and this plan’s steering committee have identified a major trail management strategy, which is to “steward the natural, cultural, and scenic experience of the trail.” Land conservation has been identified as an essential component to this strategy. However, the VCTC does not currently have written criteria, consistent with the goals of the organization, to be considered while pursuing conservation priorities and selecting projects. These criteria should be developed, well-defined, agreed upon by the board, and written before devoting the organization’s resources to the initiative. **This is a time-sensitive endeavor, as the adjacent landscape is changing in a way which can potentially threaten the natural, cultural, and scenic experience of the trail,** however, the process should not be

rushed. It is important that the VCTC carefully evaluates and selects which conservation projects it will devote resources to, even if the legal conservation tool is employed by a partner organization.

Narrowing the Focus

A survey conducted during this master planning process with a focus group composed of representatives from the VCTC and trail management partners, highlights where this group believes land conservation should be focused.

The survey reveals that the group believes that the most valuable experiences provided by the Virginia Creeper Trail include:

- The variety of unique views/rural landscapes and ecological areas along the trail
- The outdoor recreational experience of using the trail
- The connection to nature that the experience offers
- Areas along the trail where the right-of-way is especially narrow

- Natural heritage resources along the trail
- Areas where there are known recreational destinations

The group identified the greatest risk to the positive trail experience as:

- The impact from residential and commercial development on viewsheds from the trail, because most of the property adjacent to the trail is unprotected

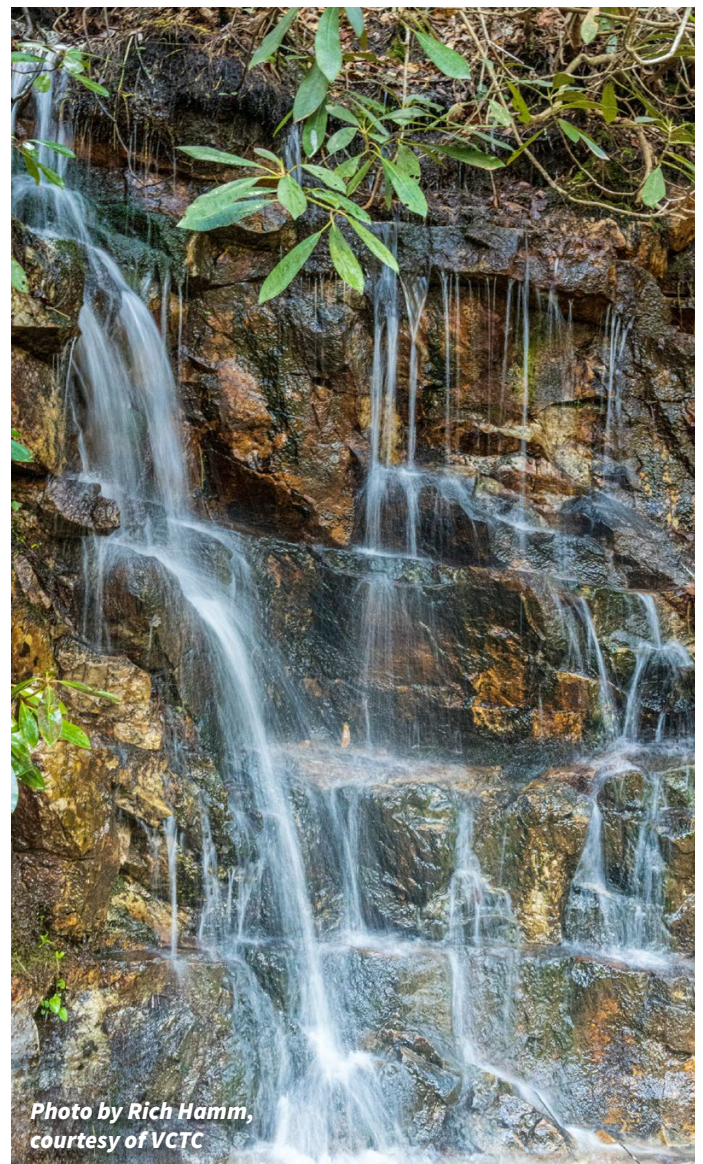
To determine strategies to conserve the trail experiences and resources highlighted by stakeholder input, the VCTC should employ a methodology to prioritize their conservation initiatives. All available tools should be used to situate the Conservancy to be able to identify conservation priorities based on clear criteria, and to acknowledge realistic opportunities as they arise.

The Virginia Creeper Trail conservation and parcel prioritization analysis resulted in a tool that synthesizes available data to pinpoint parcels that match priorities identified as key ingredients to a positive trail experience. This methodology is considered a form of strategic conservation planning, using a technical analysis that calculates an area’s proximity to the trail, contribution to a scenic viewshed from the trail (determined by a GIS analysis), ranking towards established state conservation priorities, and whether the area is adjacent to a narrow section of trail right-of-way. The methodology of this analysis can be shared, adapted, and replicated by those that have experience using GIS software.

A map of land surrounding the entire trail corridor, which specifies priority areas identified in this analysis can be shared with key conservation partners to engage them and formulate strategies. An example of this map is shown on pages 57-58, which visually defines conservation priority focus areas. A database internal to the VCTC should also be created and maintained that lists parcel ownership and priority status (informed by this desktop analysis). The tools created from this mapping exercise are meant to be dynamic in nature, meaning they should be updated at least annually, and should guide landowner outreach and provide insight into developing conservation strategies for specific parcels.

CONSERVATION CRITERIA

There are many additional factors which cannot be accounted for in a desktop analysis that should be considered when an organization such as the VCTC pursues a conservation project. The conservation and parcel prioritization analysis should give the VCTC a starting point in consideration of such projects but should not stand on its own as the criteria for conservation. The following criteria presents a starting point in what the VCTC should consider when deciding on whether to pursue a project. It should be built upon and expanded to further define the organization’s conservation strategies. The criteria should establish whether a project is eligible for consideration, but not guarantee that the VCTC will devote resources to the project. Once the criteria are established and written, a checklist can be used by VCTC board members when considering whether to move forward.



*Photo by Rich Hamm,
courtesy of VCTC*



POTENTIAL VCTC CONSERVATION CRITERIA TO CONSIDER

Virginia Creeper Trail Conservation & Parcel Prioritization Analysis Score. Does the property score high in the parcel prioritization analysis? The methodology used in the conservation and parcel prioritization provides a “score” of “1” to “9” for each parcel within a quarter-mile distance of the trail. A score of “5” or higher can generally be considered a high score, but the VCTC can decide on how these scores should best be interpreted. The parcel prioritization analysis excluded parcels that are already conserved through a conservation tool or owned by the USFS. This desktop analysis is a first step in quickly identifying parcels that will contribute the most to the trail experience when conserved, but this analysis does not consider all relevant criteria on its own.

Size of the Property. Is the property adequate size to contribute to a positive trail experience? Parcels, or a combination of parcels with the same ownership, which are 50 acres or greater should be given priority. This is based on the priorities of potential conservation partners that generally focus efforts on larger connected landscapes. Conservation projects can be time-consuming, and therefore efforts to conserve large landscapes will generally yield a greater output from the input of the organization’s resources.

Proximity to the Trail. How close is the property to the trail center? Buffering the trail with easements or fee simple ownership by a conservation organization of parcels adjacent to or near the trail should be considered high priority, even if the parcels are under 50 acres. This will be valuable in limiting encroachment issues along the trail.

Proximity to Existing Conservation Project. Is the property adjacent or close to an existing conserved property? Parcels that present a connection opportunity to another parcel that is conserved or publicly owned should be a priority, as these projects are likely to present partnership opportunities to create a connected conserved landscape. In nearly all cases a particular parcel’s proximity to other protected lands should lead to rank a property more highly with regard to its conservation value. In the evaluation of individual parcels as well as in the identification of conservation priority areas, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts – contiguity with other protected lands is desirable.

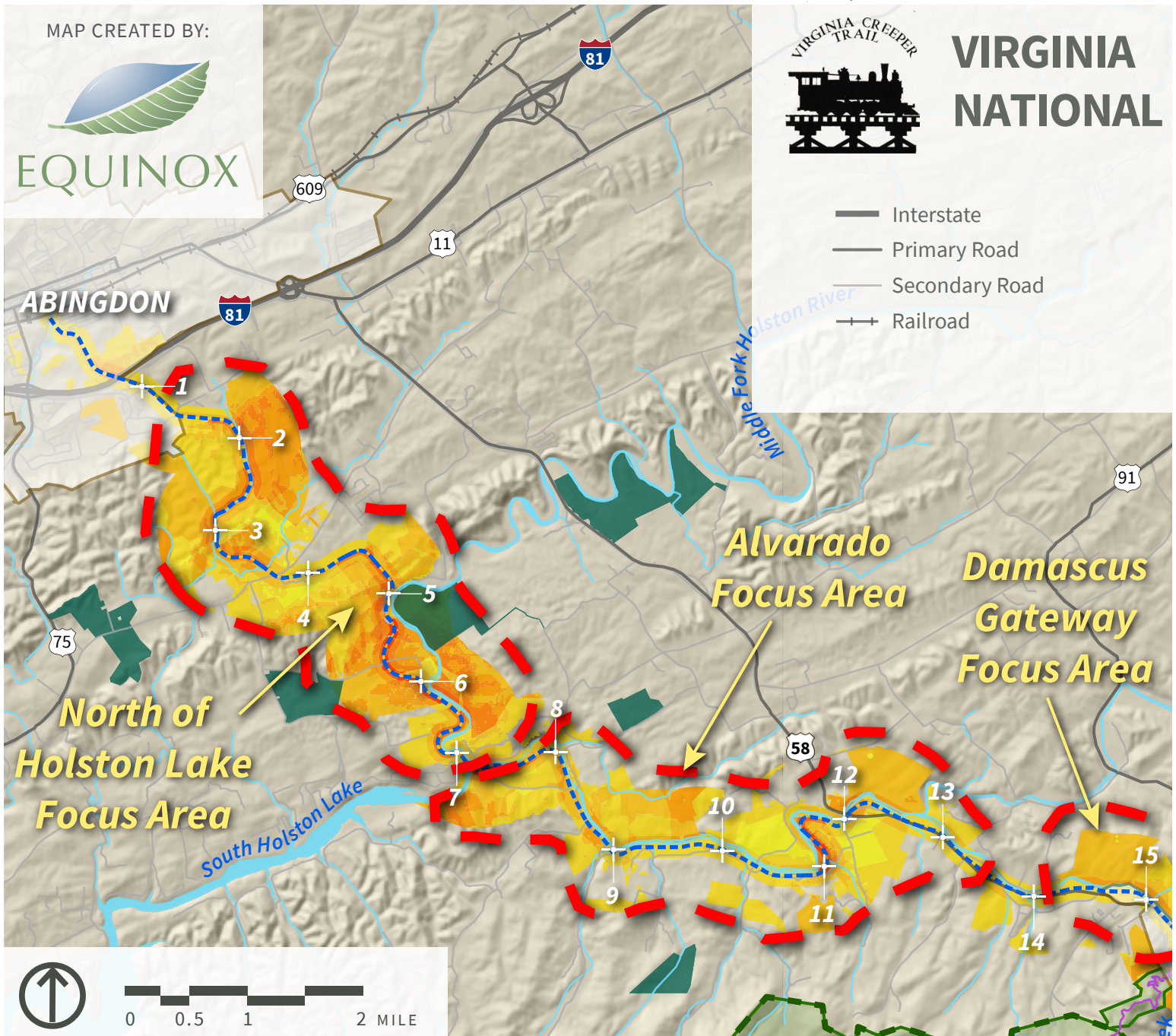
Proximity to a River or Waterbody. Is the property adjacent to or close to a river or body of water? Parcels that are adjacent to a river or waterbody are generally state priorities in conservation and may attract additional interest from certain conservation partners, as their protection from development can protect and improve water quality throughout the watershed. When these parcels are in close proximity to the trail, a conservation project can achieve mutual goals.

Land Ownership Type. Is the ownership of the land complex, or are there any known legal encumbrances? Private land ownership exists in a variety of forms. Some parcels are owned by a single owner, others may be owned by an LLC or trust composed of numerous partners with equal ownership rights. This can create time and resource-consuming challenges in creating a legal agreement, and complexity of ownership should be a factor considered when reaching out to a landowner. Additionally, a lien on a property, which should be revealed in a title search on the property, represents an additional legal obstacle and may prevent a project’s success.

MAP CREATED BY:



VIRGINIA NATIONAL



TRAIL CONSERVATION PRIORITY ANALYSIS

Each of the individual scores assigned during the conservation GIS analysis were used to create a cumulative total score to assign conservation priority. Data layers to create this analysis include: **areas identified in a viewshed analysis**, a buffer of **500 feet around the trail**, segments of the trail **where the right-of-way is narrowest**, VA Department of Conservation & Recreation **Natural Heritage Screening Coverage sites**, and **ConserveVirginia Agriculture & Forestry Category** and **Natural Habitat & Ecosystem Diversity Category sites**. These data layers are used in an overlay analysis that aggregates a conservation priority score across the landscape. Additionally, parcels that are identified using this analysis are then filtered by their size, and these **parcels that are 50 acres or larger** are added to this overlay. This analysis creates a visual representation of where conservation efforts should be focused for the purpose of preserving the Virginia Creeper Trail experience. **(SEE PAGES 59-60 FOR MORE DETAILS)**

CREEPER RECREATION TRAIL

SEE FOLLOWING PAGES FOR MORE DETAILS →

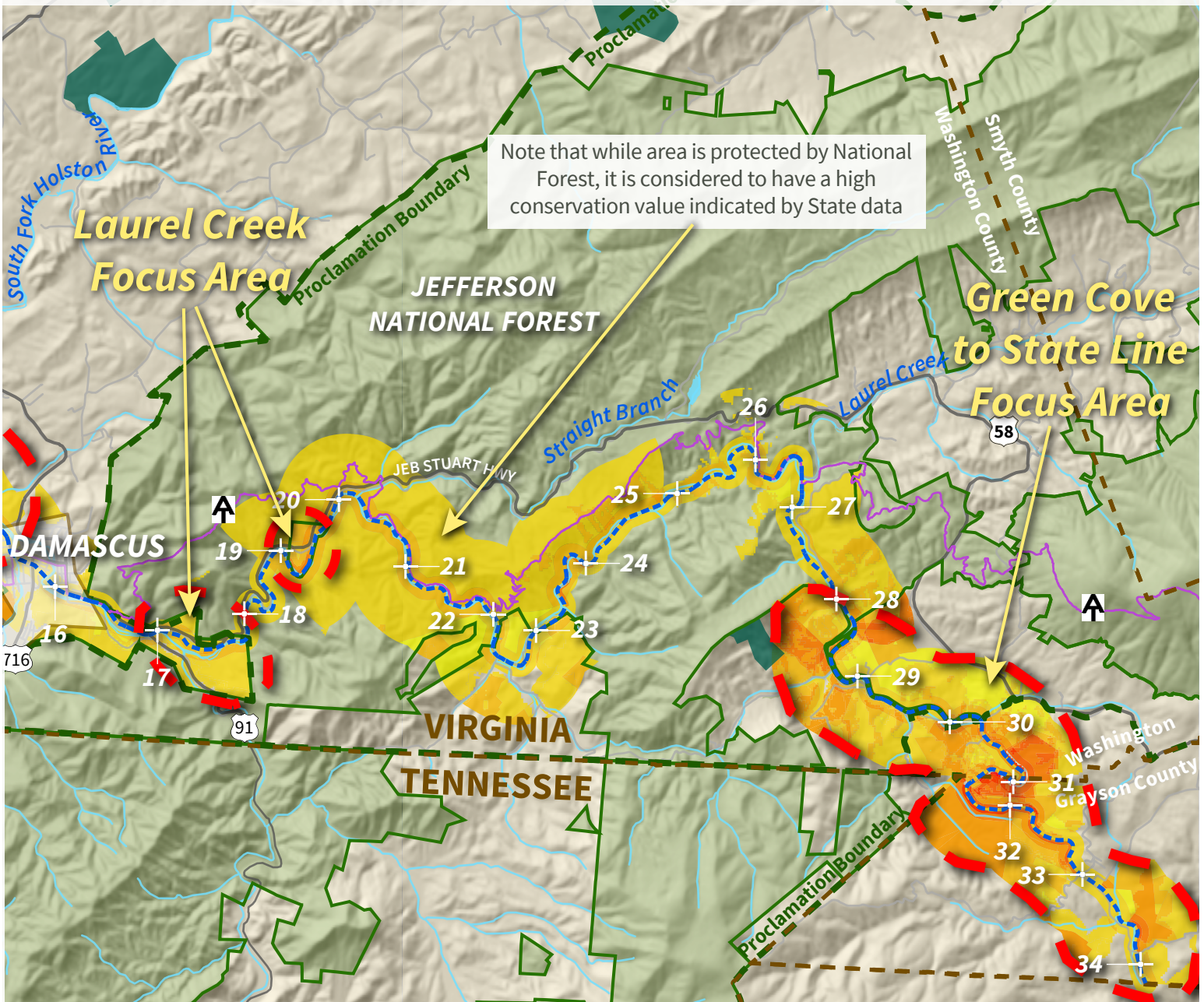
Conservation Priorities Ranking Analysis from the following data:

- Areas identified using a viewshed analysis
- Areas in close proximity to trail
- Parcels at high risk of encroachment
- Parcels with significant frontage to trail
- State Natural Heritage resource data
- State *ConserveVirginia* data
- Parcels identified with the above data that are 50 acres or larger

- National Forest Proclamation Boundary
- National Forest Land
- Conservation Easement Land
- Waterbody
- River

- Virginia Creeper National Recreation Trail
- Mile Marker
- Appalachian National Scenic Trail
- Abingdon or Damascus Town Boundary
- State/County Line

- Higher Priority
- Lower Priority
- Conservation Planning Focus Area



TRAIL CONSERVATION PRIORITY ANALYSIS DETAILS

As development pressures grow in Washington County and the surrounding region, the Virginia Creeper Trail becomes increasingly at risk of losing what makes it unique and attractive to those who use the trail to connect to nature, to witness unique views and rural landscapes, and to connect to other recreational destinations. **Incompatible development along the trail and the surrounding region has been identified as the biggest threat to the Virginia Creeper Trail experience.**

DATA COLLECTION & METHODOLOGY

To create conservation priority maps, data “layers” were compiled using a geographic information system (GIS) analysis. See the Conservation Priority Analysis map on the prior two page. The following priorities and associated data types were identified by stakeholders and are explored below:

AREAS IDENTIFIED BY VIEWSHED ANALYSIS



Viewsheds of significance have been identified as a high priority for conservation, as they can truly define the trail experience. A variety of unique views, rural landscapes, and ecological diversity are a top ranked attraction to the Virginia Creeper Trail. These viewsheds have been identified and mapped, using points of significant views from the trail collected by staff using GPS technology. These points are then used to calculate visible areas that contribute to a positive experience while on the trail.¹

DETAILED METHODOLOGY FOOTNOTES

¹ The observation points are converted into GIS data and used by a viewshed analysis tool developed by ESRI. This tool works by converting the landscape into 30 by 30 meter (100 by 100 foot) cells and identifying which cells are visible from the observation points.

The visibility of each cell center is determined by comparing the altitude angle to the cell center with the altitude angle to the local horizon. The altitude angle is determined using a high resolution Digital Elevation Model created by the United States Geological Survey. If the point lies above the local horizon, it is considered visible.

Once the viewshed analysis tool is run, new data is available to put on a map showing which areas of the landscape are visible from the observation points. This data contains cells that are categorized by the number of observation points from where the cell is visible. An overlay analysis was then performed in the GIS to determine which parcels contain the visible cells. Each parcel that contains a visible cell is given a score that is used in the conservation priority analysis. Parcels that are visible from four or less observation points were given a score of “1” and parcels visible from five or more points were given a score of “2.”

PROXIMITY & FRONTAGE TO THE TRAIL



The proximity of land to the trail was considered in this analysis. Areas within a certain distance from the trail were prioritized first and further consideration was then given to more specific areas within close proximity.

The trail right-of-way, originally established by the rail corridor, has inconsistent widths throughout its length. Segments of trail with a narrower right-of-way (i.e. less than 100 feet wide) were identified as at high-risk of encroachment. Additionally, individual parcels with the greatest frontage, meaning total area of linear land directly adjacent to the right-of-way, were ranked as an even higher priority. Land that directly surrounds the trail is important to the user experience, which can be compromised if incompatible development continues or expands in close proximity to the trail.²

STATE CONSERVATION DATA



Natural Heritage Resource Data

The Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) Natural Heritage office maintains a GIS data layer that represent key areas, or “sites,” of the landscape for protection and stewardship priorities because of the natural heritage resources and habitat they support. These sites are given a biodiversity significance ranking based on the rarity, quality, and number of natural heritage resources they contain.³

² All parcels within a 500-foot buffer to the trail were given a score of “1.” In addition, these parcels were clipped to a smaller buffer of 200 feet for analysis purposes and the parcel area contained within this buffer was calculated. Parcels with an area contained in this (200 foot) buffer of 5 acres or greater were given an additional score of “1” and those with an area contained in the buffer of 10 acres or greater were given a “2.”

An additional score was further assigned to the parcels directly adjacent to the areas where the right-of-way is more narrow than 100 feet. In the Washington County portion of the trail outside of USFS management, this comprises the majority of the rights-of-way, but not all. In this prioritization, the numeric score was not weighted and all parcels that were identified using this method received a score of “1.”

³ A ranking of “B1 - Outstanding” is the highest rank assigned by the state. “B5 - General Interest/Open Space” is the lowest assigned ranking. Within a certain proximity of the trail, this data has been shared with VCTC through a data share agreement, which was used to identify parcels of significant ecological value.

To accomplish this, parcels that intersect these screening coverage areas were given a score weighted by the state-assigned significance ranking. The parcels that intersect the highest-ranked sites (“B3 - High” to “B5 - Outstanding”) were given a score of “2” in this category and those that intersect lower ranked sites were given a “1.”

ConserveVirginia Data

To garner interest from larger conservation groups for potential partnership opportunities, it will be important to focus some efforts on lands identified as state priority by the *ConserveVirginia* tool, which provides a guiding approach to state land conservation. The tool defines specific areas across the state by categories of conservation focus.

There is a significant acreage of land surrounding the Virginia Creeper Trail that has been identified using this tool, primarily from the Natural Habitat & Ecosystem Diversity Category and the Agriculture & Forestry Category. Other categories used by the *ConserveVirginia* tool were not used in this analysis because they do not represent a significant area of land near the trail nor do they contain priorities identified by stakeholders of the Virginia Creeper Trail Master Plan.

The land that is classified by these *ConserveVirginia* categories is easily identified using the tools made available by DCR. These lands represent significant opportunities to work with larger conservation groups to conserve connected landscapes within a viewshed distance from the Trail which will preserve the rural character of the trail experience.⁴

⁴ In this analysis, parcels that intersect these state priority areas were given a score that contribute to their priority status. These scores were not weighted, as the *ConserveVirginia* tool does not assign a priority rank for these lands, so these parcels were all assigned a score of “1.”

PARCEL PRIORITIZATION

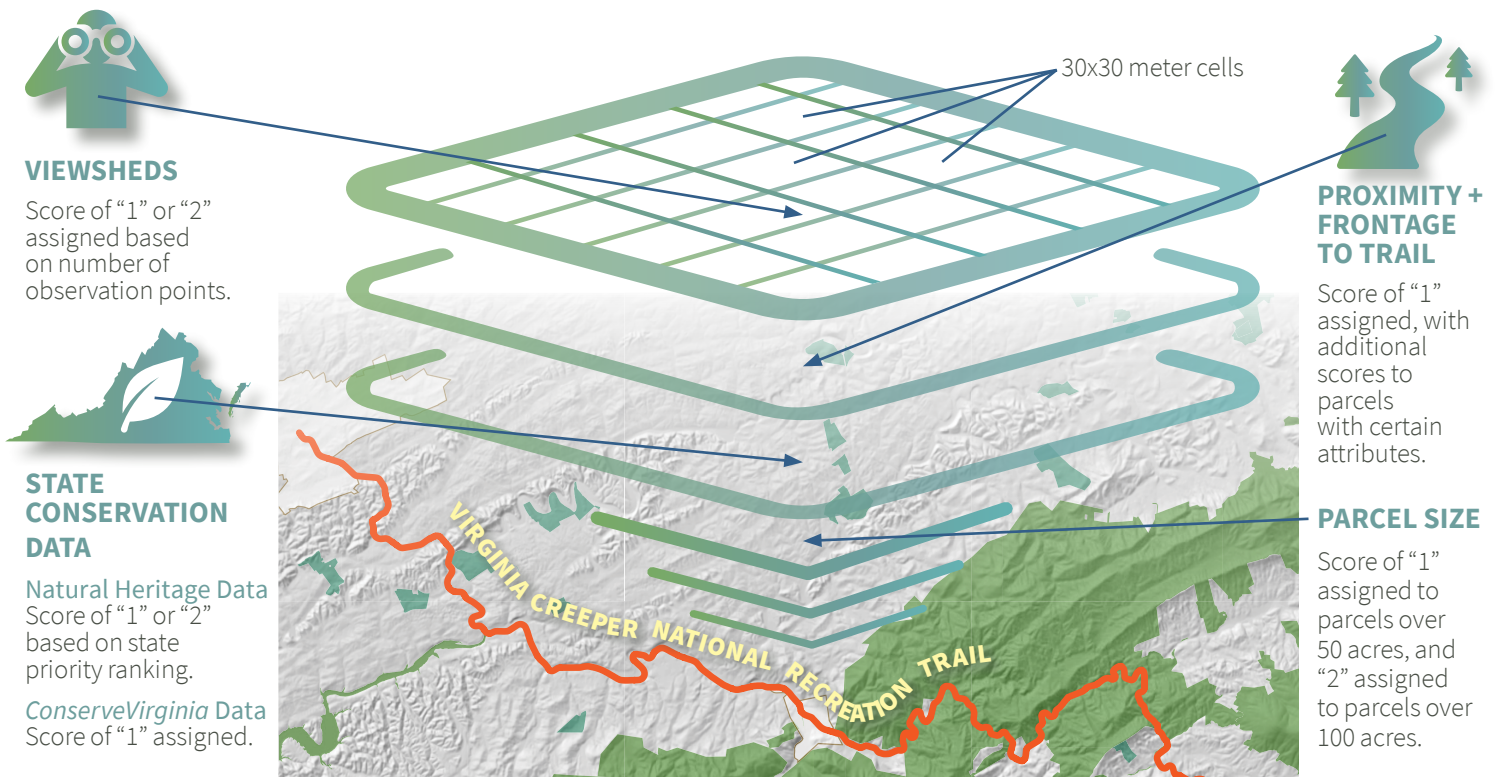
Parcels of land that fall within the aforementioned areas have been prioritized and ranked using GIS tools. Larger parcels were given a higher priority status. Potential federal, state, local, and non-profit partners are most likely to contribute their efforts to larger-scale landscape conservation. The rankings were used to visually reveal “conservation focus areas” where efforts should be focused to work with landowners and partners to develop the best strategies for conserving the resources that benefit the trail and the region.

Each of these scoring categories were then layered to reveal the most important priority areas, even if they overlap land that is already in a protected status. A final conservation priority map was developed using the aggregation of the individual data layers. Top priority landscapes can be identified along the trail at the parcel level. A toolbox of potential conservation strategies can be implemented to conserve the priorities identified in this analysis.⁵

⁵ Each of the individual scores assigned using the aforementioned steps in the GIS analysis were used to create a cumulative total score to assign conservation priority to each parcel that intersects the data.

Parcels of a certain size were then assigned an additional score to increase their priority status (50-100 acres assigned a “1” and >100 acres assigned a “2”). Parcels outside of a quarter (0.25) mile proximity to the trail, parcels smaller than 5 acres, and parcels that are already in a protected status were left out of the analysis. These steps were done to maximize VCTC’s efforts in taking the steps to conserve the most significant priorities.

OVERVIEW OF HOW THE VA CREEPER TRAIL CONSERVATION MODEL WAS CREATED



THE VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL REGIONAL CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP

The VCTC Should Advocate for and Support Conservation of the Trail by Partners

While the VCTC may not have the resources to become a land trust at this time, it can fill a vitally important role by providing a forum and structure for organizations and agencies interested in conserving key landscapes and resources along the Virginia Creeper Trail to work together.

In many other locations around the country, land trusts and conservation organizations have banded together to form Regional Conservation Partnerships (RCPs) that provide a framework for land trusts, agencies, and other interested partners to work together toward common goals. By creating an RCP focused on conserving the Virginia Creeper Trail and other areas adjacent to the trail, the VCTC can work collaboratively with interested partners to achieve far greater conservation than it could by itself.

Several land trusts and government agencies have expressed interest in working together to conserve key landscapes and conservation values along the Virginia Creeper Trail. Some organizations have offered to help set up an RCP; others have offered to provide guidance on land trust standards and practices and conservation techniques; and still others have indicated an interest or offered to take a more active role in conserving lands along the Virginia Creeper Trail.

Initially, a working committee within the VCTC can help guide the formation of the Partnership, using the framework for creating an “emerging” regional conservation partnership outlined in *The Regional Conservation Partnership Handbook* (Labich, W. 2015. Highstead Foundation, Redding CT). The VCTC can serve as the host partner, contact interested parties, serve as the point of contact, hold regular meetings, and facilitate regular communications among partners. As a group, the RCP can define geographical boundaries, seek funding, learn about and share each other’s agendas and needs, and develop shared goals and objectives.

When properties adjacent to the trail are conserved, VCTC staff and volunteers may notice issues from the trail concerning land use on conservation properties. Members of the public using the trail may also notice these issues and report them to the VCTC. In these cases, the VCTC can document and report the issues to the appropriate conservation partner so that the issue may be mitigated using the established conservation tool. The VCTC should not contact the landowner directly about these issues if they do not hold a legal interest in the property.

The VCTC can lead the development of this “Virginia Creeper Trail Conservation Partnership” by:

- » Creating a collaborative RCP framework for established land trusts and agencies to work together,
- » Developing a compelling case for conserving lands along the Virginia Creeper Trail,
- » Mapping high priority landscapes and conservation values,
- » Creating a database of potential funding sources,
- » Working with land trusts and agencies to develop a template of easement terms and conditions that ensure protection trail resource values, and
- » Helping to determine the best strategies for long-term conservation of lands important to the Virginia Creeper Trail.

In addition, the VCTC can serve as the critical “on the ground” link between landowners along the trail and members of the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservation Partnership, by:

- » Conducting preliminary outreach to landowners through the Landowner Outreach Program,
- » Establishing itself as the “face” of the Partnership and the primary contact for landowners,
- » Acting as a go-between connecting interested landowners and land trusts with similar interests,
- » Reporting landowner/land use issues noticed from the trail to the appropriate conservation partner, and
- » Providing members of the RCP with regular updates on real estate listings and other opportunities to conserve priority conservation lands along the trail.

Potential Partners: The Virginia Outdoors Foundation, The Nature Conservancy, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, Washington and Grayson Counties, the USFS, the Trust for Public Land, the Land Trust of Virginia, Virginia’s United Land Trusts, the New River Land Trust, the Blue Ridge Land Conservancy, the Virginia Department of Forestry, the Virginia Department of Conservation & Recreation, the Virginia Environmental Endowment, and the Holston River Soil and Water Conservation District (HRSWCD).

A STRATEGY FOR CONSERVING LAND DEVELOP A COLLABORATIVE PROTECTION PLAN

The best approach to conservation planning for the Virginia Creeper Trail is to develop an informal, collaborative “action plan” among members of the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservation Partnership, each of which is represented by

one or more individuals familiar with the landscape and their own organization's conservation interests.

This plan provides baseline data and identifies key areas where conservation measures can help protect outstanding recreational experiences, scenic values, and natural and cultural resources along the Virginia Creeper Trail.

Many high priority areas adjacent to the trail also have agricultural, forest, historic, biological, and water resource values, in addition to their value as the scenic backdrop for the trail. By using an RCP approach, the VCTC can engage other partners in developing a collaborative protection plan, where each partner identifies those values and areas that are of interest to them, as well as their anticipated methods for conserving land. For example, a land trust specializing in agricultural easements may take the lead in working with a farmer on an agricultural easement; a historic preservation organization may approach the owner of a significant historic property about a historic preservation easement; and the Virginia Department of Forestry may approach an

owner of a property with significant forest values about a forest conservation easement.

METHODS FOR CONSERVING PRIORITY CONSERVATION LANDS

Each land trust or agency also can identify the method they prefer to use to conserve land in specific areas. See the *Potential Conservation Tools for Priority Lands* box below. Although many options and permutations exist, the primary methods for conserving land and resources are (1) a conservation easement, (2) a right-of-way easement, and (3) a fee simple transaction.

The USFS and towns of Abingdon and Damascus already own the corridor of land on which the trail is located. In most cases, this corridor is all that is needed to provide for public access on the trail. In a few instances, a right-of-way easement may be desirable to provide for additional access to the trail. In most cases, conservation easements will be the best method for conserving lands adjacent to the trail.

POTENTIAL CONSERVATION TOOLS FOR PRIORITY LANDS

Conservation easements provide trail protection, compatible uses, and private land ownership.

Conservation easements are an ideal solution for areas adjacent to the trail where the current land uses are not only compatible with the trail but enhance the trail's scenic values. Conservation easements keep land in private ownership, enhance conservation values, and do not allow public access. The title to the property and all rights to use the property not restricted by the terms of the easement are retained by the private property owner. In addition, the VCTC can work with its partners to develop a menu of terms that can be incorporated into each conservation easement to ensure protection of those resource values that are important to the Virginia Creeper Trail.

Right-of-way easements provide for access to the trail while keeping the land in private ownership.

Trail right-of-way easements provide public access, as well as the rights to construct and maintain a trail treadway. The title to the property and all rights of use not conveyed in the easement are retained by the private property owner. Trail rights-of-way may be used where additional public or administrative access to the trail is needed. A trail right-of-way easement can be "layered" with a conservation easement (either in the same deed, or in separate deeds) to provide for public access as well as protect the trail experience and natural, cultural, and scenic values.

Fee simple purchases or donations may be desirable in some circumstances.

Fee simple transactions involve conveyance of the title to property from one party to another. Since the corridor of land along the trail itself is owned in its entirety from Whitetop Station to Abingdon by the USFS and the towns of Abingdon and Damascus, little if any additional fee land acquisition is needed to protect the actual trail treadway and its immediate environs.

However, if an adjacent high priority property is on the market, a land trust may be interested in purchasing the property, placing a conservation easement on it, and re-selling it subject to the easement. Or, a land trust may purchase a property with the intention of re-conveying it at a later date to an agency.

To state the obvious: the optimal time for purchasing a parcel of land is when it is for sale. In many rural areas, as much as 5 to 10% of parcels are for sale at any given time. Keeping track of real estate listings in priority areas can facilitate communications between landowners (or their agents) and land trusts that specialize in acquiring and re-conveying high priority lands.

Regardless of what interests are acquired, all transactions are expected to be entirely voluntary transactions between willing sellers and buyers (or willing donors and donees).

STRATEGIES TO IMPLEMENT LAND PROTECTION THROUGH PURCHASE OR EASEMENTS (FUNDING & PROGRAMS)

REINVIGORATE WASHINGTON COUNTY'S PURCHASE OF DEVELOPMENT RIGHTS (PDR) PROGRAM

Washington County's PDR program allows landowners to voluntarily sell the right to develop their land. This program is managed by the Holston River Soil and Water Conservation District (HRSWCD) in partnership with the Virginia Outdoors Foundation (VOF), the easement holder. This program is currently inactive; reinstating it would be a long-term goal, but it could be explored further. This would take political buy-in and yearly budgeting from the county to invest in the program, which was never truly successfully funded. This program would likely need to benefit the entire county and not just be specific to the trail. Other county agricultural protection programs often develop criteria for projects, and protection of trail landscapes could be one of them. A first step should be to reach out to the HRSWCD to engage them on the reinvigoration of this program. The VCTC can work with Trail Conservation Partners to advocate for county funding and support for the program.

DEVELOP A CONSERVATION SEED FUND TO FACILITATE CONSERVATION PURCHASES

The Conservancy and its conservation partners should pursue the idea of working with land trusts like The Conservation Fund, The Trust for Public Land, or a local conservation supporter to develop a revolving "seed fund" that could be tapped to provide funding in whole or in part for easement or fee simple purchases. For example, the VCTC or a conservation partner could pay for a right-of-first-refusal or term-limited option to hold a property until such time as an agency or land trust is able to obtain the funding to purchase it; or the VCTC or a partner could underwrite the cost of an appraisal, survey, or other transaction-related service. The VCTC or a partner also could agree to match or leverage agency grant funding by contributing 10% or 20% of the cost, or contribute the difference between a federal or state offer and a seller's purchase price, or fund the actual purchase of a key parcel and then re-convey it to a government agency and use the proceeds from the sale to replenish the conservation fund. Much of this Conservation Seed Fund could be raised through private philanthropists. Utilize the Board and the President's Advisory Council to court philanthropists to invest in the fund.

THE LANDOWNER OUTREACH PROGRAM

LAUNCHING THE PROGRAM

Once the Conservation Partnership has been formed, and funding options for conservation projects have been explored and identified, the Conservancy can develop its landowner engagement strategy, the Landowner Outreach Program. Landowners who own larger parcels with high conservation value and important viewsheds should be prioritized for early outreach. This outreach should provide options on ways to engage with the VCTC to protect the trail experience, whether through regular communication, or through more formal voluntary agreements, like the right for first refusal. Building trusted relationships with these landowners over time may be fruitful.

The program should start small and expand over 10 years, with the primary goal to reach out to the highest priority landowners for conservation easement or fee simple land purchases. This program can be managed initially by the Trail & Conservation Committee, and then by the Trail and Conservation Coordinator/Director with assistance from the Committee. Landowners should be engaged early and often regarding the mission of the VCTC and how land use on adjacent and nearby land directly affects the trail and experience and the Conservancy's ability to accomplish its goals. Engaging 3-5 major landowners a year should be a target once the outreach program is formed.

UTILIZING PARTNERSHIPS IN OUTREACH

Working with conservation partners, the VCTC should reach out to the highest priority landowners within the focus areas established by the trail conservation analysis after the potential projects have been ranked against others using the other established conservation criteria.

Certain conservation partners may already have established relationships with some landowners. The VCTC should work directly with partners to identify relationships that have already been formed and leverage these relationships to receive a positive response. For example, the HRSWCD or VOF, potential conservation partners, can serve as the initial liaison and make first outreach to many local farmers whom they have already established trusted relationships with. If the VCTC were to perform its own outreach to a landowner that already has a familiar and positive relationship with a partnering organization, resources will likely be spent unwisely on an attempt to form a new relationship. Regardless of which partner becomes the primary point of contact during these outreach efforts, the VCTC should remain in the conversation at all times to build a relationship with the landowners. As the organization whose primary

focus is to consider the trail, it is important that the VCTC keeps the conversation focused on conserving the trail experience, which is the primary goal of the Virginia Creeper Landowner Outreach Program.

Some members of VCTC leadership believe that real estate partnerships may be crucial in determining land acquisition or conservation easement opportunities on nearby land; this is just one example of how consideration of active partners should not be limited to traditional land conservation agencies and organizations. The VCTC should consider engaging a real estate agent with an established community relationship. This partner would need to have personal goals that align closely with that of the organization, as this type of relationship will not usually be profitable to the agent. This may help establish a better pulse on what properties may be going onto the market once there is funding for conservation projects. This partner may also be valuable at performing outreach to landowners who may be willing to sell or donate a portion of their land.

OUTREACH MEDIA

Common media to deliver messages to landowners include brochures, postcards, letters, presentations, website updates, and social media. Even phone calls can be an appropriate outreach media when the landowner is acquainted with the organization and has given permission to call. Each of these has its own pros and cons regarding how much information they convey and how targeted the outreach is. For the VCTC's purposes, direct mailings may be the best media option for making first contact with landowners.

Landowner Meetings & Workshops

To further engage potential easement and land donors once initial outreach has been performed, the VCTC or an appropriate conservation partner can hold one-on-one meetings or informative workshops for landowners at different community locations and invite these landowners to them. One-on-one meetings may prove to have a greater success rate, but workshops can capture a larger audience at once to give overview of the options. These meetings and any associated outreach should make it clear to landowners that the proposed conservation program is entirely voluntary.

These meetings or workshops should include some form a presentation from the VCTC or an appropriate conservation partner, i.e. the land trust that will be working in the particular focus area, to explain the program as a whole and the benefits it can provide to the preservation of the Virginia Creeper Trail and the surrounding community, as well as a presentation from an attorney who can explain the

tax incentives of a voluntary conservation easement, bargain sale, or land donation. Examples of successful conservation agreements initiated from similar programs can be displayed to communicate the positive outcomes that can benefit all parties involved.

DIRECT MAILINGS

In the scenario of catching the attention of specific landowners of parcels that match the established conservation criteria, direct mail may be the most appropriate form of outreach. Publicly available parcel information contains mailing addresses which can be easily extracted from a landowner database. Some considerations regarding direct mail include:

- Direct mail can be an excellent tool to reach specific landowners and track their responses.
- Response rates to unsolicited mail from relatively unknown organizations are fairly low, so multiple mailings should be sent with consistent offers, messages, and branding to build recognition and trust. It is likely that a landowner who lives near the trail will have at least heard of the VCTC and recognize its local presence, so it may be more impactful for the Conservancy to send the mailing than a partnering organization.
- With mailings, the response rate can be easily tracked, the mailout can be scaled to match the desired budget, and it can be assumed that the message was conveyed to the landowner if multiple mailings were successfully delivered.
- Mailings should be well designed to get and hold the audience's attention. They will be read quickly by the recipient, if read at all, so the message should be simple and singular, and focus on the benefits rather than the details.
- Pictures can be used that capture the attention of the target audience and connect with them through a common interest. Depending on the goal of a particular outreach, the mailing may include pictures that help evoke pride in their landholding, which could motivate them to conserve what they love about their land.
- If designed and timed well, multiple waves of direct mail can increase brand awareness and credibility, even among non-respondents.

LANDOWNER OUTREACH PROGRAM BUILD-OUT OVER TIME

1ST
YEAR

The first year of the program is the most critical for establishing the VCTC's presence and positive reputation with landowners. Initial outreach can share the mission of the VCTC and how land use on adjacent and nearby land directly affects the trail experience. It can be the main year to get to know some of the landowners that have been identified using the established conservation criteria. Early outreach should concentrate on large acre/high priority parcels identified by the conservation analysis. All landowner engagements and relevant notes should be tracked in the landowner database. Those who "opt-out" should be marked to no longer receive outreach. The program should have a target of engaging 3 major landowners to begin conversations on mutual options for conservation during its first year.

YEARS
2-3

Outreach after the first year of the program may continue to focus on the highest priority landowners of large tracts, either those who have not yet been engaged or those where a relationship continues to be built. Additionally, new outreach can be made towards others who were not engaged in the first year and who own lands either directly adjacent to or relatively close to the corridor. All landowner engagements and relevant notes should be tracked in the landowner database. Those who "opted-out" should be marked to no longer receive outreach. Target engaging 3-5 major landowners a year during this period.

YEARS
3-5

While the highest priority landowners may have been engaged in the first two years of the program, the following years may allow the organization to focus outreach efforts on landowners of parcels that create a connected landscape of conserved land. The connection of lands is often a priority target for many larger conservation organizations. This strategy may help engage these larger organizations who can provide support to achieve a connected conservation landscape. All landowner engagements and relevant notes should be tracked in the landowner database. Those who have opted-out of future engagement should be marked to no longer receive outreach. Target engaging 3-5 major landowners a year during this period.

5+
YEARS

Maintaining long-term landowner relationships is important. When the program has matured, and if it has led to successful conservation projects, the program can continue to communicate with landowners of conservation easement properties or those adjacent to fee simple conservation properties. Regardless of who holds the conservation easements or fee simple ownership (the easement holder will be the primary party responsible for maintaining the conservation values of the property and recording violations), maintaining the positive image of the VCTC in the eyes of landowners will be a necessary and important initiative. Semi-regular mailings from the VCTC specifically targeted to landowners, as well as other forms of check-ins, will keep landowners abreast of what's happening on the trail as it relates to what may affect their land. The program can continue its goal of working with landowner partners and display successful examples of where the program has been beneficial to both the landowner and the trail experience. Including conservation landowners on invitation lists to VCTC events, such as year-end celebrations and educational workshops, will keep them engaged.

TRANSITIONING TO A LAND TRUST

The VCTC May at Some Point Become a Land Trust

If the VCTC decides that it would like to become a fully operational land trust, it should seriously analyze the financial and personnel costs of doing so, as well as the internal policies, procedures, and operations it should have in place. Starting a land trust is a major enterprise that requires a significant, sustained investment of capital and human resources over an extended period of time.

In other words, the VCTC should carefully evaluate whether it is capable of "standing on its own two feet" as a land trust in all phases of its governance, fiscal health, land transactions, and land stewardship and enforcement, in addition to

fulfilling its other obligations as the central coordinator of many other aspects of managing the Virginia Creeper Trail.

This does not necessarily mean that the VCTC cannot step in and acquire land or interests in land in the interim. The organization may find it necessary to act when a key property comes on the market and no other organization or agency expresses interest. It may also decide to purchase property with the intention of re-conveying it to an agency in the future. However, it should carefully evaluate the commitment of time, money, and professional expertise needed to complete such transactions, as well as the risks involved in the ownership and stewardship of land, which can be significant.

LAND USE PLANNING AND TRAIL PROTECTION

USING LAND USE PLANNING, CHANGING POLICY, AND IMPLEMENTING ORDINANCES TO PROTECT THE TRAIL

The value of the trail to the community and economy is much more than just the pathway itself—it is the entire landscape experience, including the scenic, historic, and agricultural landscapes along the trail, much of which is not protected. It may not be feasible to protect the entire “viewshed” of the trail through land conservation.

Working with governmental partners may help protect the broader trail experience. Below are some methods to protect trail experience in partnership with local governments.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH PLANNING STAFF

Staff overseeing the planning and zoning work for the towns and Washington and Grayson counties are the experts on land use planning and also usually are on the forefront of knowing what areas are sought for development. Developers often consult with planners early, and most of government communications and interactions are of public record. The VCTC and partners should build relationships with planners and administrators to get in front of potential developments and especially rezoning, where the community has the most input.

THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL CONSERVANCY HAS IMPLEMENTED A SIMILAR ENGAGEMENT WITH LAND PLANNING AND MUNICIPALITIES TO PROTECT THE TRAIL.

“Remote for detachment, narrow for chosen company, winding for leisure, lonely for contemplation, the Appalachian Trail beckons not merely north and south, but upward to the body, mind, and soul of man” (Harold Allen, 1936)

A CONSERVATION GUIDEBOOK FOR COMMUNITIES ALONG THE APPALACHIAN NATIONAL SCENIC TRAIL

LONG-RANGE PLANNING THAT SUPPORTS THE TRAIL

All governments go through a reiterative process of long-range planning, including the development of comprehensive plans (10–20-year plans) that guide the future of municipalities. The VCTC and partners should advocate that the trail and trail needs are incorporated into future plans. It should be recognized as an important asset and protection of the trail landscape experience should be supported in plans. Planning for protection of the surrounding landscape could also mean supporting the protection of working farmlands.

ASSESSING WHAT ARE THE BEST LAND USE PLANNING METHODS TO PROTECT THE TRAIL

The following discussion points with planners and zoning administrators should be had so that they know the best land use planning methods to protect the trail:

1. What are the types of resources the VCTC and partners want to protect within the jurisdiction? Is it mostly agriculture, wooded lands, etc.
2. Where the VCTC and partners prioritize the most important landscapes/parcels to protect the trail experience.
3. What are the current ordinances in place and how will they protect or adversely impact the trail experience as development occurs? See more about current regulation in the following pages.
4. What does build out of parcels/areas look like if landowners built to the density allowed? What kind of zoning amendments could better protect the trail? See more about current regulation and recommendations in the following pages.
5. Would the municipality be supportive of decreasing density in areas along the trail, either through overlay or existing ordinances?
6. Does staff have experience with conservation design ordinances, and do they feel that it would be applicable and politically feasible?
7. Are there high impact uses currently allowed, and if so, what can be done to exclude them?

Since Washington County has the largest control of zoning, it is recommended to approach the county first and the towns next. Grayson County was not assessed for zoning.



CURRENT LAND USES AND ZONING ALONG THE TRAIL

The majority (around 75-80%) of the trail is in the unincorporated county which has a zoning ordinance to define and restrict certain land uses. Washington County's zoning can be seen on the map above (Washington County Zoning). Abingdon and Damascus zoning was not analyzed for this plan. A short description of the zones is below.

Washington County Zoning

Agricultural, Limited, District (A1) Per County ordinance "The A-1 limited agricultural district is established for the specific purpose of facilitating existing and future farming operations, conservation of water and other natural resources, reducing soil erosion, protecting watersheds, and reducing hazards from flood and fire."

- » **Uses allowed that could be impactful to the trail experience:** Wastewater treatment plants; discuss with staff also whether large factory farms are allowed, as these typically have the appearance of large warehouses; and trash disposal convenience sites.
- » **Density requirements:** The minimum lot area for each permitted use in the A-1 district shall be two acres; one acre, where public water is available.

Agricultural, General, District (A2) Per County ordinance, "Generally, the A-2 general agricultural district covers the portion of the county into which urban-type development could logically expand as the need occurs. As a general rule, it surrounds residential sections. Domestic water and sewerage facilities, police and fire protection, and other services necessary to accommodate urban-type development already exist in the district or can be economically extended as urbanization takes place." This zone is most under pressure for rezoning and may be worth prioritizing addressing this over other zones.

- » **Uses allowed that could be impactful to the trail experience:** Wastewater treatment plants; discuss with staff also whether large factory farms are allowed, as these typically have the appearance of large warehouses; and trash disposal convenience sites. There are special exception uses within this zone that could be detrimental to the experience of the trail, particularly storage facilities.
- » **Density requirements:** Density is based on utility availability and is as follows: (1) A minimum of one acre with no public water or sewer. (2) A minimum of 30,000 square feet with public water. (3) A minimum of 15,000 square feet with public sewer and water.

Residential, General, (R2, Small parts near Abingdon)

Per County ordinance, “The R-2 general residential district is composed of certain medium to high concentration of residential uses, ordinarily located between residential and commercial areas, plus certain open areas where similar development appears likely to occur.”

- » **Uses allowed that could be impactful to the trail experience:** Single family lots currently do back up the trail, with houses closely adjacent.
- » **Density requirements:** Density is based on utility availability and is as follows: (1) A minimum of one acre with no public water or sewer. (2) A minimum of 30,000 square feet with public water. (3) A minimum of 15,000 square feet with public sewer and water.

Highlands Recreation District (HR) Per the ordinance, “The Highland Recreation district consists of all national

recreation areas (NRA) within the county as designated by the U.S. Congress. In order to accomplish the necessary controls for this area, the boundaries of this district shall be concurrent with those of the national recreation area. The intent is to keep the use of privately owned land within the recreation area and on this designated perimeter in harmony with the rural theme of the national recreation area. It is not intended that these lands should be developed intensively for residences, either year-round or second homes. It is the intent that the primary uses will be forestry and agriculture together with certain recreational activities appropriate to the mountains.”

- » **Uses allowed that could be impactful to the trail experience:** Wastewater treatment plants.
- » **Density requirements:** The minimum lot area for each permitted use in the HR district shall be two acres; one acre with public water.

PROPOSED LAND USE PLANNING RECOMMENDATIONS

The following strategies and recommendations could be points of discussion with county and town staff of protecting the trail experience:

Lower Allowed Density: Much of Washington County’s rural zoning allows for 1-2 acre lots. Cumulatively this can be visually impactful, essentially creating a low-density subdivision over time. Other counties within Virginia do have lower densities for the agricultural zones, including one unit per 5 acres minimum.

Revised Planned Unit Development Ordinances to allow for Conservation Subdivisions/Design or Create a New Stand-Alone Provision. Conservation subdivisions have become a common practice and allow for flexibility in design so that residential units can have higher density in exchange for protecting natural resources and protecting open space. This provision could be used to protect the trail by creating significant open space setbacks. Model ordinances for Conservation Subdivisions can be found online.

Implement a Virginia Creeper Trail Overlay. Another tool that could be used in conjunction with other strategies is an overlay. Zoning overlays create a special district that overlays

on an existing zone. This has been implemented on sections of the Appalachian Trail in Pennsylvania and perhaps other areas to some benefit. Overlays in Pennsylvania required setbacks of structures from trail ROW by 100 feet, limited tree disturbance, and restriction of certain impactful uses. A model ordinance can be found in *A Conservation Guidebook for Communities Along the Appalachian National Scenic Trail*. Note that this guidebook was largely created for the State of Pennsylvania, and applicability to Virginia zoning laws would need to be studied.

The VCTC and Partners Should be Included in Future Long-Range Planning. Ensure a seat at the table for future long-range planning, including Comprehensive Plans, Greenway/Trail Plans, Transportation Plans, etc. Maintain a relationship with staff to understand where engagement might be needed.

Meet with Planning and Zoning Staff Regularly Enough to Maintain Rapport. As staff become aware of development projects that are adjacent to the trail, they may be able to connect developers and the Conservancy to facilitate conversation around trail protection.



EXAMPLE OF 1-ACRE DENSITY



EXAMPLE OF 2-ACRE DENSITY



TRAIL MANAGEMENT CAPITAL PROJECT & MAINTENANCE

CONSTANT CARE AND MAJOR UPGRADES

STEWARDED TRAIL INFRASTRUCTURE INTO 2032 & BEYOND

The Conservancy and its trail management partners are stewards of an incredible resource that takes constant maintenance and care. Capital and maintenance projects provide an opportunity to further provide a “one-trail” experience that creates a cohesive sense of place along the trail. One of the trail management partner’s biggest hurdles will be the repair of many trestles that have a significant amount of deferred maintenance. Other capital improvements needs include the constant increase in expanding current trailheads, improving trail road crossings for safety, implementing a comprehensive and cohesive signage strategy, and working towards trail standards for width, clearing, surface etc. This section is a summary of all the proposed infrastructure needs, including capital projects and maintenance for the next 10 years and beyond.

TRAILHEAD IMPROVEMENT PLAN

ENSURING THE GATEWAYS TO THE TRAIL ARE WELCOMING

The *Trailhead and Road Crossing Improvement Needs Map* summarizes all projects (see pages 73-74). The following is a detailed list of the upgrade needs for all trailheads:





WATAUGA TRAILHEAD

Abingdon - Managed Trailhead Proposed for a New Restroom and Amenities

Watauga Trailhead will soon see upgrades to the road crossing and parking lot for improved safety and function in 2022.

Increasing access to restrooms trail wide was a request by many who provided input. Watauga Trailhead is proposed to have a new restroom, bike repair station, and hydration station. This trailhead could also use signage (safety and wayfinding) upgrades. Final plans for this trailhead are in the works.

ALVARADO TRAILHEAD

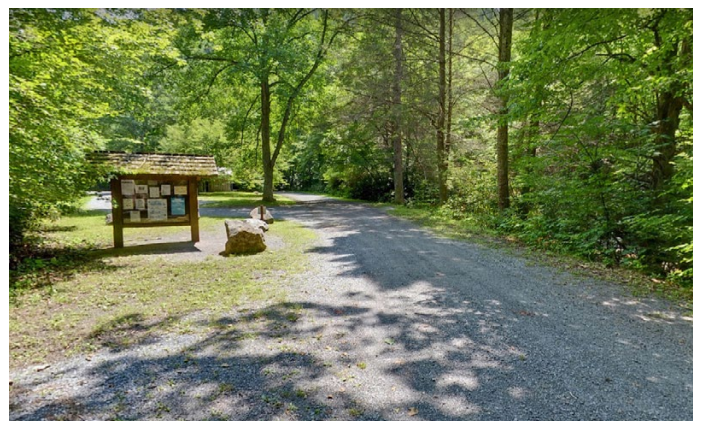
Alvarado is a constant concern because the trail is not clearly defined.

Cyclists, pedestrians, and vehicles share the same space in the large parking lot creating ongoing dangerous interactions when vehicles enter or exit.

CREEK JUNCTION TRAILHEAD

Forest Service Trailhead Needs Improved Access and Parking

Access to this trailhead is confusing and signage from Jeb Stuart Highway (SR 58) is easy to miss. Increasing and bettering access may alleviate pressure on other trailheads.



GREEN COVE STATION

Instate The VCTC’s Representation at Green Cove Station:

Advocate and position the VCTC to have a presence or even manage Green Cove Station in the future as the major non-profit partner to the trail. It is critical for the VCTC to have a stronger presence on the trail, especially as it assumes more responsibilities that help the USFS in event management, volunteer management, maintenance, etc. The VCTC’s ability to access a revenue stream to one of the most heavily accessed sections of the trail would be a critical way to support the Conservancy’s growth and ability to support the USFS. The VCTC should explore with the USFS when this may become a possibility. The VCTC should put plans in place to ensure that an adequate volunteer staffing strategy (to greet trail users and sell merchandise) is in place and think creatively how Green Cove could be used to support the trail.

Presence of the VCTC at Green Cove Station to further expand its brand and interface with trail users is critical.



WHITETOP STATION TRAILHEAD

Work with the USFS and Grayson County to Improve the Trailhead and Explore Creative Solutions as the Trailhead Faces Maximum Capacity Through Much of the Season

Whitetop Trailhead sees some of the heaviest use of any of the trailheads, including heaviest use by outfitters shuttling customers to the trail. Consider the VCTC hosting a design workshop that invites outfitters and other stakeholders to learn about trailhead issues and future needs, or consider ways that capacity could be alleviated prior to trailhead upgrades like parking lot expansions. Separate queuing areas for shuttles, predetermined shuttled drop-off times, and other solutions can be discussed as a group.

TRAIL CROSSING IMPROVEMENT PLAN

IMPROVING CROSSING TO ENSURE SAFETY AND AWARENESS OF THE TRAIL

There are 23 road crossings along the entire trail. Trailhead crossings are a chance to brand the trail and raise awareness but are also a safety risk to trail users and automobile operators if a conflict occurs. A summary of recommendations can be seen on the *Trailhead & Road Crossing Improvement Needs Map* on page 73-74. Details of these recommendations are expanded below. Note that signage of crossing is a critical aspect to improve safety at road crossings. See more about this in the Signage Improvement Plan further on.

VAILS MILL ROAD CROSSING

Option to Improve Capacity for Access

Vails Mill Road is a low-traffic road that bisects the trail just west of Damascus. Unofficial parking by trail user’s automobiles has been created over time. Cars park right on or near the trail. Future strategies may need to be addressed, if impacts become more detrimental to the trail, which may include preventing any automobiles from parking.

CALLAHAN ROAD CROSSING

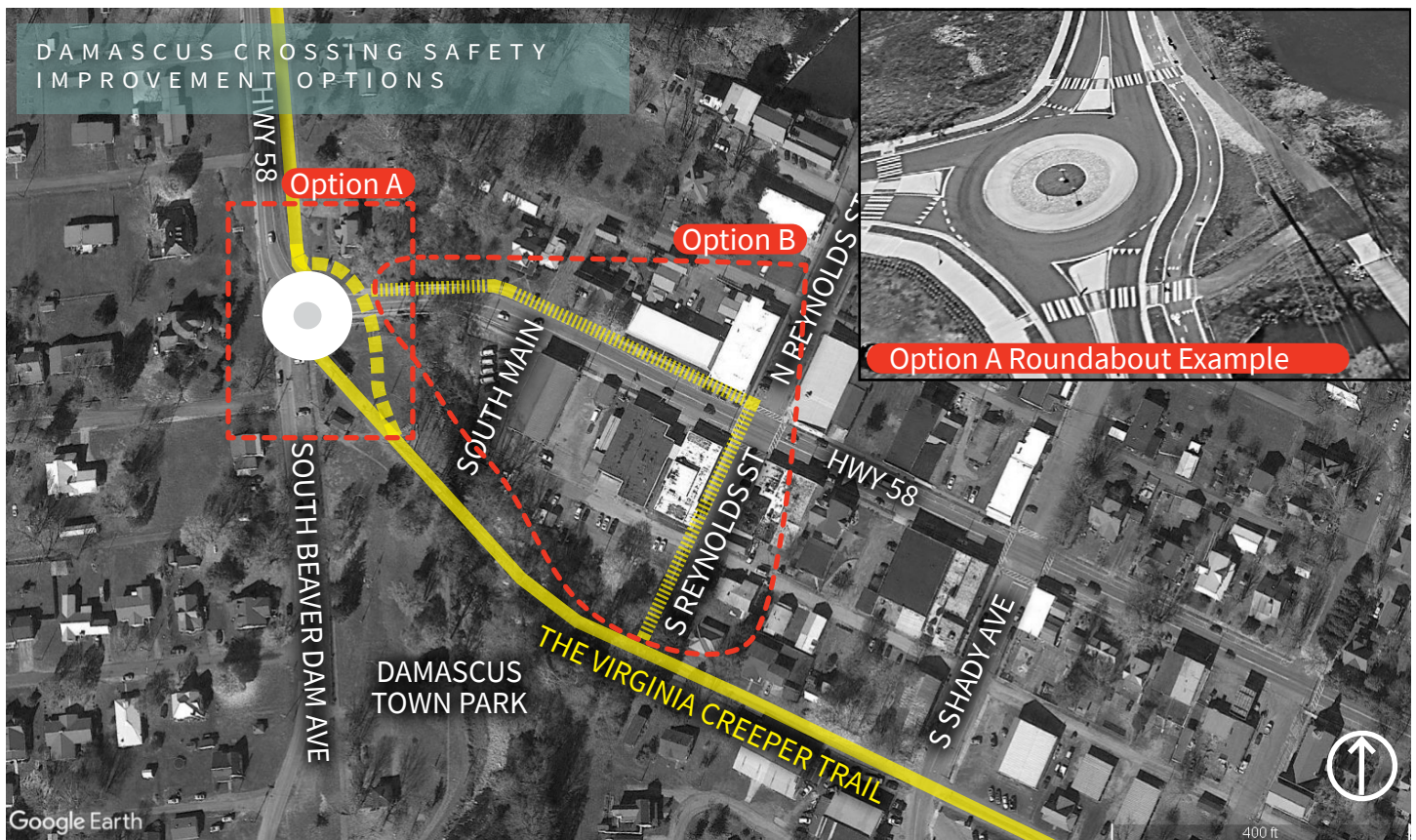
Working with VDOT to Improve Safety

This crossing is currently confusing and difficult. The VCTC should coordinate with VDOT and the USFS to consider improvement options.

WHITETOP ROAD CROSSING

VDOT Improvements to Occur

Crossing improvements are in the works and will likely be done by VDOT within a year.



DAMASCUS/SR 58 CROSSING SAFETY IMPROVEMENT/REROUTE

A Reroute Will Improve One of the Most Trafficked Road Crossing of the Trail

This crossing occurs at the gateway into Damascus adjacent to the Damascus Town Park. Highway 58 (or known as West Laurel Avenue in town) is very busy and the trail crossing here is done on a bend of the road just as one enters town, creating distractions for drivers. Options to improve this crossing have been proposed to elected officials in Damascus and have yet to receive approval. Coordination with elected officials and VDOT is critical as any future design ideas are considered. A few options are described below and can be seen in the graphic above:

- » **Option A) Roundabout.** A roundabout on Highway 58 as it crosses the trail in Damascus could significantly slow traffic and also serve as a gateway into town. The trail could cross on the outer edge of the roundabout. This option would need to be studied by a traffic engineer to confirm feasibility.
- » **Option B) Trail Reroute to Damascus Trail Center and Away from Intersection.** This reroute would have users connect to the Trail Center, exiting the historic rail line, crossing at the South Reynolds Street intersection which has an existing high visibility crossing.

TRESTLE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

PRIORITIZE TRESTLE REPAIRS TO PREVENT TRAIL CLOSURES

Prioritizing Trestle Repair Will Be Significant in Both Cost and Effort

The VCTC and trail management partners are strategizing how all 47 trestles along the trail can be assessed and maintained to prevent structural failures that would cause closures of the trail. A summary of all trestle repairs can be viewed on the map on pages 75-76. The prioritization breaks into three categories:

#1 Priority Trestles: These are a priority due to the condition of the trestles. The VCTC working with trail management partners will prioritize seeking funding for repair. Studies have been done indicating needs for repair.

#2 Priority Trestles: These trestles are second in priority. Studies have been done indicating needs for repair.

Need New/Updated Trestle Engineering Study: These trestles have not been analyzed lately and study of these trestles should be a priority to ensure safety and allocate funding.



0 0.5 1 2 MILE



VIRGINIA NATIONAL

- Interstate
- Primary Road
- Secondary Road
- Railroad

ABINGDON

Abingdon Trailhead

Meade Dr.

WATAUGA TRAILHEAD

- 2022 Abingdon will upgrade the road crossing and parking. Explore funding for and implement trailhead upgrades to restroom, bike repair station, and hydration station.

Watauga Trailhead

Watauga Rd.

Keller Rd.

ALVARADO TRAILHEAD

- 2022 Add in parking and trail reroute.

Alvarado Trailhead

Riverwalk Trl.

Alvarado Rd.

Delmar Rd.

Drowning Ford Rd. (County Rd 1230)

Blossom Rd. #1

Vails Mill Rd.

Blossom Rd. #2

Damascus Caboose Trailhead

DAMASCUS

VAILS MILL RD. CROSSING

- Unofficial parking occurs here.
- 2022-2024 Explore if improvements are needed and monitor parking.
- 2025-2026 Implement improved parking, if needed.

MAP CREATED BY:

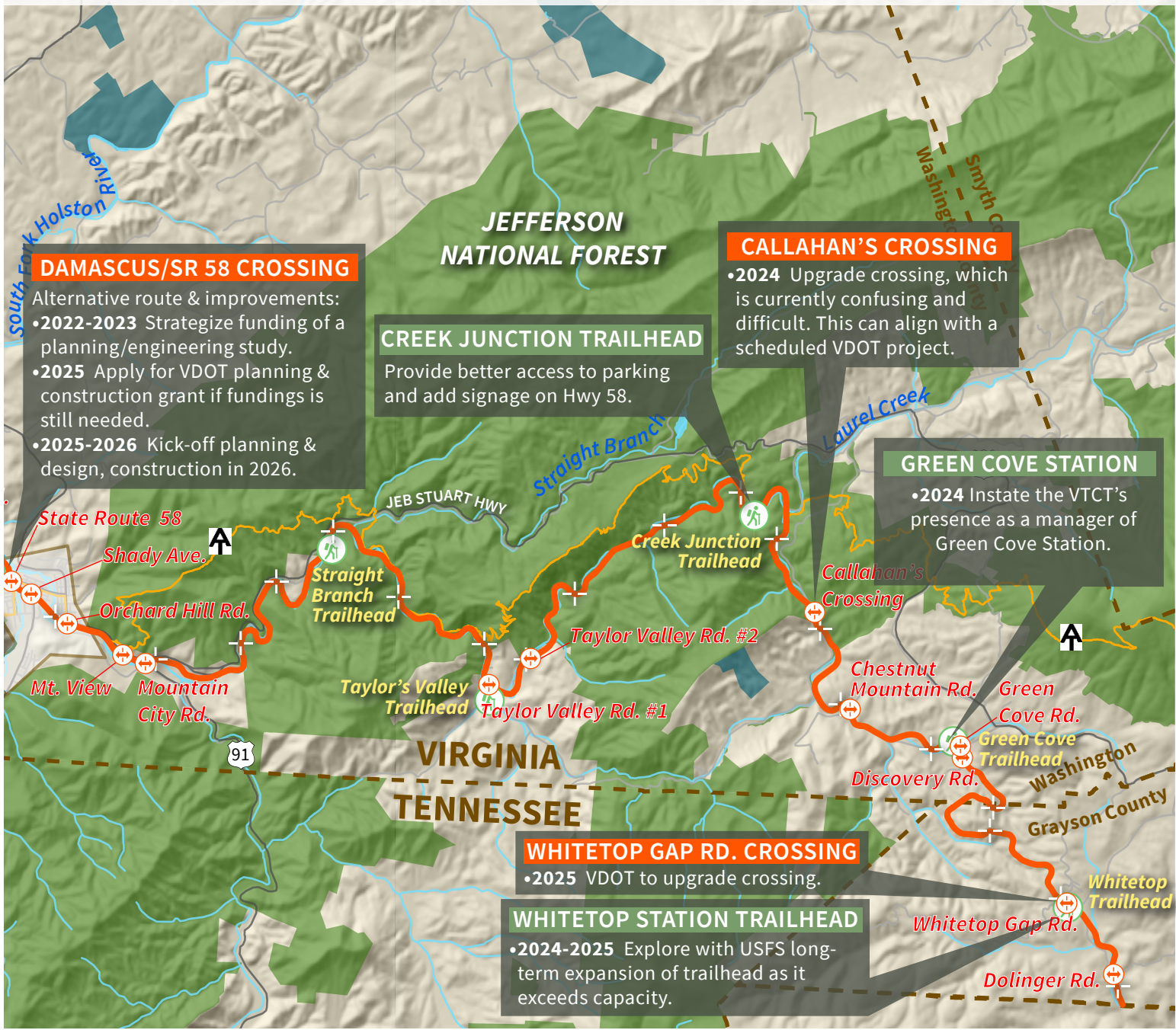


EQUINOX

TRAILHEAD & ROAD CROSSING IMPROVEMENT NEEDS

CREEPER RECREATION TRAIL

- National Forest Land
- Conservation Easement Land
- Waterbody
- River
- Virginia Creeper National Recreation Trail
- Appalachian National Scenic Trail
- Abingdon or Damascus Town Boundary
- State/County Line
- + Mile Marker
- + Road Crossing
- 🚶 Trailhead/Kiosk



DAMASCUS/SR 58 CROSSING

- Alternative route & improvements:
- 2022-2023 Strategize funding of a planning/engineering study.
 - 2025 Apply for VDOT planning & construction grant if fundings is still needed.
 - 2025-2026 Kick-off planning & design, construction in 2026.

CREEK JUNCTION TRAILHEAD

Provide better access to parking and add signage on Hwy 58.

CALLAHAN'S CROSSING

- 2024 Upgrade crossing, which is currently confusing and difficult. This can align with a scheduled VDOT project.

GREEN COVE STATION

- 2024 Instate the VTCT's presence as a manager of Green Cove Station.

WHITETOP GAP RD. CROSSING

- 2025 VDOT to upgrade crossing.

WHITETOP STATION TRAILHEAD

- 2024-2025 Explore with USFS long-term expansion of trailhead as it exceeds capacity.



0 0.5 1 2 MILE



VIRGINIA NATIONAL

- Interstate
- Primary Road
- Secondary Road
- Railroad



MAP CREATED BY:



EQUINOX

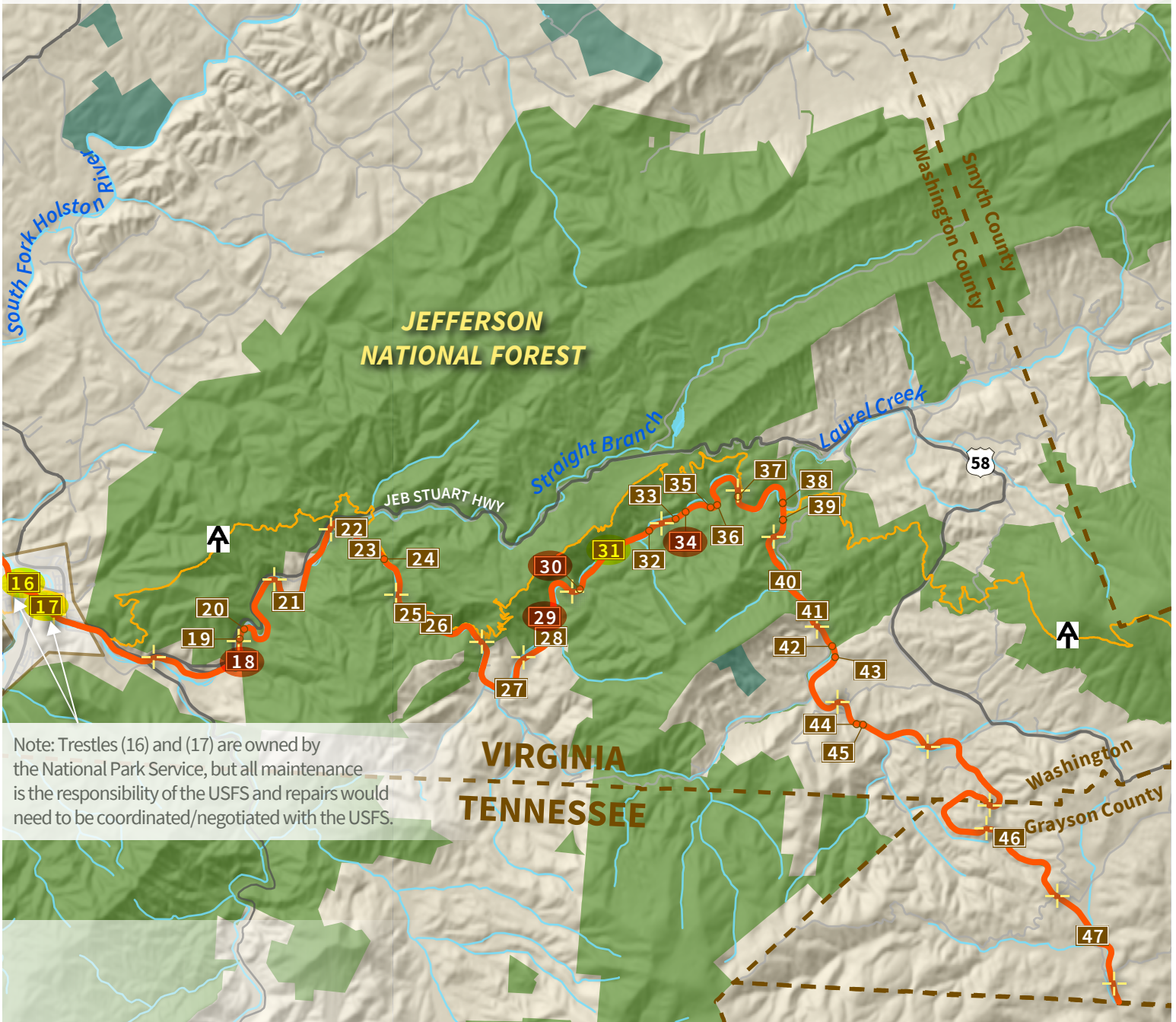
TRESTLE REPAIR PRIORITIES

CREEPER RECREATION TRAIL

- National Forest Land
- Conservation Easement Land
- Waterbody
- River

- Virginia Creeper National Recreation Trail
- Appalachian National Scenic Trail
- Abingdon or Damascus Town Boundary
- State/County Line

- Mile Marker
- Trestle with Number
- #1 Priority Repair Trestle
- #2 Priority Repair Trestle
- Need New/Updated Trestle Engineering Study



Note: Trestles (16) and (17) are owned by the National Park Service, but all maintenance is the responsibility of the USFS and repairs would need to be coordinated/negotiated with the USFS.

SIGNAGE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

IMPLEMENT A “ONE TRAIL” SIGNAGE PROGRAM

Consistent Signage Will Unify the Trail, Increase Safety, and Improve User Experience

Implementing a cohesive signage program is one of the most important steps that the VCTC and trail management partners can do to improve safety and improve the user experience. Trail signage is currently disjointed, varying by age and management section. There is a lack of auto wayfinding to the trail as well as actual signage at trailheads and along the trail at key points. A trail signage guideline could create a cohesive look and feel and be a reference point for all partners. The following is a set of recommendations (in order of priority) to implement a cohesive signage program for the trail:

- 1. Trailhead Monument/Entrance Signs:** Start with these signs that serve as the welcome point to any trailheads or access points. These signs can sometimes occur in VDOT right-of-way, so often, permits are needed. The USFS may be able to kick off the implementation of these signs early. It is estimated that 4-5 of these should be implemented on the trail, including for all trailheads. See pages 73-74 for trailhead locations.
- 2. Safety Signage at Road Crossings.** This type of signage is standardized and would most likely go within VDOT right-of-way. This signage alerts motorists of a trail crossing ahead. Work with trail management partners to assess what road crossings need this improvement and work with VDOT to implement. For very high visibility, this type of sign can have additional flashers with a rapid flashing beacon installed to alert motorists even more effectively.

- 3. Road Crossings Signage.** Road crossing signage is critical for emergency response. It has been reported by emergency responders that response delays can happen when users don't know where they are. A sign near every road crossing can be marked with the road's name and mile point of the crossing. This can reflect the same style as the wooden bollards of the mile marker (see below), or a carsonite marker.
- 4. Mile Marker Signage.** This is another opportunity to increase safety and emergency response on the trail. Updated, easy-to-read markers at every mile or every ½-mile or ¼-mile would help for quick location for emergencies. This has become standard practice for many long-distance rail-trails. When markers are installed, their locations can be recorded with a GPS device and incorporated into emergency responders' systems, often which include GIS mapping.
- 5. Trailhead Kiosks.** There are many kiosks along the trail, but their style is not uniform and in varying stages of repair. These kiosks also do not carry consistent information. Some information that should be consistently included on all kiosks are a trail map (with “you are here” location), rules and regulations, emergency contact numbers (911), representation of trail manager partners logo and the VCTC logo and brief explanation of how the trail is managed, and ways to provide feedback on needed trail maintenance/contact info (see use of crowd sourcing for this on page 89).
- 6. Auto Wayfinding Signage.** There is some auto wayfinding signage, but it is very limited and appears to mostly be on the western end of the trail near Abingdon. This signage directs those in vehicles how to get to the trail. Location of these signs should be planned holistically at once for the whole trail. An auto wayfinding signage plan is recommended. This plan will indicate where all signs go, identify their location, and delve into details such as exact placement and even VDOT permitting since much of these signs would be located in VDOT right-of-way. VDOT has an auto wayfinding “how-to” and guidelines manual which can be viewed online.



EXAMPLES OF EXISTING TYPES OF SIGNAGE ALONG THE TRAIL

“ONE TRAIL” DESIGN GUIDELINES

CREATING CONSISTENCY ACROSS THE TRAIL

Implementing trail standards can improve safety, will give a cohesive feel across the trail, and can help “reinforce the trail brand” through placemaking elements. Trail managers and the VCTC can coordinate to ensure continuity across the trail. The following standardized elements which occur now or could in the future should be considered (see details about each of these further below):

- » Signage (addressed in Signage Improvement Plan above), including kiosks, mile markers, auto wayfinding, trailhead monuments, and other signage
- » Restrooms
- » Benches, tables, and other passive recreation facilities
- » Trail cross section (surface, grade, clearing width, height. etc.)
- » ADA/universal design standards
- » Standard treatment of bridge ingress/egress

RESTROOMS AND PAVILIONS

Any future architecture should consider the precedent of previous architectural style on the trail as well as the surrounding historic character of the rural architecture. The USFS installed a vault toilet at Whitetop that mimics the roof and siding of the historic Green Cove Station. Context sensitive design that reflects the surrounding character is encouraged.



BENCHES, TABLES, & OTHER PASSIVE RECREATION AMENITIES

These elements can further define a sense of place. Benches and tables currently on the trail are typically basic wood design and stained. As elements are replaced over time or new benches are added, consider keeping within 1-2 styles that fit together. Also consider opportunities for donation, memorial, and naming (with the exception of the USFS section), and the VCTC could promote the opportunity to do so in-step with trail management partners.

TRAIL CROSS SECTION

As sections of the trail are updated, aiming for a trail standard will help in maintaining uniformity and safety. This cross section can also be used to ensure consistent maintenance standards. Not all sections could currently meet a consistent standard, so this would be a very gradual phased approach. These standards are illustrated on the next page. Two options are shown, a typical and an ADA/Universal Access option. Read further about when the ADA/Universal Access option should be used.

ADA/UNIVERSAL DESIGN STANDARD

Much of the trail, especially the western half, is universally accessible, meaning that a range of users with varying abilities can easily access the trail. Universal design creates facilities that can be used by a wide range of people, regardless of age, size, or disabilities. Trail surface, irregular dips in the trail, and steeper grades, even if short periods, can exclude certain users. While not all the trails can be fully ADA (American Disabilities Act) Accessible (as defined by the American Access Board), striving to meet where feasible can meet Universal Design goals. It is a common misconception that a trail needs to be paved to meet ADA standards. The rule of thumb for a surface is that it needs to be “firm and stable.” If a regular stroller with a child can travel the trail, it likely is close to complying with ADA surface standards.

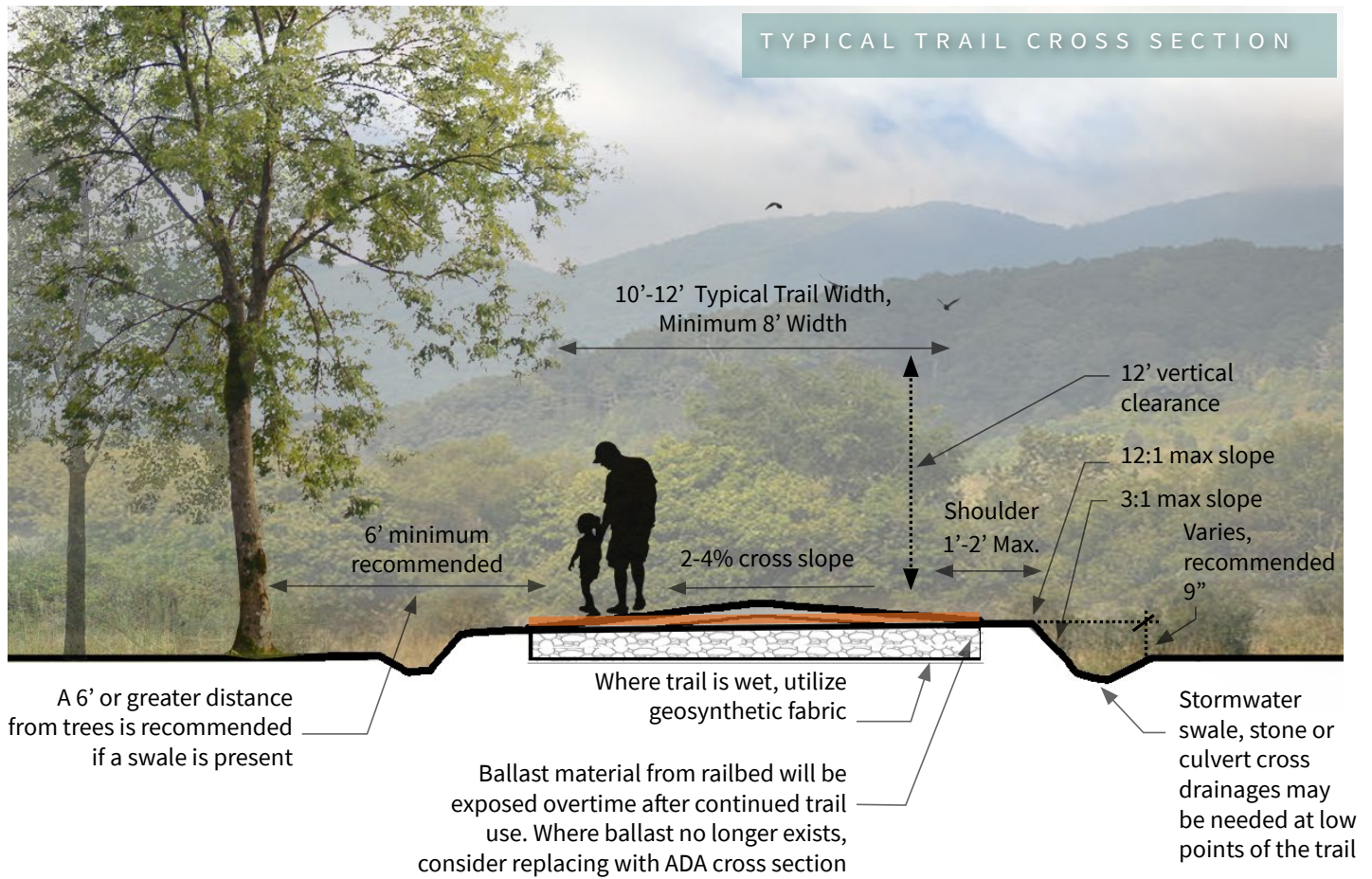
When These Standards Should Be Used

Universal Design should be considered for any improvements, maintenance, and new projects. The following conditions typically require full ADA accessible design:

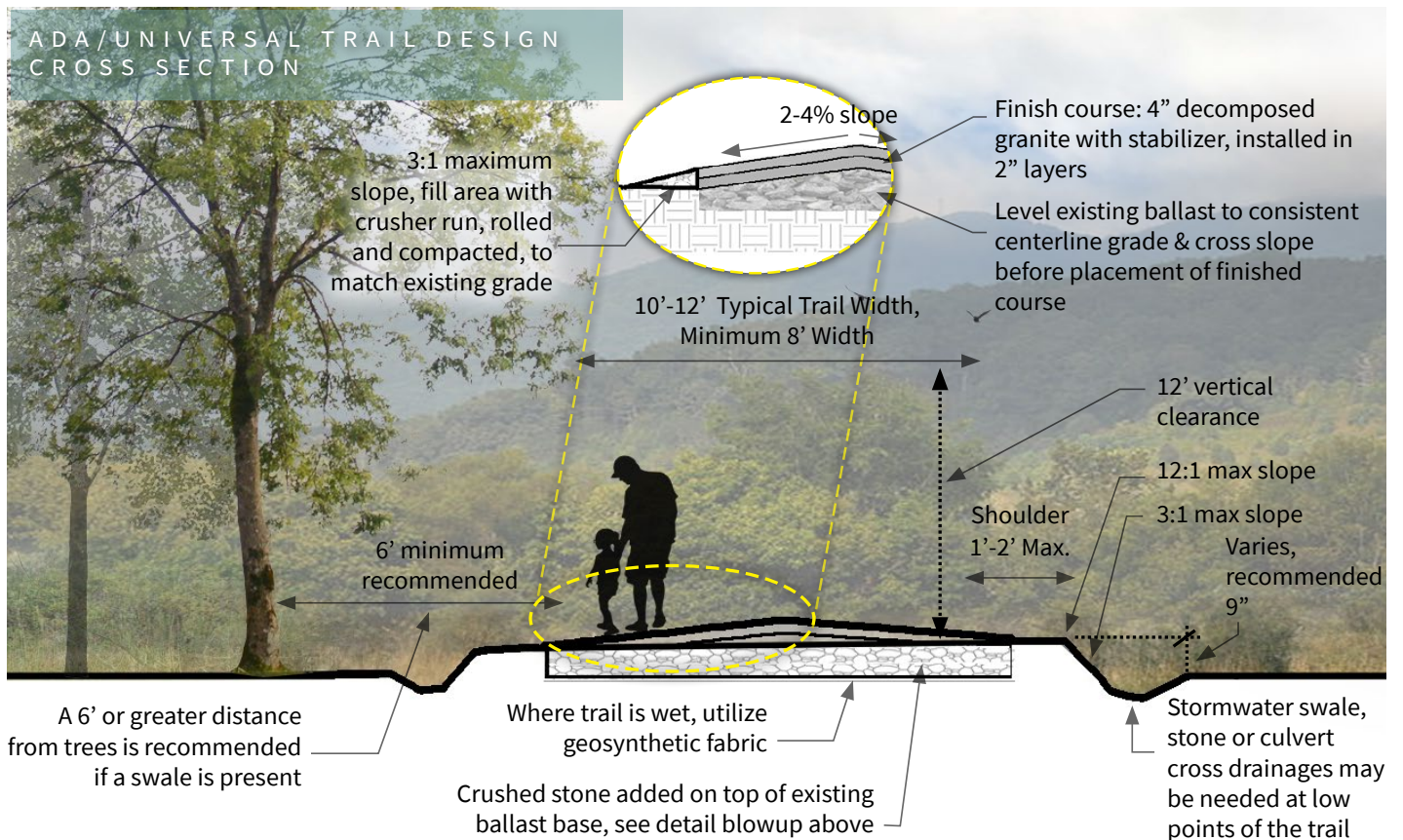
- » **Connecting to other ADA accessible facilities like restrooms, parking lots, etc.** While the trail itself might not be fully accessible, making a short section accessible as well as any pathways to restrooms (which ideally are ADA accessible) is necessary. ADA accessibility is more stringent on federal lands and design with USFS facilities typically will comply with any ADA requirements.
- » **When federal/state funding is involved.** These funding sources typically require ADA accessibility for trails if a whole section is being rebuilt. This would not necessarily apply to a feature like a trestle being repaired if the trail was not designed to be ADA.
- » **When grades and conditions allow.** Some areas may be better suited to full ADA accessibility. Consider portions of the trail being fully ADA accessible and communicating to the public which sections are.



TYPICAL TRAIL CROSS SECTION



ADA/UNIVERSAL TRAIL DESIGN CROSS SECTION





TRAIL MANAGEMENT DATA MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

A STRATEGY FOR THE VCTC TO COLLECTIVELY MANAGE DATA FOR THE TRAIL

THE IMPORTANCE OF DATA MANAGEMENT

Every organization must keep accurate and complete records to run efficiently. However, to truly be successful the organization must go beyond simple record keeping and establish an effective data-management strategy; one that is customized to its needs. The collection, storage, and management of trail-related data are important components of everyday business activities in trail organizations.

The Need for a Strategy

The true value of a non-profit's data management strategy is that it serves as a blueprint for the organization's "data culture." The data that forms the foundation of the organization's operations should be ready for use from the

moment it is collected. It must be error free, consistent, unambiguous, up-to-date, secure, and accessible by the people who need it, when they need it. The cornerstone of an organization's data-management strategy is the understanding that data assets should be treated with the same care and caution that is applied to its financial and human resources. The fast pace of change in technology makes preparing for the future more important than ever for an organization such as the VCTC. Data security is constantly evolving and extremely important to consider. Certain types of data should be treated with high security, which may require consultation with a data security professional.

Choosing the right data management software is integral. There are more and more data management platforms for non-profit organizations being introduced each day. There are plenty of options on the market, many of which offer the same list of standard features. The Conservancy may already employ preferred software for some of its forms of data management, but it is recommended that advice is sought from a software professional before integrating the organization's essential data onto a new platform.



Photo by Jesse Kokotek, courtesy of VCTC

STAFFING NEEDS

The Conservancy will need the staffing, hardware, and software resources to be able to accomplish this. The importance of filling this need cannot be overstated, as data management is both highly complex and essential. While the day-to-day tasks can be accomplished by a third-party IT contractor, it will be invaluable to one day have a staff person with the vision and understanding of the technology to leverage what the VCTC already has and find ways to do even more. This would be someone with the ability to look at the organization and direct what technological dashboard is needed currently and what will be needed into the future. It is unsustainable for an organization to vest its data management functions into one volunteer or board member who could leave the organization without providing a comprehensive and reproducible standard operating procedure (SOP) for the use of each form of data that the organization manages. Data management responsibilities should be handled by professionals with technological experience.

BECOMING THE CENTRALIZED TRAIL DATA MANAGER

The Conservancy should work towards becoming the centralized, “One Stop Shop” trail data manager for all things related to the Virginia Creeper Trail, with someone who is tasked with managing and creating ways for partner data sharing. This includes management of trail-wide data. Some of the data that should be aggregated could include:

- » Trail use counts and economic impact data
- » Safety and emergency data
- » Trail conditions and maintenance needs
- » Membership and donor database
- » An outfitter/business database
- » Geospatial/GIS data that provides comprehensive mapping of the trail
- » Landowner database, which can be part of a voluntary “opt-in” list to provide important updates to the trail
- » Funding opportunities
- » Collection of historic info
- » A Virginia Creeper Trail calendar of dates

All types of data mentioned here should each have management functions written down and guided by its own SOP document. The SOPs should be created by someone with a significant understanding of the needs met by each type of data as well as an understanding of the technology chosen to manage the type of data. The following pages briefly explore an overview of the management needs for each type of data that the VCTC should assume management of as it matures as an organization.

TYPES OF DATA TO MANAGE

TRAIL USE COUNTS & ECONOMIC IMPACT DATA:

Maintaining data that measures the trail impact can be a primary data management role for the VCTC. This can include counter data, online user data, or other ways of tracking trail usage. Additional data that can be stored internally that can be collected from user surveying may include:

- Quantity of users
- Type of use
- Physical activity / duration of use
- Visitor demographic
- Spending impact from the trail
- Property value impact from the trail
- Quality of life impact from the trail
- Tourism / economic development efforts
- Event Impact

The Conservancy should work with trail managers and businesses to collect information that will inform this assessment through intercept surveys, trail counters, and outfitter customer data, or other means that can holistically tell the story of the trail's positive impact. These types of data can vary greatly in their managerial needs, but it's important that they're collected and stored in a format that can be used in analytics to allow ease of use for future economic impact studies. A digital table can be stored, organized by each month/year, and hold count data from each counter. This allows the counts to be easily shared between management partners. There should ideally only be one person to manage all of this data to ensure consistency in entry.

SAFETY & EMERGENCY DATA: This data can include collected custom reports made by the county, towns, and the USFS that could indicate hot spots for issues and allow for collaborative identification of remedies to these issues. This type of data will greatly assist partners in responding to safety issues. To understand common issues that need to be addressed, the Conservancy should coordinate with town law enforcement and the county sheriff's office to receive quarterly reports on what specific trail incidents are reported. The Conservancy can collect information in a database that records the type of incident, general location, and other common data across the trail. Although this data can be entered and stored as a digital table with general location descriptors, it is recommended that this type of data be converted to a geospatial format which can contain attributes about an incident along with an associated precise location that can be viewed in an interactive map for better analysis.



Photo by Jo Ann White, courtesy of VCTC

TRAIL CONDITIONS & MAINTENANCE NEEDS: The Conservancy should fill the role of being the “go-to” contact to report maintenance needs on the trail. This can include creating a standardized way for volunteers, trail users, and the VCTC to submit maintenance issues. Further down the road when it’s developed, the Virginia Creeper Trail App can include an integrated way to record maintenance issues and trail segment conditions that can be used by anyone. Reporting this way can be done through a method similar to other geospatial mobile apps. For example, certain mobile apps can record georeferenced points on an interactive map with a photo to indicate where there is an issue and record a georeferenced line segment using GPS to record the condition of a segment of trail. All of this data can be stored online through a cloud system and reported back to the Conservancy.

MEMBERSHIP & DONOR DATABASE: This data is important for the organization to engage those who are members of the Conservancy, have provided one-time or recurring donations, or who have volunteered. It should be stored in a format that can be updated quickly or automatically as new donations and Conservancy memberships are entered. There is an array of software options offered to non-profits for this type of data, particularly for donor management. Additionally, the VCTC should maintain a volunteer database, in a digital table format, which can be used to record volunteer hours which, if collected and reported, can often be used as in-kind donations to be used as match to grants. Also, it is important to report volunteer hours to the USFS. The volunteer database can be integrated with the membership and donor database or maintained separately. *Note: All donor data and associated notes are sensitive and should be treated with high security.*

OUTFITTER/BUSINESS DATABASE: The Conservancy can provide a great service to the trail’s users by providing a comprehensive list of Virginia Creeper Trail outfitters and nearby businesses. Establishing the VCTC website as the “go-to” online place to plan one’s day on the trail can further solidify the organization as the “One Stop Shop” for all things trail related. Additionally, this list of businesses can internally be used to keep business contact information that can be quickly accessed for messaging to the business community about closures, issues, etc.

GEOSPATIAL DATA: Georeferenced data can be used to provide comprehensive mapping of the trail for the VCTC, partners, and the public. This mapping could be updated annually and published online just for trail partners and/or eventually become publicly available. Coordinate with land managers to standardize data and identify data collection needs. All data on this list can potentially be stored and

used in a geospatial format. Having someone on staff with technical experience using GIS software will be essential to carrying out successful geospatial data management.

Standardizing and Cataloguing GIS Information:

It is an important best management practice for any manager working with GIS to create and utilize a standardized system of record for data that can be shared with a variety of partners, depending on its intended use, to be easily understood and used. This system will be directed by an internal SOP document and updated often.

There is a disparity in the access to and quality of pertinent GIS data between the different segments of the trail. This creates many obstacles to trail management. If the Conservancy is able to establish a complete catalogue consisting of all geospatial data pertaining to the trail, it will have a powerful tool to accomplish its management goals. Some of this data may exist and need to be collected from various partners and edited to fit the organization’s standards, while other data will need to be created. The organization will assume its intended role as the “One Stop Shop” for information and data regarding the trail while achieving organized geospatial awareness of the trail that it serves.

» **Creating a System of Engagement with GIS Information:**

Anything that can be shared in a map in a way that can help the public or the organization, should be used as a tool for engagement. It is about empowering everyone who uses and manages the trail to access and understand the information provided by geospatial data. Maps free up access to useful information that would otherwise be locked away in systems of record. Maps, and GIS, allow records to also be used in a system of engagement. Collaborative online opportunities using geospatial data are improving each year as the technology upgrades. The VCTC can capitalize on its communication, marketing, public connection, and data collection initiatives through a system of engagement that uses online mapping. This engagement extends to the use of mobile apps on the trail and can be a powerful communication tool that utilizes much of the data types explored in this section. Using GIS as both a system of record and engagement is an optimal use of technology.

» **Using GIS for Conservation:**

The VCTC should be the leader in providing comprehensive conservation data management and defining conservation priorities related to the trail, including a conservation

priority map and database. GIS data that pertains to established conservation criteria should be maintained by the organization, and data shared through a data use agreement should be treated with the appropriate sensitivity. A map of land surrounding the entire trail corridor that specifies priority areas can be shared with key conservation partners to engage them and formulate strategies. This conservation data as well as specific parcel data can be used to create a conservation parcel/landowner database. These dynamic tools will guide strategies and advise which means will be used to achieve conservation goals. Conservation partners should be able to rely on the VCTC for direction and for the sharing of data pertinent to achieving conservation goals. *Note: All landowner data and certain conservation data provided by state and federal agencies are sensitive and should be treated with high security.*

LANDOWNER DATABASE: An adjacent landowner database, a list of landowners adjacent to the trail, can be part of a voluntary “opt-in” list to provide important updates to the trail. GIS data has the ability to be exported as a digital table which can be used in programs such as Microsoft Excel. This table can be used to begin to build communications with landowners related to conservation or other matters.

Simultaneously, a conservation parcel/landowner database created from the conservation and parcel prioritization analysis, with a conservation “score” for each parcel within a certain radius of the trail, can be maintained internally. This database can list parcel ownership and priority status and be used by the Conservancy and conservation partners to track priorities in conservation efforts as well as additional information regarding outreach efforts and landowner willingness. As land ownership transfers and parcel data updates, GIS technology offers relatively simple solutions to updating the database as county GIS data updates. There are tools built into the software that allow for the updated parcel data to be integrated into the original parcel data. *Note: All landowner data and associated notes are sensitive and should be treated with high security.*

FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES: A trail organization should stay aware of any and all potential funding sources, and internal management of funding source data will keep the organization up-to-date and ready to pursue all opportunities.

- » **Funding for Maintenance and General Operating:** While the Conservancy may not be performing trail maintenance on its own using its own funding, it may be a leader in identifying diverse funding sources and applying to grants that can be used on trail maintenance. Additionally, keeping record of sources

that can fund the organization’s general operating expenses is essential to any non-profit organization. These funding tables should be revisited regularly and updated semi-annually.

- » **Funding for Conservation:** Funding will be critical for implementation of a conservation plan. The Conservancy should create and maintain a dynamic database of funding opportunities for land conservation from federal, state, local, and private sources. The database should identify maximum and minimum award amounts, application deadlines, what the funds would be best used for, and potential matching funds and personnel for each potential grant. This can apply to sources that would provide funding directly to the Conservancy or sources that would provide funding to identified partners that can assist in the conservation of priority land. This database can be maintained and updated semi-annually, as a dynamic digital table and can be maintained by a volunteer and eventually a staff person.

HISTORIC INFO: History tells a story and captures the attention of an audience. The Virginia Creeper Trail has a long and colorful history, and the Conservancy should do what it can to highlight this history to the public. This can include photos or other items of interest related to the trail. The towns of Abingdon and Damascus and the Forest Service may store archives of the trail’s development and its early years, as well as ongoing records. Most of these records are likely to not exist in a digital format. These partners should be engaged to create a digital archive of the trail’s history by scanning hard-copy photos or written records and storing them in a cloud or server archive. Cloud storage is preferable to ensure data safety and availability. Members of the public, including nearby landowners, may have additional records that can be shared. Storage of this type of data may consume a vast amount of digital space, so purchasing a robust storage plan, in whichever chosen format, will be integral to the ability to communicate and capitalize on the trail’s rich history.

VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL CALENDAR: The VCTC should be the go-to source for updates on the Virginia Creeper Trail, and any ambiguity of what’s happening on the trail should be extinguished by the creation and maintenance of the official Virginia Creeper Trail Calendar. The calendar should be regularly updated with all upcoming trail events, volunteer opportunities, etc. This tool can be maintained by VCTC volunteers or staff and can be displayed on the VCTC website and linked from other online sources.



DATA NEEDS CHECKLIST

- TRAIL USE COUNTS & ECONOMIC IMPACT DATA
- SAFETY & EMERGENCY DATA
- TRAIL CONDITIONS & MAINTENANCE NEEDS
- MEMBERSHIP & DONOR DATABASE
- OUTFITTER/BUSINESS DATABASE
- GEOSPATIAL DATA
- LANDOWNER DATABASE
- FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES
- HISTORIC INFO
- VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL CALENDAR

Photo by Jo Ann White, courtesy of VCTC





TRAIL MANAGEMENT SAFETY & EMERGENCY RESPONSE STRATEGY

A STRATEGY TO ADDRESS SAFETY ON THE TRAIL

RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE SAFETY AND CREATE A FEEDBACK LOOP WITH TRAIL MANAGERS AND EMERGENCY RESPONDERS

Trail safety and emergency response improvements can be addressed in many ways. Partnerships and methods of communication are extremely important to addressing safety and emergency response concerns. This section addresses the top issues and provide potential solutions.

SAFETY & EMERGENCY RESPONSE ISSUES

WHAT TRAIL MANAGEMENT PARTNERS, STAKEHOLDERS, AND EMERGENCY RESPONDERS DEEM THE MOST CRITICAL ISSUES

Based on several conversations, including a focus group of emergency responders at the trail workshop, the following major concerns were raised.

- » **Delayed Response Due to Lack of Cell Phone Service.** A portion of the trail lacks cellular service, including large parts of the USFS section. This combined with lack of users knowing where they are can cause delays.
- » **Users Are Unable to Locate Where They Are When Calling for Emergencies.** Because of lack of service and signage, users often don't know how to locate themselves if in need of assistance.
- » **Vandalism and Theft is A Minor Concern.** Damascus police have reported the trail is occasionally used by those committing illegal activities or fleeing from these activities. The Watauga Trailhead has had some car vandalism, but the trailhead is regularly patrolled by Abingdon police.
- » **There Is Not a Consistent Feedback Loop Between Emergency Responders and Trail Management Partners.** Safety issues and coordinated responses are disjointed due to several different jurisdictions for



Photo by Jesse Kokotek, courtesy of VCTC

response (county, town, and USFS). Also, there is not one go-to entity that coordinates communications with all emergency responder organizations in trail-wide incidents, though the VCTC has played the role of communicator. Trail incidents reported to emergency responders are documented but not necessarily shared so that trail managers can see where problematic areas might be.

- » **If Safety Concerns Are Observed, But Are a Non-Emergency, They May Go Unreported.** If users have an accident or observe something unsafe (fallen tree, trail incident, etc.) they have no easy means to currently report. If more of this is reported, a more holistic picture and responsiveness to the issue can occur.

IMPROVING EMERGENCY RESPONSE & SAFETY ON THE TRAIL

IMPROVE COMMUNICATIONS FOR TRAIL USERS & EMERGENCY RESPONDERS

Explore opportunities to increase radio repeaters for emergency responder communications, expand cell service coverage, and explore ways broadband expansion may improve cellular communications on the trail. Text messages for emergency response could be an opportunity to explore as well. Further down the road, a Virginia Creeper Trail mobile phone app could provide trail users information on what to do in an emergency as well as information on general trail safety protocol as a proactive measure aimed at preventing incidents in the first place.

The VCTC Should Lead Streamlined Public Communications In-Step With Emergency Responders and Trail Management Partners During Trail Wide Emergencies

Having quick access to top decision makers for emergency response will benefit the trail. Cell phones, emails, and

other means for communications should be gathered and accessible to the VCTC and trail managers, and a protocol should be set for when a trail wide emergency hits. These types of emergencies could include natural disasters like floods or tornadoes, closures due to safety issues (as experienced in the start of the 2020 COVID pandemic), missing persons, or active criminal investigations of those still on the trail. Work with emergency responders on how to best communicate and share information, and even how the Conservancy can play a role in the Incident Command System that law enforcement uses in large scale emergency response events. The VCTC could play a key role in information sharing and coordinated communications between trail management partners and emergency responders when a trail wide emergency occurs. There also should be coordinated response between trail management partners and one point of public communication for press releases, trail closures, etc. It is recommended that the VCTC coordinate this messaging with trail management partners and distribute to all trail and emergency management partners. This will reduce the number of mixed messages to the public.

Assess Emergency Responders' Data to Understand Potential Safety Concerns/Management Needs

To understand common issues that need to be addressed, coordinate with town law enforcement and the county sheriff's office to receive quarterly reports on what specific trail incidents are reported. The VCTC can collect and share this information with trail management partners to determine how to address safety issues. Collect information in a database that records the type of incident, general location, and other common data across the trail. Further down the road, a Virginia Creeper Trail app could crowd source maintenance issues.

Address Some of the Trail Conditions that Cause Accidents, Safety Concerns, or Delayed Response

Top priorities include repair of egress at bridges where erosion is occurring and the widening of trail surface where it is narrow—especially in areas that reach or exceed capacity. Damascus sees some elements of crime that utilize the trail at night—lighting may be a potential solution. Some safety responders cited limited access with all-terrain vehicles past certain trestles. Outfitting responders with electric bikes could allow for faster response times as well as provide a less intimidating and more approachable “community policing” effort.

Increase Wayfinding Signage to Allow Users to Locate Themselves

Improve mile markers signs but also include road crossing signage with name of road and mile point (see Signage Implementation Plan). This will better emergency response times if trail users and emergency responders can quickly pinpoint the emergency location.

Crowd Source Identifying Potential Safety Issues to the Public and Volunteers

Signs can be placed at trailheads/trail road crossings that ask trail users to report any safety issues via text. This could be maintenance issues or could be incidents that law enforcement may want to follow up on. Since cell phone service is spotty, placing these signs at the first location of service would be helpful. This type of reporting is being used on other trails with good success. Ultimately, a “report an issue” feature could also be integrated into the Virginia Creeper Trail App.



ALABAMA STATE PARKS UTILIZING CROWD SOURCING TO IDENTIFY MAINTENANCE ISSUES

ADDRESSING TRAIL CAPACITY

STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS EXCEEDED TRAIL CAPACITY

Anecdotal experience of trail users, stakeholders, and the trail management partners indicates that at peak times of the year, especially in the Fall, trail use along sections of the trail exceeds carrying capacity. This is especially the case for the Green Cove Station to Damascus section that travels through USFS land and where at times the trail narrows and has some of the steepest grade. This can create conditions that some feel create a negative and perhaps even unsafe experience when users are constantly having to avoid each other or are stuck in a large caravan of trail users. It is also reported that most equestrians don't use this section as much anymore due to its heavy use and conflict with cyclists.

COLLABORATE ON TRAIL MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Utilize trail management partners, staff, and the Trail Advisory Board to advise on strategies. Consider utilizing a focus group of outfitters to ask them if they perceive issues with capacity and what recommendations they may have to address these issues.

DEFINING SOLUTIONS

Long-term solutions might include working with outfitters to have set drop-off times, suggesting/incentivizing trail users during peak seasons to use different trail sections, education of trail users on proper etiquette and rules, working to manage and regulate group size, widening of the trail in sections or creating pullouts, and other potential management solutions. Carefully consider the potential effects of any potential new uses on trail capacity and visitor safety.

LET DATA INFORM STRATEGY TO ADDRESS TRAIL CAPACITY

While there is much anecdotal evidence, having some solid data may help bolster decision making, especially if it is controversial. Types of data that can be gathered could include, but are not limited to:

- » **Trail Count Data:** Monitoring of peak season user trail counts can show a trajectory of use overtime. Monitoring what is comfortable vs. what tends to cause hazards can be done by volunteers, trail ambassadors, and staff. Knowing these numbers can help define the periods where data solidly shows there are concerns for safety and exceeding capacity.
- » **Trail Capacity/Level of Service Standards:** The US Federal Highway Administration's [Shared-Use Path Level of Service Calculator](#) method for analysis for what is the optimum level of service. Using a national recognized standard can give trail management partners some backing if implementing any management measures. The VCTC and partners can apply this tool and come up with an agreed upon Level of Service (amount of users) that is optimal for safety. The calculator gives a passing to failing grade based on several factors. Reasons for designating an optimal level of service could include:
 - Maintaining an optimum speed for the majority of users (largely bicyclists), for both safety and comfort.
 - Ensuring level of service measures allows freedom to maneuver, which can be impacted by clustered users, active passes, delayed passes, and the perceived ability to pass.
- » **Listen to Trail Users:** Use the trail intercept surveys (asking qualitative questions), trail-user safety reporting, and emergency responder data. Listen to what issues are being caused by exceeding capacity. Document this data.



TRAIL IMPACT

A PLAN TO UNDERSTAND VISITATION

OVERVIEW

THE IMPORTANCE OF MEASURING IMPACT OF THE VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL

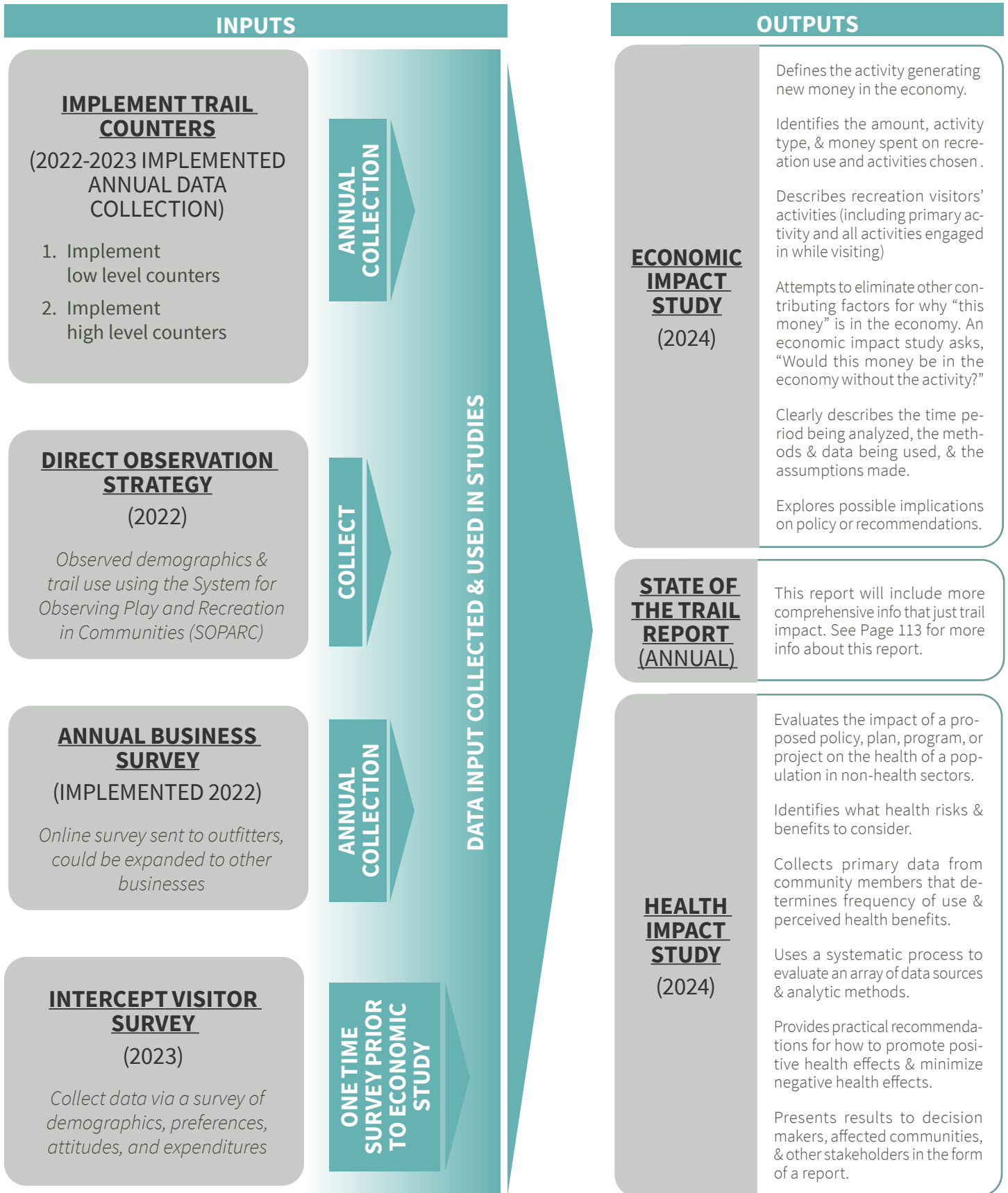
Outdoor recreation supports the quality of life and health of individuals, communities, and local economies. For the VCTC to be able to understand the needs of the Virginia Creeper Trail from a management and funding perspective and to be able to communicate the health and economic benefits provided by the trail, the impact of the trail will need to be measured and analyzed. The following plan outlines the systematic collection of user and economic data needed to measure the true impact of the trail. The primary purpose of collecting baseline data is to understand user trends over time, manage visitors, and report economic impacts to the community.

MEASURING IMPACT

There are various methods to measure impact; however, due to the Virginia Creeper Trail's length, its location through two counties, and its management by multiple agencies, coordination of these efforts is essential. Each type of measurement has limitations and will not capture the entire picture, so using various techniques can ensure a broader view of who is using the Virginia Creeper Trail. The tables on *pages 93-95* display a list of options to measure trail impact.

ECONOMIC IMPACT STRATEGY

INPUTS & OUTPUTS



OPTIONS FOR MEASUREMENT

➤ *Measurement to Pursue Based on Input*

OPTIONS FOR MEASUREMENT & EXAMPLES	WHAT TO MEASURE & WHY	LIMITATIONS	STRATEGY
<p>➤ Quantity of Users</p> <p>Examples: Great Allegheny Passage Annual Trail Count (2020)</p> <p>Empire State Trail User Projections</p> <p>North Carolina Non-Motorized Volume Data Program:</p>	<p>WHAT: <i>How many people use the trail?</i></p> <p>WHY: <i>The data demonstrates growing trail use to support future funding and grants.</i></p>	<p>Trail counters only collect the basic information of how many users are on the trail, they do not take into account the type of activity, duration, spending, motivations, or demographics.</p>	<p>Simple Trail Counts: <i>Use volunteers/organizations/companies to count trail users using a robust counter-strategy.</i></p> <p>Permanent Counters: <i>Strategically place permanent trail counters along the Virginia Creeper and plan for data download and analysis.</i></p>
<p>Type of Use</p> <p>Example: Active Living Research</p>	<p>WHAT: <i>What type of activity people are doing on the trail (run, walk, bike, horseback riding, fishing, enjoying nature, etc.) along with group types and basic observational demographics.</i></p> <p>WHY: <i>Physical activity is a complex behavior, influenced by many factors. Data may help enhance existing, and plan for future, trail amenities and identify business opportunities.</i></p>	<p>Observation of use enhances basic trail counting but is limited to only what the eye sees. It does not allow interaction with the user to ask more detailed follow-up questions.</p>	<p>The System for Observing Play and Recreation in Communities (SOPARC)</p> <p>Observations: <i>Use volunteers to record activities observed on the trail.</i></p> <p>Trail Intercept Survey: <i>Ask users how they are using, or would like to use, the trail.</i></p>
<p>➤ Health Impact / Physical Activity/ Duration of Use</p> <p>Examples: Measuring Trails Benefits for Public Health</p> <p>CDC Health Impact Resource Page</p> <p>People for Bikes Health Research Library</p>	<p>WHAT: <i>Active time on the trail to measure the physical activity of trail users.</i></p> <p>WHY: <i>Data may interest public health providers and funders.</i></p>	<p>Choosing to measure health impact or physical activity needs to be purposeful and entail a detailed strategy to ensure data collected meets the need/purpose. Often health impacts for local residents are needed for funding/grants. Ensure new technology like Strava, etc. are explored to collect data from secondary sources.</p>	<p>Intercept Survey: <i>Minutes of activity on the trail. In lieu of an intercept survey, some communities provide stations for self-reporting surveys using kiosks and/or drop boxes.</i></p> <p>Device Information: <i>Actual physical activity results from platforms such as Strava, AllTrails, etc.</i></p> <p>Health Impact Assessment (HIA): <i>A health impact assessment is a tool that can help communities, decision-makers, and practitioners make choices that improve public health through community design.</i></p>

*THIS TABLE DISPLAYS A LIST OF OPTIONS FOR MEASURING TRAIL IMPACT.



OPTIONS FOR MEASUREMENT

➤ *Measurement to Pursue Based on Input*

OPTIONS FOR MEASUREMENT & EXAMPLES	WHAT TO MEASURE & WHY	LIMITATIONS	STRATEGY
<p>➤ Visitor Demographic</p> <p>Example: 2019 Ankeny Bicycle Tourism Plan</p>	<p>WHAT: <i>Who are your trail users and from where do they come?</i></p> <p>WHY: <i>Data may be used for targeted marketing and/or business development efforts. Data may also be used to differentiate local vs. visitor patterns and preferences.</i></p>	<p>Observation of use enhances basic trail counting but is limited to only what the eye sees. It does not allow interaction with the user to ask more detailed follow-up questions.</p> <p>Intercepting users at trailheads can be challenging and extremely time-consuming for survey takers. Often people do not want to stop and talk during their travel time/vacation.</p>	<p>Simple License Plate Survey: <i>At designated times and locations record the home state of license plates on cars parked at pre-selected trailheads.</i></p> <p>Intercept Survey: <i>Can ask a wide variety of questions such as zip code, education, reasons for visiting the trail, etc.</i></p> <p>Visitor Surveys at Lodging Establishments: <i>Partner with local lodging providers to ask about trail use (e.g. will you be visiting the trail, did you visit the trail, what did you do, etc.)</i></p> <p>Visitor Zip Code Survey: <i>Can use visitor zip code to understand the market dynamics of the area from which visitors are coming.</i></p>
<p>➤ Spending Impact</p> <p>Examples: An Economic, Health, and Environmental Benefits Analysis of the Mounds Greenway for the Hoosier Environmental Council City of Steamboat Springs</p>	<p>WHAT: <i>How much money do trail users spend before, during, and after their visit?</i></p> <p>WHY: <i>Data may interest local businesses, may help attract new business and opportunities.</i></p>	<p>It's easy to administer surveys and questionnaires asking, however, this technique is limited by respondents' memories and perceptions.</p>	<p>Intercept Survey: <i>How much did you spend before, during, after your most recent visit?</i></p> <p>Business Owner Surveys: <i>Work with businesses to ask customers where they are from (zip code survey)/ why they are here?</i></p> <p>Sales Tax Revenue: <i>Communities can track increased sales tax revenue at businesses near the trail.</i></p>
<p>Property Value Impact</p> <p>Examples: The Impact of Greenways on Property Values: Evidence from Austin, Texas Perceptions of How the Presence of Greenway Trails Affects the Value of Proximate Properties The Value of Greenways</p>	<p>WHAT: <i>What is the long-term impact of trails on property values and/or home prices near the trail?</i></p> <p>WHY: <i>Some communities see rising home or property values as a positive impact.</i></p>	<p>There are many factors that impact property values and directly correlating outdoor recreation opportunities or greenways can be difficult.</p>	<p>Formal Study: <i>Many things can affect property values. A formal study can determine if there is a correlation between trails and property values. A community should consider hiring a consultant that has completed similar studies.</i></p> <p>Home Prices: <i>Working with a local realtor and the local tax office, a community can document changing prices of homes near the trail.</i></p>

*THIS TABLE DISPLAYS A LIST OF OPTIONS FOR MEASURING TRAIL IMPACT.

OPTIONS FOR MEASUREMENT

➤ *Measurement to Pursue Based on Input*

OPTIONS FOR MEASUREMENT & EXAMPLES	WHAT TO MEASURE & WHY	LIMITATIONS	STRATEGY
<p>Quality of Life Impact</p> <p>Examples: Center City Allentown Quality of Life Survey City of Longmont Customer Satisfaction Surveys</p>	<p>WHAT: <i>Do community residents see the trail as an important community amenity?</i></p> <p>WHY: <i>Many community residents consider trails as an important amenity that contributes to their quality of life.</i></p> <p>Understanding local sentiment may build support for additional trails.</p>	<p>Measuring quality of life and satisfaction is subjective for each person and includes a large scale with a variety of factors. This data should be collected with other public partners in a community to prioritize efforts/funding. Results may be difficult to act on in government settings.</p>	<p>Questions: <i>Using a variety of tools (e.g. community-wide surveys, customer satisfaction surveys, questions asked during other planning efforts), communities can ask residents about trails. For example, ask residents to rank the value of trails, ask what community amenities they would like to see more of.</i></p>
<p>Tourism / Economic Development Efforts</p> <p>Example: Promoting Parks and Recreation’s Role in Economic Development</p>	<p>WHAT: <i>Some communities work closely with economic development and tourism partners to promote trails.</i></p> <p>WHY: <i>Communities with trails are attractive to potential businesses and tourists. Trails are an amenity that economic developers and tourism promoters can market to potential businesses and visitors.</i></p>	<p>These partnerships may be difficult to develop depending on the size, activity, and purpose of the community partners and economic development agency.</p>	<p>Partner with regional economic agencies to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote the trail Gather feedback Collect user data Connect with planning and development of the trail Work together to raise funds for trail maintenance
<p>➤ Event Impact</p>	<p>WHAT: <i>Communities that host events on their trails can learn from event attendees.</i></p> <p>WHY: <i>Surveying event attendees can quantify the impact of the event (spending, where traveling from, demographics, etc.)</i></p> <p>Communicating with attendees after an event may result in repeat visits.</p>	<p>Collecting survey data can be challenging if events are taking place along the trail, not everyone is in the same place. Attendees may not want to fill out surveys. Follow-up event emails with the online surveys can be a more effective method.</p>	<p>Distribute a survey to participants at the finish of an event, or provide a survey link to participants after the event.</p> <p>Keep track of event attendee contact information to build a trail communication list.</p> <p>Include area tourism information in event packets to encourage return visits.</p>
<p>➤ Economic Impact Study</p> <p>Example: Evaluating the Economic Impact of Shared Use Paths in North Carolina</p>	<p>WHAT: <i>Identify extensive economic impacts through a formal economic impact modeling study such as IMPLAN.</i></p> <p>WHY: <i>Understand spending habits and impacts on the region.</i></p>	<p>Small towns have a difficult time measuring impacts of money spent and have a low impact factor (number of times money turns over). Can be very expensive to gain access to the software.</p>	<p>Hire a consultant to develop and run the model to identify benefits related to jobs, wages, business output, and value-added products.</p>

*THIS TABLE DISPLAYS A LIST OF OPTIONS FOR MEASURING TRAIL IMPACT.



INPUTS/DATA GATHERING METHODS

TRAIL COUNTER STRATEGY

UNDERSTANDING USAGE ON THE VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL

To have the most effective Trail Impact Plan, the first step is to count trail usage. To determine this, a user count, or estimate of total trail users and total trail user visits, must be developed. There are a number of methods that can be used to develop trail user estimates. The least expensive, but most time consuming, method is to have volunteers conduct trail user counts at trail access points. Volunteers can also count trail users as they pass by other specific assigned locations. Another method that eliminates the need to have volunteers counting users is the strategic placement of trail counters over an extended period of time on the trail. Whichever method is implemented, it is strongly advised that a trail

user count be conducted in conjunction or before the implementation of a visitor survey. It is possible to perform and make use of a trail visitor survey without performing a user count; however, the findings will not be able to be projected to determine the overall economic impact.

Consideration of trail counter placement is essential to understanding the use of the entire 34-mile trail system. High level trail counts would be placed at all entry points. Low level trail counts would be placed at the main entrance for users and at both ends of the trail. Collection of trail data and analysis is the most time-consuming aspect of trail counters. Consideration of how much time it will take to download data, analyze, and report into a system for understandability is necessary in deciding how many trail counters to place on the trail. Furthermore, it's essential for one person to oversee all implementation, monitoring, and data collection to ensure consistency.

TRAIL COUNTER IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

LOW LEVEL TRAIL COUNTER LOCATIONS

- Between Mile Marker 1 (MM1) and entry to the trail from Abingdon Sports Complex (when completed)
- Near the Orchard Hill Rd and State Route 58 intersection in Damascus (VDOT will prescribe exact location)
- Straight Branch Trailhead – Near 25738 Jeb Stuart Highway, Jefferson National Forest Damascus, VA 24236
- Green Cove Station – Green Cove Community Center, 41221 County Road 600, Jefferson National Forest, Damascus, VA 24236

HIGH LEVEL TRAIL COUNTER LOCATIONS ADDITIONS

- Watauga Trailhead – 24350 Watauga Road, Abingdon, VA 24211
- Alvarado Station – 21198 Alvarado Rd, Abingdon, VA 24211
- Taylors Valley Trailhead – 23530 Taylor Valley Road, Jefferson National Forest, Damascus, VA 24236
- Creek Junction Trailhead – 21285 Creek Junction Road, Jefferson National Forest, Damascus, VA 24236

THE ANNUAL BUSINESS SURVEY

UNDERSTAND CONDITIONS OF BUSINESSES THAT DEPEND ON THE TRAIL

Regional businesses located near the Virginia Creeper Trail depend on this resource/attraction for economic benefits. Administering an annual business survey that gathers important insights into rentals, sales, and trends creates a two-way system of communication between businesses and the Conservancy. This communication and data collection optimizes decision making and creates a platform to discuss improvements.

Collect Data on Business Vitality

- » Describe seasonal (quarterly) sales that include equipment rental.
- » Collect data on customer feedback, satisfaction, trail quality, etc.
- » Understand business challenges or trends (like e-bikes) to guide decision making.
- » Request businesses collect information about where visitors learn about the area via marketing channels.

THE VISITOR SURVEY

COLLECTING INFORMATION ABOUT USER MOTIVATIONS & CHARACTERISTICS

It is imperative at the outset to establish a set of objectives for the Virginia Creeper Trail Visitor Survey. Know why the information is being collected and what will be done with it when the study is completed. The USFS requires permit approval for surveys. Coordination with the USFS is necessary. Determining the characteristics of users of the trail is critical and steps could include:

Describe the Preferences, Attitudes, & Characteristics of Users

- » Describe the preferences, attitudes, and characteristics of Users (what trail visitors do, when and why they do it).
- » Describe demographics of trail users or visitors – age, gender, residence, etc.
- » Describe recreation visitors' socio-demographic characteristics.
- » Describe recreation visitors and their trip characteristics, including seasonality.
- » Describe user preferences and expectations of the Virginia Creeper Trail and quality of interpretation and information.
- » Describe trail users' perceptions of the trail – maintenance, security, cleanliness.
- » Describe recreation visitors' activities (for example, including primary activity and all activities engaged in while visiting).

Collect Information About Recreation Use & Demand

- » Identify the amount, activity type, and money spent on recreation use and activities chosen.
- » Estimate usage and predict future demand.
- » Assess the Virginia Creeper recreation uniqueness and significance.

Collect Information About Tourists Spending & Travel Choices

- » Collect information on money spent on overnight stays, dining, and shopping.
- » Collect information on spending related to trail activities – bike or equipment purchase, food, water, etc.
- » Identify travel choices while visiting the Virginia Creeper Trail (i.e., home zip code, reason for visit, future return travel plans, etc.).

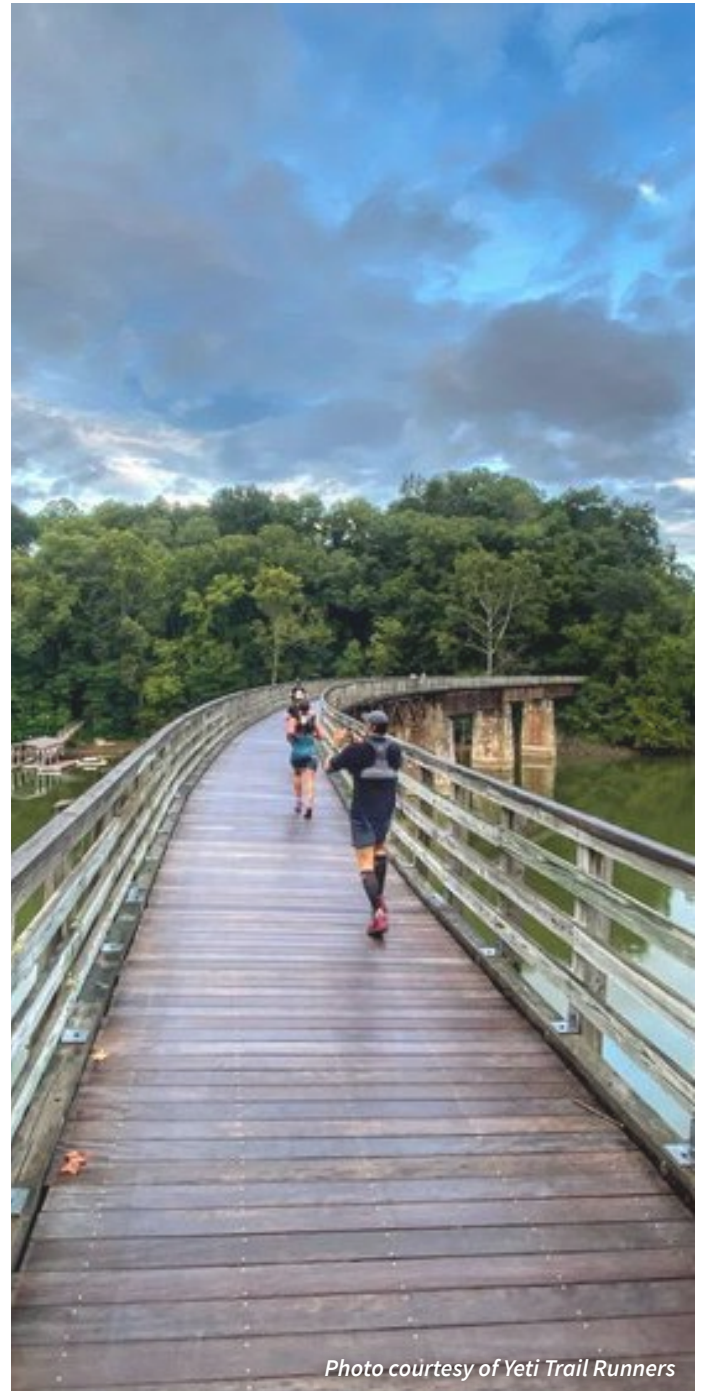


Photo courtesy of Yeti Trail Runners



VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL VISITOR SURVEY (EXAMPLE)

Overview: The purpose of this project is to gain insights into the community's use and experience with the Virginia Creeper Trail. This is the first step in the process to provide data to community leaders to understand trail use and its impact to the community.

1. How often, on average, do you use the Virginia Creeper Trail? (Select One)
 - a. Daily
 - b. Between 3 and 5 times a week
 - c. 1 or 2 times a week
 - d. Once a week
 - e. A couple of times a month
 - f. Once a month
 - g. A few times a year
 - h. Once a year
 - i. Once every couple of years
 - j. This is my first time on the trail

2. How do you access the Virginia Creeper Trail? (Select One)
 - a. Walk
 - b. Bike
 - c. Drive
 - d. Other

3. What is your primary activity on the Virginia Creeper Trail? (Select One)
 - a. Walking/Hiking
 - b. Biking
 - c. Jogging/Running
 - d. Horseback riding
 - e. Cross-country Skiing/Snowshoeing
 - f. Other activity (specify)

4. How much time do you spend on the Virginia Creeper Trail on each visit? (Select One)
 - a. Less than 30 minutes
 - b. 30 minutes to 1 hour
 - c. 1 to 2 hours
 - d. More than 2 hours

5. Would you consider your use of the Virginia Creeper Trail to be most frequently for...(Select One)

- a. Recreation
- b. Health and Exercise
- c. Commuting
- d. Other (specify)

6. How did you find out about the Virginia Creeper Trail? (choose all that apply)

- a. Word of mouth
- b. Roadside signage
- c. Driving past
- d. Newspaper
- e. Bike shop
- f. Convention and Visitors Bureau
- g. Information from Rails-to-Trails Conservancy
- h. Internet web site
- i. Social media
- j. Magazines
- k. Online forums
- l. Email group
- m. Membership group affiliation
- n. Other

7. The Virginia Creeper Trail considers trail related spending as money spent on bikes, bike supplies, bike racks, sportswear (footwear and clothing). Considering that, how much did your household spend in the last year on trail related gear?

8. In conjunction with this visit to the Virginia Creeper Trail, how many nights did your group stay and how much did your group spend per-night on overnight accommodations?

Type of Accommodation	Motel or Hotel	Bed and Breakfast or AirNb	Friend or Relative's Home	Campground	Other (please specify):
Nights spent:					
Cost per night:	\$	\$	\$	\$	\$

9. In conjunction with this visit to the Virginia Creeper Trail, approximately how much did your group spend on these items?

Restaurants (meals & drinks)	Retail/Shopping	Groceries	Entertainment	Other
\$	\$	\$	\$	\$

10. How many people are there in your household?
11. How many people are there in your group today with you on the Virginia Creeper Trail?
12. What improvements would encourage you to use this trail more often?
13. How do you view your safety and security along the Virginia Creeper Trail? (Select One)
 - a. Excellent
 - b. Good
 - c. Fair
 - d. Poor
14. What is your living status in the area?
 - a. Local
 - b. Seasonal resident
 - c. Visitor
15. What is your residential zip code?
16. What is your age?
17. How many children under the age of 18 are there with you today?
18. What is your gender?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Transgender
 - d. Do not identify as male, female, or transgender
19. What is your race?
 - a. Black or African American
 - b. White/Caucasian
 - c. American Indian/Native American

- d. Hispanic/Latino
- e. Asian/Pacific Islander
- f. Other _____

20. What is your ethnicity?

- a. Hispanic or Latino
- b. Non-Hispanic or Latino

21. What is your household annual income?

- a. Less than/Equal to \$25,000
- b. \$25,001-\$50,000
- c. \$50,001-\$75,000
- d. \$75,001-\$100,000
- e. \$100,001-\$200,000
- f. More than \$200,000

22. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?

- a. High School Graduate/GED
- b. Associate's Degree
- c. Bachelor's Degree
- d. Master's Degree
- e. Doctoral Degree or Terminal Degree



THE INTERCEPT VISITOR SURVEY

UNDERSTANDING WHO USES THE VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL

This data collection methodology provides the greatest degree of control but is the most expensive and difficult to implement. This method involves “intercepting” trail users and asking them to complete a survey. A survey collector, which could be staff, interns, or volunteers, are stationed at trail access points. At certain locations on the Virginia Creeper trail, they are asked to participate in the survey. The survey can be completed by the trail user or the individual who is administering the intercept (questions would be read to the trail user like an interview). Completed survey

forms are collected at a central location for data input. It is critical for one person to manage the data entry and reporting. To be effective in obtaining a cross section of trail users, intercepts must be conducted randomly across all daylight hours and every day of the week, preferably in every season. Over the course of a survey period, this will entail hundreds of hours of effort. Those conducting the intercepts must be trained in advance on how to be effective in asking for trail user participation. If the survey is going to be conducted like an interview, additional training needs to be conducted on how to elicit responses so as not to bias the results.

VISITOR SURVEY DATA COLLECTION METHODS

There are a number of different ways that the visitor survey data information can be collected from trail users. The following are brief descriptions of methods that can be used to collect trail-user data.

Personal Intercept. This method requires that an interviewer stop trail users and ask a series of questions. This is usually best for short surveys. In one example, the only question was “What is your zip code?” as trail users walked or rode by. This method is labor intensive and usually requires a lot of volunteer hours.

Self-Selecting-Drop Box. In this method, survey forms are available to be picked up at trailheads and trailside businesses. Completed forms are deposited in a drop box at the trailhead or business. The labor required here is to have someone make sure the supply of survey forms is maintained and that the drop boxes are emptied periodically.

Self-Selecting-Mail-Back. This is similar to the method described above except that the completed survey forms are mailed back to the trail organization’s address. The mail-back can be either a self-addressed stamped envelope or business reply mail.

QR Code. QR Codes are 2D barcodes that encode alphanumeric information. A Survey QR Code, when scanned, will bring up the survey form. People can fill it out and submit their responses. Often, they are included with a marketing piece and logo to prompt people to scan it and fill out the survey form.

Direct mail, email, and web-based survey methods are not recommended for trail-user surveys because they require a previously existing database of trail users, and professional assistance is advised.

OUTPUTS

THE ECONOMIC IMPACT STUDY

TO ANALYZE FLOWS OF SPENDING ASSOCIATED WITH TRAIL USE AND REGIONAL TOURISM

Outdoor recreation is increasingly of strategic interest to rural areas seeking to encourage economic development through increased outdoor recreation-linked tourism (EPA, 2019; White, et al., 2016). Recreational activity, whether at home or while traveling, generates spending and economic activity in local communities. An economic impact study traces the flows of spending associated with tourism activity in a region to identify changes in sales, tax revenues, income, and jobs due to tourism activity. The principal methods here are visitor spending surveys, analysis of secondary data from government economic statistics, economic base models, input-output models, and multipliers. An important aspect of trails is the financial impact they have on the communities they pass through. The economic impact of the Virginia Creeper Trail is an important tool to maintain support and fund the future. Using the statistics gathered from the overall trail impact plan can also strengthen applications for grant funding. Several important components to economic impact analyses include: (1) the amount of money users spend, (2) the number of annual trail visitations, and (3) the costs associated with the trail.

Spending Categories

Three categories of spending accurately reflect spending relevant to both the trail and the user:

1. **Hard Goods:** Items such as bicycles, backpacks, and outdoor equipment
2. **Soft Goods:** Consumables such as food and drink
3. **Overnight Accommodations:** A trail activity related to a stay in a hotel, motel, Airbnb, B & B, or campground

Trail User Spending

An economic impact analysis will assess the contribution of tourism activity to a region's economy. The basic questions an economic impact study usually addresses are:

- » How much do tourists spend in the area?
- » What portion of sales by local businesses is due to tourism?
- » How much income does tourism generate for households and businesses in the area?
- » How many jobs in the area does tourism support?
- » How much tax revenue is generated from tourism?

To calculate the average expenditure, sum all the expenditures provided by the survey respondents and divide this total by the number of respondents that actually provided a dollar figure response. For hard good purchases, the survey question should request information on purchases made over the past twelve months. In the case of soft good purchases, the survey question should request expenditures per person on the most recent Virginia Creeper Trail visit. The survey form should ask the respondent whether overnight accommodations were used on the most recent visit, and the associated expenditures from these accommodations. Assuming that the total annual user visits to the Virginia Creeper Trail has been determined, the average soft good expenditure can then be multiplied by the number of user visits to determine the economic impact of this category of spending.

Trail User Counts

To be most effective, the economic impact should be presented as spending by all trail users on all trail visits over the course of a year (annual expenditures). In order to determine this, a user count must be developed (see *Trail Counter Strategy*).

CREATE AN ANNUAL "STATE OF TRAIL" REPORT TO SHARE WITH STAKEHOLDERS ABOUT TRAIL USAGE & IMPACTS

Combining the trail counter reports and the annual business survey results to share with stakeholders allows the VCTC to summarize notable successes and needed improvements that fulfill their mission to maintain and preserve the trail in order to support a safe and enjoyable experience for all trail users. This data should be collected quarterly and be reported annually. Providing meeting space for stakeholders to convene and report the findings creates meaningful discussion and engagement for partners. Full details of the report are outlined on Page 113.



THE HEALTH IMPACT STUDY LINKING PARK & TRAIL PLANNING TO PUBLIC HEALTH GOALS & HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

Citizens today are confronted with a number of serious health issues and the trend towards a sedentary lifestyle is recognized as a major contributor to health and social issues. With increased awareness of these issues, park and recreation professionals, policy makers, health care providers, community leaders, and educators need to better understand the benefits that park and public lands, facilities, and programs may play in addressing these concerns. Moreover, trails are a critical component of outdoor recreation infrastructure in and around cities, towns, rural areas, and public lands. Trail access enriches the lives of community residents and visitors, providing an outlet for exercise, outdoor recreation, and transportation. A variety of studies have shown that individuals with greater access to trails report higher levels of physical activity (*Brownson et al., 2000; Librett, Yore, & Schmid, 2006; Fitzhugh, Bassett Jr, & Evans, 2010; Grunseit et al., 2019*).

In addition, outdoor recreation-based amenities play an important role in many individuals' decisions of where to live and where to travel. Librett, Yore, & Schmid (2006) found that 48% of frequent trail users and 20% of non-trail users considered trail and green space access as an important factor in deciding where to live. Trail access is reported as an important factor for many individuals in their choice of where to live (*Librett, Yore, & Schmid, 2006; Plantinga and Bernell, 2007*). Recent analysis supports that rural areas that are recreation-dependent have been economically outperforming those that are not (*Headwaters Economics, 2019*). Agencies that provide trails and recreation opportunities provide crucial health and wellness opportunities for all populations within communities. As many people in the United States continue to face serious health issues — including rising rates of chronic disease, an increased prevalence of sedentary lifestyles, and poor nutrition habits — parks, recreation, and trails offer an affordable and accessible solution.

GEOGRAPHIC DATA COLLECTION METHODS TO CONNECT OUTDOOR RECREATION & PUBLIC HEALTH					
SUGGESTED MEASURES		FACILITY AREA	SITE	CITY / COUNTY	STATE / NATIONAL
ACCESS MEASURES	1. Proximity - Percentage of the population (city/county/state/ national) living within a half mile of a public park or trail corridor boundary.			✓	✓
	2. Walking Access - Percentage of the population (city/ county) with less than a half-mile walk route to a public park or trail entrance.			✓	
	3. Park Connectivity - Ratio of the number of people with less than a half-mile walk route to a public park or trail entrance to the number of people living within a half mile of that specific park or trail corridor boundary.		✓		
ACREAGE MEASURE	4. Land Area - Percentage of land area designated as public parks or trails.			✓	✓
FACILITY AREA MEASURES	5. Physical Activity - Percentage of users engaged in sedentary, moderate, or vigorous physical activity at a specific facility area.	✓			
	6. Visitation - Annual number of visits to a specific facility area.	✓			
	7. Frequency – Average number of visits to a specific facility area by an individual during a period of time.	✓			
	8. Duration - Average time spent at a specific facility area by an individual.	✓			

Source: Merriam, D.; Bality, A.; Stein, J.; Boehmer, T. 2017. [Improving Public Health through Public Parks and Trails: Eight Common Measures](#). Summary report. US Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and US Department of the Interior, National Park Service.)

The link between parks, trail, nature, and public health are emerging through a variety of research methods including health impact studies. These studies cover a wide range of topics addressing a range of health challenges, such as obesity, cardiovascular disease, depression, and anxiety. Moreover, the benefits of providing a place for physical activity include improved mental health, reduced stress, connections to nature, and increased social interaction. Time spent in nature shows promise in prevention of health issues and as treatment across the life span. In addition, parks and trails can simultaneously provide venues for community events, activities, and public health programs and improve the environment.

Researchers, community leaders, decision makers, park and recreation professionals, and public health professionals have been working together to promote the public health benefits of parks and trails. Active Living Research, funded in part by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, has been a national leader in validating the positive public health benefits of parks and trails and provides below a summary of common measures. The goal of having common measurements associated with parks and trail infrastructure is to provide a systematic way to evaluate health benefits.

There are a variety of methods to collect health impact data including secondary resources from government sources like:

- US Bureau of Economic Analysis
- Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan Library
- CDC Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS)
- Division for Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention Map Tool
- US Department of Transportation’s Active Transportation Studies
- Rails to Trails’ BikeAble™
- US Forest Service National Visitor Use Monitoring Program



Photo by Alison Williams, courtesy of Fans of Virginia Creeper Trail

SUGGESTED MEASURES & METHODS FOR MEASURING PUBLIC HEALTH IMPACTS OF THE TRAIL

Proximity – Percentage of the population (city/county/state/national) living within a half mile of a public park or trail corridor boundary.

Method

- Step 1.** Define the service area by creating a half-mile buffer around the boundaries of all parks or trail corridors within the jurisdiction.
- Step 2.** Merge buffers to eliminate double counting overlapping areas.
- Step 3.** Calculate population within the service area. See area proportional weighting call-out box for recommended method. (Your GIS specialist can help.)
- Step 4.** Divide the population within the service area by the total population in the jurisdiction.

Walking Access – Percentage of the population (city/county) with less than a half-mile walk route to a public park or trail entrance.

Method

- Step 1.** Locate park and trail entry points and follow walking access routes (e.g., sidewalks or neighborhood trails) for a half mile or until encountering a barrier, whichever occurs first. Barriers can include things such as major roads or railroads with no pedestrian crossing.
- Step 2.** Create 300-foot buffers around access routes to establish the service area for all park or trail entrances. Merge the buffers to create one service area for the entire city or county.
- Step 3.** Calculate population within the service area. See area proportional weighting call-out box for recommended method. (Your GIS specialist can help.)
- Step 4.** Divide the population within the network service area by the total population in the city or county.

Park Connectivity – The ratio of the number of people with less than a half-mile walk route to a public park or trail entrance to the number of people living within a half mile of that specific park or trail corridor boundary.

Method

- Step 1.** For a specific park or trail, calculate the number of people with less than a half-mile walk route to entry points using the methodology outlined for Measure 2.
- Step 2.** Divide by the total number of people living within a half mile of that park or trail using the methodology outlined for Measure 1.

Land Area – Percentage of land area designated as public parks or trails.

Method:

Divide the total acres of public parks and trail corridors by the total acres of land within the city or county.

Physical Activity – Percentage of users engaged in sedentary, moderate, or vigorous physical activity at a specific facility area.

Method:

Direct observation using validated protocols is recommended to collect data for this measure. Direct observation is likely to provide more accurate data than surveys and interviews, which tend to be more subjective. Surveys and interviews are acceptable if direct observation is not a feasible option.

Visitation – Annual number of visits to a specific facility area.

Method:

This data can be collected using mechanical counters such as inductive loops and infrared counters. On-site, telephone, or mail surveys can also provide information on annual number of visits to a facility area. Data for this measure can also be collected via technology, such as mobile phone applications.

Frequency – Average number of visits to a specific facility area by an individual during a period of time.

Duration – Average time spent at a specific facility area by an individual.

Method:

Data for Measures 7 and 8 can be obtained via surveys that ask people how often they visit specific park facility areas and how long they stay at each facility area. Telephone and mail surveys can be conducted among individuals living within a specified area or a targeted sample can be obtained using on-site intercept surveys of individuals using the facility area.

Source: Merriam, D.; Bality, A.; Stein, J.; Boehmer, T. 2017. [Improving Public Health through Public Parks and Trails: Eight Common Measures](#). Summary report. US Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and US Department of the Interior, National Park Service.)



MARKETING & OUTREACH

A FOUNDATIONAL PLAN FOR INCREASING AWARENESS, ENGAGEMENT, & SUPPORT OF THE VCTC

OVERVIEW

While there is general awareness and understanding of the Virginia Creeper Trail itself, there is limited or inconsistent awareness of the broader functions and structure of the VCTC organization and the importance of the organization in relation to the trail. The following plan is designed to help the Conservancy consider how it can better leverage its local presence, and the Virginia Creeper Trail’s regional and national presence, to support the growth and evolution of the organization and strategically advance its goals. The development of a strong, recognizable brand can help to garner greater financial support, credibility, increase organizational capacity, and engagement.

DEVELOPING THE BRANDING STRATEGY

ROLL OUT CLEAR & COMPREHENSIVE BRAND STRATEGY

Implement a Brand Refresh to Support the Evolution of the VCTC

Having a strong, recognizable brand is key to any successful organization. A brand is more than just a mark or a logo, it is a reflection of an organization’s values, the impact it has, and how it is recognized in the community. Through the stakeholder engagement process it was clear that there is an inconsistent understanding of who the VCTC is, what they do, and why that matters. This inconsistency was universal across the stakeholder groups depending on their degree of engagement with the organization.

Fortunately, those who are familiar with the work of the Conservancy have a strong connection with the organization and value the work that the VCTC does. That is a great place



to start. A new brand strategy should identify that value proposition and lead to a refreshing update, look, and feel to the organization that will be key to attracting new audiences, volunteers, partners, and funders. The VCTC is growing and evolving; its brand should reflect that.

Defining the Value Proposition

Value proposition is perhaps the most important element of organizational and market strategy and success. Developing the ability to create and communicate its own unique value

proposition was one of the most important aspects of any business, especially a non-profit.

Creating perceived value (particularly for a non-profit that relies on its ability to articulate the benefits and impact it is having on a community, a problem, or a demographic) is essential to fund development and therefore the organization's financial sustainability. Value is the core of an organization's brand identity and generates the respect it commands and the trust it engenders in the community. This concept should be woven into a unique value proposition (UVP) for the Conservancy. The value proposition for the

“ **WHAT IS VALUE PROPOSITION?
ACCORDING TO THE BRIDGESPAN GROUP:**

A value proposition is a short description of what a company provides for its customers in exchange for their financial support. If you've ever purchased a product, paid for a service, or donated to a nonprofit, you likely did so because you accepted (perhaps subconsciously) its value proposition.

”



BUILDING ON THE CURRENT BRAND

LEVERAGING PARTNERS & VOLUNTEERS

Recommendations to enhance and build on the current brand prior to full brand refresh

The VCTC, to those who are familiar and engaged, is a well-respected and valued organization across all subsectors of the community. There is a significant opportunity to articulate the current value and impact the work of the VCTC and better engage those partners and volunteers in supporting short-term opportunities for the organization while it works to scale up its capacity and capability prescribed in this larger plan.

The following approaches are intended to position the VCTC as the key leader in providing up to date information, and therefore value, to the communities along the trail and the trail users. This will minimize the impact of duplicate communication and social media channels over time, support the VCTC in solidifying its value proposition, and continue to elevate the brand and importance of the organization in relation to the trail.

TRAIL COMMUNITY OUTREACH & BRAND BUILDING FOR VCTC

TAKE THE LEAD IN BEING THE COMPREHENSIVE RESOURCE & DISSEMINATOR OF INFORMATION FOR VISITORS

Update and Distribute Maps and VCTC Info More Broadly and More Consistently

During the stakeholder engagement process we heard that there is a desire, from both the business owners and their customers, to have access to more information, maps, and updates on the trail. That is a great sign and proves they see the value in the trail and the impact it has on their business. Prior to an organizational brand refresh, work on more broadly distributing VCTC merchandise (maps, etc.) to retailers and the public.

The outlets include the following partners:

- » Trail Managers
- » Local Businesses
- » Community Partners
- » Other Trail Organizations.

Success is achieved when all businesses that want the resources for information about the trail, have them or

organization should include UVPs for each of the distinct target customers or constituents.

The VCTC's core constituents communicating the value of trails include:

- » Local land management and community partners
- » Regional businesses and their customers
- » The general public (a broad-based trail user constituency)

In the near future, the **VCTC should focus on a clear and consistent branding identity and strategy prior to implementation of any major investments in updates to online media, marketing materials, and other types of outreach.** Following a full brand update project there will need to be significant updates to the website, marketing materials, maps, etc.

This process should start with the creation of an ad hoc committee of key stakeholders, partners, and subject matter experts in the VCTC network to help build a request for proposals (RFP) for the full re-brand exercise. This committee could very likely be long standing and continue to support the marketing and communications of the organization as a non-profit brand is always evolving and growing to meet the needs of the community and its constituents. Prior to launching a full brand update or refresh, the VCTC should identify short-term opportunities to enhance the current brand within existing assets and materials.

In the meantime, consider how the Conservancy can better leverage its website, maps, social media, and events today to highlight all the great work the organization is doing and even more so, the great work the VCTC has planned through this new strategic planning process. The following steps are some key ways the VCTC can build on its current brand.

know where to get the information if they desire. To better coordinate these requests and fully understand the demand it is recommended to include a link to a form on the website where local stakeholders can request information and provide details on their location, quantity needed, etc. The results of this request form can be a great way to build your constituent database, support broader engagement and communications, and be key to future fund-raising efforts.

To become the primary disseminator of information about the Virginia Creeper Trail, the steps listed below should be followed:

1. Identify all current locations and potential future suitable locations, outlets, and partners for distribution.
2. Inventory all items, materials, and merchandise the Conservancy has that would be feasible to facilitate as part of this effort.
3. Build the request form and link on the VCTC website. This can be a simple google form or a more sophisticated process depending on VCTC systems and capacity. The key outcome will be a spreadsheet of contacts that can be utilized in future efforts.

The rollout of this effort could be phased to not over promise and create something that the current VCTC staff and volunteers are unable to manage. This is an ideal opportunity to build into the volunteer engagement plan, be coordinated by a volunteer, and rely on volunteers for distribution. When staffing capacity has scaled up over the next few years, this is a great opportunity to make contact with partners and businesses and be seen out in the community.

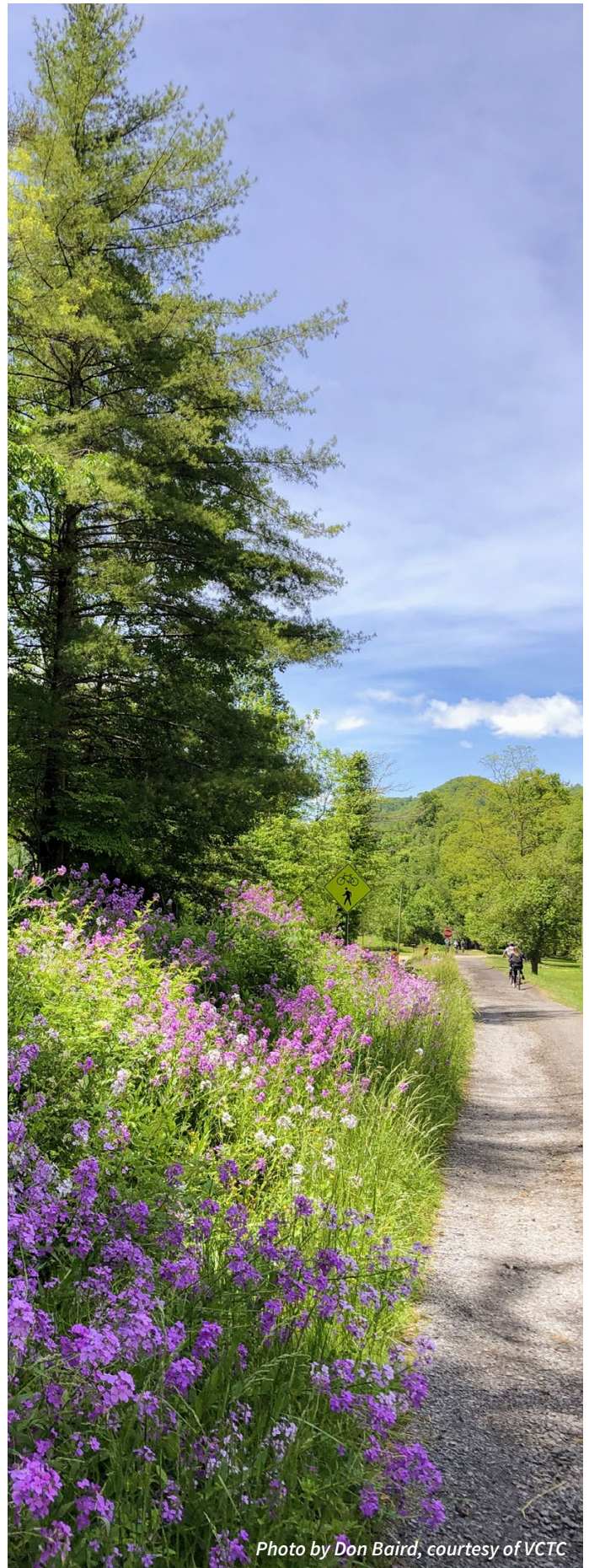


Photo by Don Baird, courtesy of VCTC

HOST A VCTC END OF YEAR EVENT

Celebrate Volunteers & Recognize Sponsors Each Year at an Annual Event

Many trail organizations across the country hold a banquet at the end of the year that has multiple goals, but the primary function is to raise funds and recognize supporters. This event could include an awards ceremony and celebration that recognizes volunteers, sponsors, partners, funders, and decision makers and to celebrate the VCTC's and partners' work each year. Trail groups have raised significant funds from a single event like this. [Here](#) is one example from a mountain bike group in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Components of an Annual Event

- » A public release of the annual VCTC "State of the Trail" Report or any other key data release
- » Silent raffle or auction of items donated by the local business community and partners
- » Volunteer awards ceremony
- » Limited edition merchandise, gear, or commemorative items for attendees
- » Live music, entertainment, or guest speaker
- » Sponsorship opportunities, both cash and in kind
- » The final award ceremony for an annual video, photo, or art contest

Steps to Implementation of the Annual Event:

1. Form a committee of volunteers and partners to help organize, plan, and lead the effort.
2. Establish high level goals/outcomes for the first one (keep it simple and grow).
3. Build an annual budget and work plan.
4. Identify sponsors and in-kind donations to better engage other community stakeholders and businesses.

Items to consider when planning an event :

The venue will be key to the success of the event. While outdoor events can be very effective, an indoor venue that has the appropriate AV capabilities and seating capacity will be key.

- » "You have to spend money to make money." If the organization wants to maximize the revenue from the event, it should invest in quality food, beverages, decorations, and speakers.

- » Make it uniquely VCTC, find ways to incorporate the culture and values of the organization, the trail, and the communities into the themes of the event each year.
- » Consider moving the event around to a new community each year if there are viable venue options.

DEVELOP A COMPREHENSIVE VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT PLAN AND PROGRAM

Increase Organizational Capacity & Engagement in the Community

While the VCTC successfully utilizes volunteers today there is a significant opportunity for the organization to better activate volunteers to address some of the current capacity issues and achieve many of the outcomes and projects identified in this plan. Even as the organization increases staff capacity, a volunteer program should be continued into the future as the benefits will continue well beyond needing to backfill capacity.

This more comprehensive program should create clear and easy ways for members of the community to access information and understand how they can support the needs of the trail and the VCTC. This strategic plan has identified multiple areas for volunteer support. Volunteers can play different roles throughout the projects. With clear instructions, expectations, and support, volunteers can fulfill more substantial roles and even help coordinate other volunteers. The potential roles can go beyond trail maintenance and support to include, but not limited to, outreach and delivery of maps and resources, photography and content creation, group rides and trail ambassadors, event support and outreach at other community events, graphic design, visitor center staffing support, and last but not least, economic impact survey implementation.

Beyond the support volunteers can provide to help the VCTC implement this plan and carry out day to day operations, volunteer contributions can be leveraged for matching grant funds and be a tool to articulate the value and impact the VCTC has on the trail and in the surrounding community.

DEVELOPING & EXPANDING A VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

- 1. Develop a comprehensive list of trail volunteer needs.**
Consolidate all the items in this plan and the other VCTC tasks that could be facilitated by volunteers.
- Take those tasks and roles and **build a Volunteer Resources Inventory** Survey to ask potential volunteers what skills they have and what skills they'd like to contribute to the VCTC. Solicit from network and volunteers what their interests are in assisting the VCTC. This process should generate a spreadsheet of volunteers who have self-identified as able to contribute specific support so when the need arises you have a list of potential volunteers to contact to ask for help. Ex. You need to create a new VCTC flyer or event poster, so you search the survey results for someone who identified as being interested in volunteering to support episodic graphic design projects.
- 3. Envision a Trail Ambassador Program.** In addition to general, episodic tasks, volunteers can be engaged to be ambassadors on the trail which enhances the visitor experience, more broadly expands the VCTC brand, reach, and value, and can support maintenance needs identification. Task a volunteer to benchmark other model programs for trail related ambassadors, maintenance, etc. Begin the planning process for an ambassador program which will assist the public and align with the USFS trail ranger program. Envision with the USFS how these programs can work together.
- For all volunteers, **Develop a Volunteer Handbook and Training.** Develop a handbook that creates a standardized process to be facilitated by volunteer leaders, clearly explains roles and responsibilities, and enables volunteers with the support and tools to allow them to be the best ambassadors for the trail.
- The Volunteer Handbook should include **job descriptions for key volunteer roles** including board members, committee members, and other roles that are more than episodic support.
- 6. Hold a volunteer orientation** annually or semi-annually to orient new volunteers on the expectations, requirements, processes, and benefits of being a VCTC volunteer. This process sets clear expectations, helps volunteers understand the “why” and impact of their support, and builds champions for the trail and the VCTC.

Implementing a comprehensive volunteer program isn't an easy task and will take significant effort, however, the results and outcomes

POTENTIAL VOLUNTEER NEEDS

This list is by no means comprehensive, and a full assessment of needs and volunteer survey should be done. Note some of these volunteer types already exist.

Committees: Becoming a member of any of the committees proposed

Trail Conservation: Supporting the VCTC in landowner outreach program, engage realtors who can be involved in early outreach

Trail Management: routine trail maintenance, identifying tree “widow makers” or other potential hazards, working on maintenance projects, signage installation, trash collection, analyzing safety and emergency response data

Trail Impact Data Collection: Oversee collecting trail counts and organizing data (note this is recommended staff task once staff is hired), lead analyzing data from business survey, participate in trail intercept surveys

Outreach, Communication, & Development: Work with outreach events, assist with social media, volunteer with Trail Friendly Business Program, Trail Ambassadors (on the trail and at visitor centers), attending festivals or other events to represent the VCTC

will far outweigh the investment and yield exponentially greater returns down the road. Documents, training, and processes will ensure volunteers are set up for success and mitigate some of the risk associated with some of the work they will take on. Engaging volunteers in nonprofit work is a common practice and a recognized approach across the US. When designing the program, it will be imperative that the Conservancy's insurance provider is consulted in the process. This is not new and is typically covered in a general liability policy. For special events, the organization will need to purchase an additional event rider which will cover additional exposure related to that work. Examples include competitions, alcohol, etc.

PUBLISH AN ANNUAL "STATE OF THE TRAIL" REPORT

Articulating the Needs & Impact of the Trail & the VCTC

As the VCTC works to enhance its brand and value proposition it will be key to harness the various efforts to capture data and effectively communicate those results and impact throughout the community. This plan identifies multiple opportunities to do so through usage and impact surveys, volunteer contributions, events and more. Capturing all that detail in an annual report will be an invaluable communication tool and help the VCTC in many ways.

The report could include, but is not limited to the following items:

- » Estimated use numbers based on counter data
- » Past year and future year projects
- » Trail and trestle conditions
- » Visitor Center visitation numbers
- » Capital investments
- » Fundraising campaigns
- » User perceptions
- » Event attendance and economic impact
- » Volunteer numbers and contributions
- » Special event/permit information

Not only can this be used as a communication tool to trail management partners, towns/counties, businesses, elected officials, and potential funders, it can be a key part of the VCTC's communications plan and future grant applications. This annual report should be supported by a press release, promoted by media outreach, and announced or unveiled at the End of Year Banquet each year.

Whether a staff person, volunteer, and contractor design the report, the final product should include a web and print

based design and be able to be segmented for social media content throughout the year.

This report will be a key tool for fundraising and grant writing and could be the basis for an annual campaign.

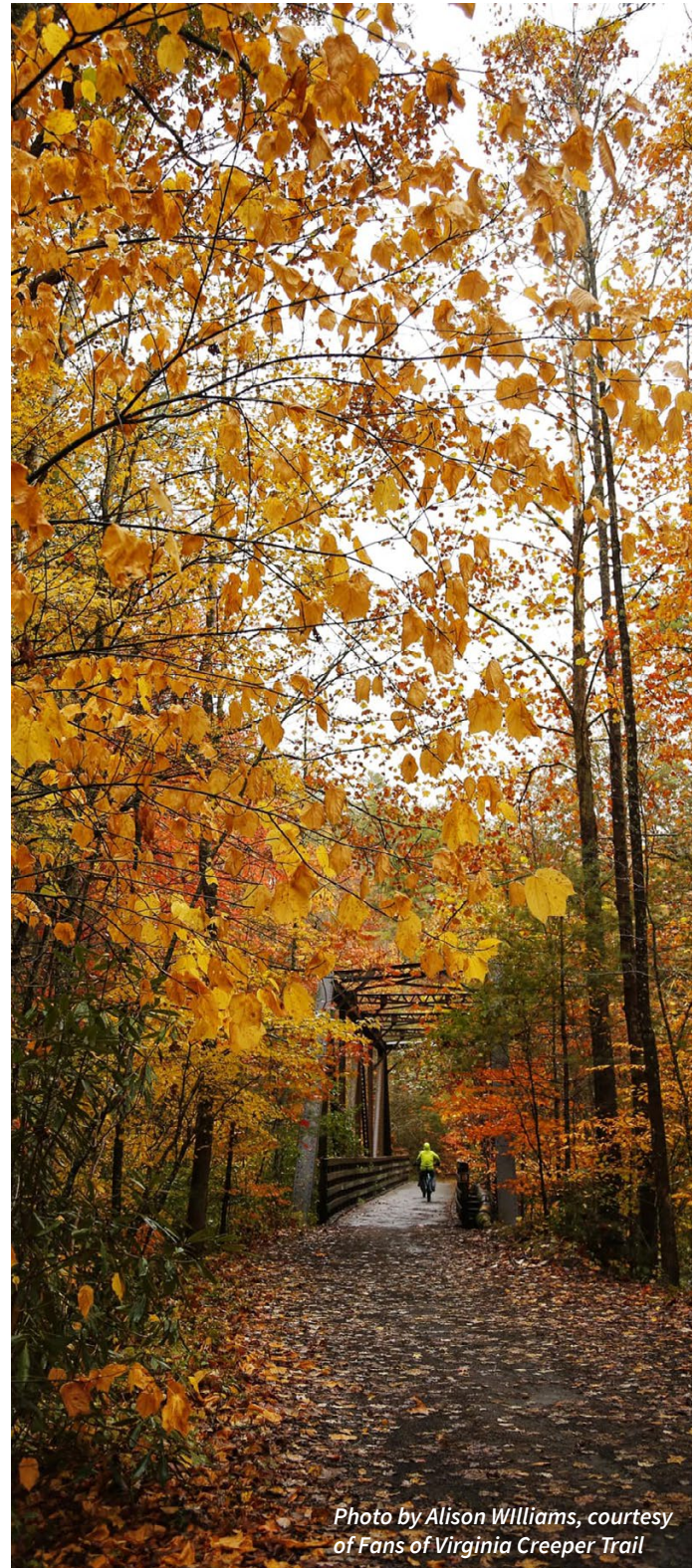


Photo by Alison Williams, courtesy of Fans of Virginia Creeper Trail

VISITOR OUTREACH & BRAND BUILDING FOR THE VCTC

BECOME THE “ONE STOP SHOP” FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

Maximizing Social Media for the Entire Trail and All Communities

Social media is a key tool for residents and visitors alike to access information about the trail and the organization. Consistent and accurate information across all communities that the trail goes through will be key to fully maximizing the impact of the various social media outlets and is a common best practice.

In most cases, residents and visitors aren't aware of the jurisdictional boundaries the trail crosses and on a given trip may pass through multiple communities. To provide a better user experience, elevate the impact of social media outlets, and ensure all communities, businesses, land managers, etc. are supported through these channels, it is recommended that the VCTC become the “One Stop Shop” for all official trail social media pages.

The VCTC should assess how they can become the “One Stop Shop” through a market and demand analysis and better understand how they can support all partners, communities, and businesses along the trail. An immediate issue heard in the stakeholder engagement process was the need to consolidate the existing social media presences. Having duplicate outlets that don't fully represent the entire trail and all the partners hinders the ability to fully leverage the potential of social media to drive more users, impact, and support.

A consistent and coordinated social media presence for the trail can yield many benefits and lift up the entire region as a whole to ensure the following:

1. A better overall user experience and therefore greater impact on the surrounding communities
2. More efficient community emergency response and sharing of closures or repair needs that impact the trail and businesses who depend on it
3. Increased engagement in events, volunteer opportunities, and surveys

The following should be considered and implemented to maintain consistent and accurate information and fully realize the potential of social media to support the larger regional goals of the trail:

1. Identification of a lead or point of contact who is the “handler” of the social media accounts so any questions, needs, or concerns are directed to the appropriate person.
2. Creation of a content calendar that is coordinated with the various trail management partners and communities.
3. Establish consistent hashtags and other standards for referencing the trail.
4. Build templates and toolkits for partners to leverage their network to promote the VCTC and the trail, support cross posting and sharing, and exponentially increase impressions and engagement.

While Facebook appears to be the primary social media outlet, the VCTC should also investigate the feasibility of utilizing other outlets and enhancing their presence on Instagram, LinkedIn, and Nextdoor in the future.

BECOME THE “ONE STOP SHOP” TRAIL EVENT MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

Develop an Efficient & Consistent Process for All Trail Management Partners

The task of managing a trail system that spans an entire region and travels through numerous communities requires efficient and consistent processes and constant communications both internally between trail management partners and externally with event promoters and the users.

As the only organization dedicated to the entire trail the VCTC is the realistic organization to help trail management partners to streamline the process and be the go-to entity to help manage the overarching management and communication of the event coordination process.

The concept of a “One Stop Shop” for events ties well into the VCTC also being the hub for information and social media management helping to elevate the awareness, frequency, and accuracy of information shared about happenings on the trail.



VCTC'S TRANSITION TO MANAGING A "ONE STOP SHOP" TRAIL EVENT PROGRAM

The following steps should be employed to ensure the newly devised process and management plan meets the needs of the trail management partners, fits within an existing regulatory structure, and is communicated clearly and consistently to all interested parties wanting to hold an event of any kind on the trail:

1. **Evaluate and assess the current load and demand of events on the VCTC** and establish an understanding of the needs of each trail management partner based on historical events held on the trail.
2. Strategize streamlining the event management process with trail management partners and define VCTC's role. This should include a **thorough evaluation of all existing processes, forms, websites**, etc. Establish a demand analysis of how events are being held, what process they use, and what the fully burdened cost of each event is. **Understanding the fully burdened cost associated with the administration of the event management** process will be key to establishing the financial arrangements in future operating and challenge cost-share agreements. Based on the above analysis, build a clear and equitable fee-based structure for events on the VCTC.
3. **Develop a challenge cost-share program with the USFS** to allow VCTC to assist and be compensated for that support. Keep an eye out and work with USFS partners to determine if there is any flexibility in their process or new policies and procedures coming in the future.
4. **Work with other trail management partners to see if they are able to assist in supporting VCTC financially for event management** oversight. Current trail management partners carry the staffing and administrative burden of managing the event process. VCTC could relieve them of that burden while creating a more consistent and streamlined approach for event organizers. This is a valuable service that the VCTC could provide to local communities and an operating agreement could be established to help fund the overhead and staff time needed to manage the process. The potential of multiple municipalities sharing the financial burden could create a more manageable outcome long-term.
5. **Initiate the development of Event Planning & Management Processes & Standard Operating Procedures** with all trail managers and key event promoters in the region. This document will be the key tool for all partners and promoters to be aware of the steps needed, the workflow, forms required, key points of contact, and costs associated with hosting events on the trail.
6. **Create a Communications Plan** and update all supporting resources, websites, and forms for event managers and partners to clearly understand the new process. Some additional capabilities or web-based forms may need to be added to the existing systems to better be able to manage and organize all the incoming forms and be better suited to evaluate and report out on the outcomes in the annual State of the Trail Report.
7. Once the process is implemented and all parties are on board, all stakeholders and trail management partners should hold, at a minimum, **one annual event planning meeting** to develop a **Virginia Creeper Trail "master" calendar**.

The desired outcome is a clear and accessible process for prospective event producers coordinated by one entity, the VCTC, with regular involvement and support from trail management partners.

DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT A “ONE STOP SHOP” TRAIL MOBILE APPLICATION.

Mobile based applications are becoming more popular and being adopted by trail management agencies across the U.S.

The organization *American Trails* is even working with *OuterSpatial* on creating an app for the National Recreation Trails Program and OuterSpatial has coordinated with many other communities across the nation. There is a great opportunity for the VCTC to work with trail management

partners, businesses, and tourism agencies to develop a Virginia Creeper Trail App that can report trail issues, have an integrated trail map with amenities, and direct trail users to trail-friendly businesses.

Some communities find that development of a fully functional, turn by turn application is out of their budget and decide to find a middle ground web based approach that is mobile friendly like the *Miami Valley Trails Online Map*.

Note: The development of a mobile application should be undertaken after a full brand-refresh is completed.

CREATING THE VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL APP

When the time comes for the VCTC to initiate the creation of their own mobile app the following steps are recommended:

1. Create a committee or internal group of multiple partners to establish a set of needs and functionalities the app will be intended to support. This needs assessment will be key to effectively communicating to the future app development team or contractor what you want to see in the end.
2. Assign a sub-group of the committee to perform a benchmarking assessment of other trails and agencies who have already tackled a similar project. In addition to a web-based review of other projects, consider reaching out to national partners like American Trails and the Rails to Trail Conservancy for contacts of project leaders you can speak to directly to get more detail on lessons learned, budget, contractors, RFP creation, etc.
3. Host a larger group meeting of trail management partners, businesses, and tourism groups and share the results of the benchmarking exercise to better help them see what is possible and also the costs associated with the various capabilities and functionalities. As part of this meeting, also include time to allow them to provide input on design, capabilities, and functionality of the app that they'd like to see. Involving more stakeholders in the process will help ensure a more impactful outcome and draw support for funding the final development phase.
4. Following the needs assessment, benchmarking, and partner feedback process the committee should develop an RFP for the project and identify a budget



Resources & Links to Help Get the VCTC Started Building a Mobile App:

- [Missouri State Parks Testing New Trail App to Enhance Hiking Experience](#)
- [GPS App Blindsquare Helps Visually Impaired Navigate Trails of Calgary's Fish Creek Park](#)
- [Chesterfield Unveils App for Park Maps, Water Access Points](#)
- [New Sensory Trail Dedicated Tuesday in Goshen](#)
- [Lahaina's Historic Walking Trail App: Where Lahaina's History and Culture Come Alive](#)
- [Ohio Bike Trail App Shows 1,523 Miles Of Routes, The Most Miles of 50 States](#)
- [You Can Now Explore Angel Island in a Whole New Way with an Audio App](#)
- [Cleveland Metroparks Trail Maps: New App Launches After Record-Breaking Year Brings 19.7+ Million Visitors](#)

DEVELOPING A TRAIL FRIENDLY BUSINESS PROGRAM

To build this new program, consider the following steps to ensure success and value for local businesses:

1. **Organize a few key businesses currently engaged to help inform and support this effort** and establish an ad hoc committee or working group co-lead by local business invested in the future success of the trail.
2. **Ask existing businesses who support the VCTC what value they see in supporting the organization** to help frame and articulate your pitch to new businesses. A combination of an electronic survey, in person meetings at their business, and group meetings should all be employed to allow as many stakeholders as possible to attend and provide feedback.
3. The working group should **benchmark other programs and gather information from other relevant trail systems** and their impacts on the local business community.
4. During the development and into the future of the Trail Friendly Business program, **hold annual or twice a year meetings with businesses** to provide updates on the trail, launch new programs, inform them of upcoming events, get feedback on trail related topics, and engage them on key issues. This will be a great opportunity to share the results of the trail user studies and impact data gathered throughout the year.
5. One of the best ways to access the business community most efficiently is to **engage local Chambers of Commerce** or other business-oriented leadership groups in gathering a better understanding of how best to coordinate with local businesses. They are the experts. They hold regular meetings already and are typically looking for guest speakers and content for their communication channels.
6. In addition to meetings, consistent communication will be key to the development and ROI of this new initiative. **Implementing a Business Specific Newsletter** will help recruit new partners, help celebrate and highlight existing participating businesses, and be a tool for continuing to articulate the value of the trail and the VCTC.
7. **Develop all the details, forms, applications, and expectations documents** to effectively and efficiently communicate the expectations and benefits the businesses can expect. Here is one example of a [Business Membership](#) document.
8. **Build a Promotional Campaign for the launch** of the program including a press release, highlight of a few key businesses in the “pilot” of the program, and some testimonials from business owners. Ensure it is distributed to all regional media outlets.

POTENTIAL COMPONENTS OF A TRAIL FRIENDLY BUSINESS PROGRAM:

Local businesses can offer support or discounts to trail users and receive recognition and promotion of their involvement.

Businesses can opt in to a "Round Up" or "Dollar Check Off" option for sales placed in their shops

Include Business listings on the website and an interactive map showing their location and directions on how to get to them from the trail. A good example of this is the [Delaware & Lehigh Trail Friendly Business Program](#)

The businesses will also be provided a VCTC Trail Friendly Business window cling and poster to display in their business. Businesses can also be provided with the ability to use the VCTC brand on their website, promotional materials, etc. to promote their support of the trail.

Incorporate local business members into the Annual Banquet and designate a Trail Friendly Business of the Year award (in addition to volunteer of the year).

Include Recognition on the mobile trail app once completed with an opportunity for companies to pay different rates depending on their level of exposure and recognition on the site.

If a Regional Trail Authority is created, it can lend itself to supporting the ability to add a small percentage sales tax that can be designated to supporting the trail. It could be in the form of an increase in the meals tax, or percentage of existing sales tax, that could be approved by the local governing bodies. The funds would go into a regional fund distributed in the form of grants to trail related projects.

Consider a “1% for the Trail” program modeled after 1% for the Planet. Participating businesses donate one percent of their sales to programs and initiatives that benefit the Virginia Creeper Trail.

THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY & BRAND BUILDING FOR THE VCTC

DEVELOP A TRAIL FRIENDLY BUSINESS PROGRAM

Engage local businesses to build the VCTC & community support

The business community understands the importance of the trail and likely sees the visible impact from the users and events, however, there is lots of room for improvement to better leverage them to help continue to support the future of the trail. The stakeholder engagement process identified that some would like to be more engaged, understand how they can help support the VCTC, and have more information to share with their customers.

Developing a Trail Friendly Business Program is an initiative that can help inform and engage the business community and develop a stronger, mutually beneficial relationship.

At some point in the process of developing your own Trail Friendly Business program you may consider benchmarking the broader concept of Trail Towns for support and guidance in how best to harness the impact of the Virginia Creeper Trail to enhance the economies of your local community. The Rails to Trails Conservancy has a great overview of the various resources, manuals, and examples of the “*Trail Towns Program*”. The following are a list of articles and studies that articulate the impact of trails like the Virginia Creeper Trail on the local business community. Utilize some of these examples, statistics, and case studies in the meantime while you are working to gather your own data on the trail.



Case Studies & Examples Demonstrating the Economic Impact of Trails on the Local Business Community:

- Small Business Owners Along the Continental Divide Trail (CDT) Say Trails are Vital to the Economy
- How's Business on the Katy Trail? Entrepreneurs See Opportunities.
- Business Impact of Monongallia River Trails System
- Businesses Along the Long Leaf Trace
- Study of Nearby Businesses and Adjacent Residential Landowners to the Pere Marquette Rail-Trail





VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL MASTER PLAN

APPENDICES

*Photo by Alison Williams, courtesy of
Friends of Virginia Creeper Trails*

VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL MASTER PLAN

LIST OF APPENDICES

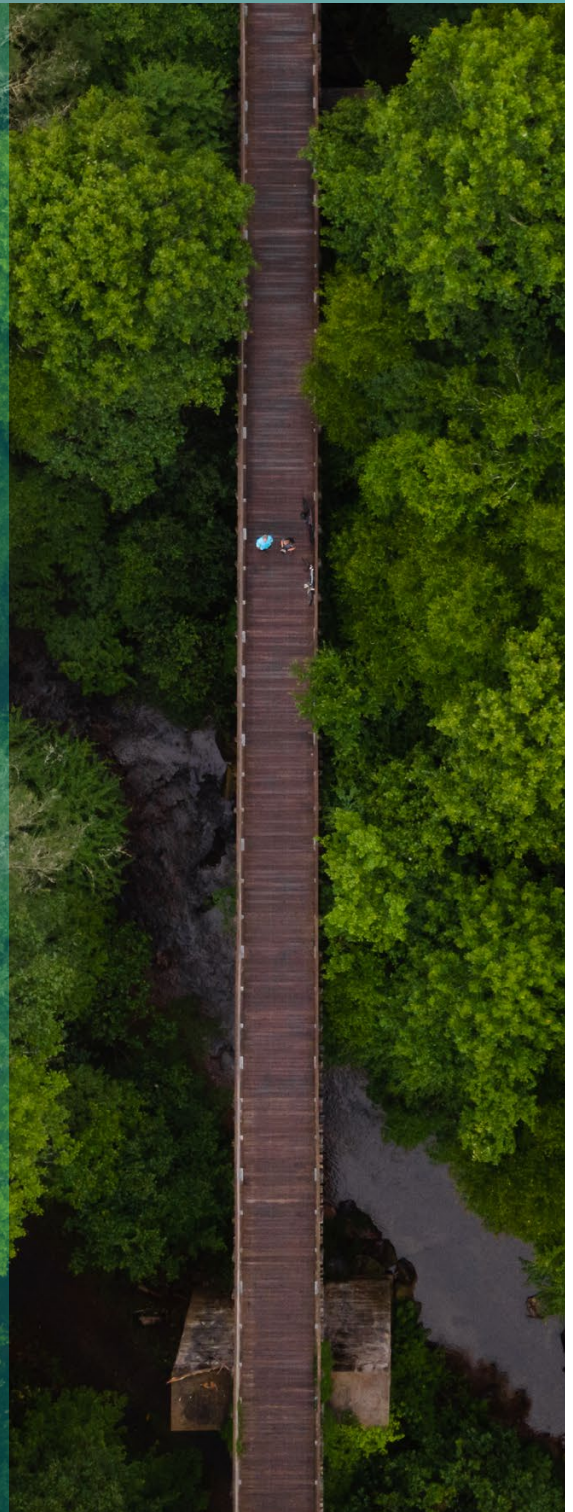
*QUICK REFERENCE
TO CONTENTS...*

**APPENDIX A: INITIAL RECOMMENDATIONS
& STAKEHOLDER SURVEY RESULTS
(AS OF AUGUST 2021)**

APPENDIX B: VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL MAPS

- **TRAIL AMENITIES**
- **TRAILHEAD & ROAD CROSSING
IMPROVEMENTS**
- **TRESTLE REPAIR PRIORITIES**
- **CONSERVATION PRIORITY ANALYSIS**
- **WASHINGTON COUNTY ZONING**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



APPENDIX A

PLEASE NOTE

The following Initial Findings, Recommendations, and Stakeholder Survey Responses serve as a snapshot in time from August 2021 during the Virginia Creeper Trail Master Plan's planning process. There are some statements in this Appendix which may conflict with findings and recommendations found in the final Master Plan. The content of this Appendix is a draft from August 2021 which has not been updated following later findings during this planning process.



VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL MASTER PLAN

INITIAL FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS



PARTNERSHIP RECOMMENDATIONS



- » **COLLABORATE WITH LAND MANAGERS.** Develop a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the trail management partners devoted to the concept of “One Trail,” using the Appalachian Trail Conservancy model for statewide MOUs. Continue to provide a forum for land-owning agencies to work together toward uniform policies trail wide.
- » **BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH ESTABLISHED LAND TRUSTS.** Significant effort is required to hold and steward conservation easements, and conservation defense can be very expensive. Explore partnerships with well-established land trusts that hold and steward conservation easements, while VCTC itself serves as a “front-end,” landowner-outreach type of conservancy. See more about developing a conservation coalition in the conservation recommendations.
- » **BUILD A TRAIL COALITION OF REGIONAL PARTNERS WITH STRONG SUPPORT FROM THE COUNTY, ELECTED OFFICIALS, AND STATEWIDE INFLUENCERS, BEGINNING INFORMALLY AND GROWING INTO FORMALIZED PARTNERSHIPS OVERTIME.** This partnership can look at ways that the towns, Washington County and/or the Mount Rogers Planning District, or others can apply for funding that is only available to local governments and leverage state or federal funding. Build coalitions with other trail partners to advocate for joint funding.
- » **Other opportunities like the formation of a Regional or County-based Trail Authority should be explored. Some of the pros and cons of informal/formal partnerships could include:**
 - **Informal:** A trail alliance between several trail organizations can jointly advocate for funding, apply for grants, or share resources like a grant writer. Informal partnership don’t allow for some of the greater abilities of a formal partnership.
 - **Formal:** Formalizing partnerships like a regional trail authority could have many positive benefits listed below. Some challenges might include ensuring there is representation on the board of the authority, competition for resources from other trails on the board of the authority, and a chance for political influence. **Benefits could include:**
 - **A more formalized relationship with Washington County,** who benefits greatly from the positive impacts from the trail.
 - **Availability to funding.** A trail authority can apply for Virginia Department of Transportation funding or other grants only available to governments. It also has the authority to utilize bonds to implement capital projects, except donations, and collect recreation fees or be the recipient of a goods tax.
 - **Exercise powers of a corporation.** Acquire, lease, sale, or hold easement on property, and secure insurance for properties held. It can sue and be sued, oversee contracts, etc.



CONSERVATION RECOMMENDATIONS



CONSERVATION OF THE TRAIL LANDSCAPE

- » **VCTC SHOULD BE THE LEADER IN PROVIDING COMPREHENSIVE CONSERVATION DATA MANAGEMENT, INCLUDING A CONSERVATION PRIORITY MAP AND DATABASE:** A map of land surrounding the entire trail corridor that specifies priority areas can be shared with key conservation partners when needed to engage them and formulate strategies. VCTC should maintain data on conservation priorities. These dynamic tools will guide strategies and advise which means will be used to achieve conservation goals. This can also be used with landowners when communicating the value of their land adjacent to the trail (important viewsheds, etc).

- » **BECOME A CONSERVANCY, NOT A LAND TRUST:** VCTC would be best served by partnering with other established land trusts, as VCTC does not have the financial or personnel resources to become a land trust that holds fee or easement interests in land at this time. VCTC could be a highly effective conservancy that conducts advance coordination, planning, and landowner outreach for state, quasi-state, and non-profit land trusts. In specific circumstances, VCTC also could assist land trusts and agencies by contributing funding for certain services; providing bridge loans; or identifying conservation buyers for key properties.
- » **DEVELOP A LOCAL MATCH SEED FUND FOR CONSERVATION:** Pursue the idea of private conservation buyers or funders providing whole or part funding for conservation easements or fee simple purchases. For example, a local conservation buyer could provide 10-20% of a federal or state grant for conservation to be used as match.



IMAGE COURTESY OF JR P, ON FLICKR

land trusts to conserve land. Create a “Virginia Creeper Conservation Coalition” of diverse partners under the leadership of the VCTC. A working committee within VCTC can help guide this work. Formal lines of communication should be established with land trusts and agency partners to react to real estate opportunities on priority conservation land when funding or incentive opportunities are available. As the local “on the ground” partner, VCTC should serve as the organization that brings landowners, realtors, land trusts, and agencies to the table.

» **MAINTAIN A DATABASE OF FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR LAND CONSERVATION:**

Funding will be critical for implementation of a conservation plan. VCTC should create and maintain a dynamic database of funding opportunities for land conservation from federal, state, local, and private sources. The database should identify maximum and minimum award amounts, application deadlines, what the funds would be best used for, and potential matching funds and personnel for each potential grant. This can apply to sources that would provide funding directly to VCTC or sources that would provide funding to identified partners of VCTC that can assist in the conservation of priority land.

» **BUILD A VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP TO CONSERVE LAND:**

VCTC should work closely with federal, state, and local public agencies (i.e. the Holston River Soil and Water Conservation District), as well as private

» **EXPLORE DEVELOPING A LOCAL OR REGIONAL LAND TRUST THAT COULD SERVE SOUTHWESTERN VIRGINIA:**

VCTC should consider applying to the Virginia Environmental Endowment (VEE) to apply for a grant to explore developing a new local or regional land trust that could serve the region around the Virginia Creeper Trail. Work with the VEE to frame the proposal in a way that meets VCTC’s needs at the same time as the grant application requirements. Convene land trust organizations and other interested parties to explore ways to “fill in the gaps” in southwest Virginia where a local land trust presence does not exist.

» **PRIORITIZE LARGE ACRE HIGH-CONSERVATION VALUE PROPERTIES FIRST AND DETERMINE WHO WILL HOLD THESE PROPERTIES OR EASEMENTS:**

Typically, large properties are the most appealing to land trusts or agency partners. Land trusts also will often have easier access to funding for properties that have high conservation value. VCTC could engage and lead the Virginia Creeper Conservation Coalition in an analysis of properties adjacent to the trail, and then conduct an outreach program to owners of the highest priority properties. Eventually VCTC could develop and exercise agreements for right-of-first refusal or options if landowners are willing to consider them. Critical to any of this happening will be determining if a land trust, a municipality, the county, or the Forest Service would be willing to assume responsibility for purchasing and managing the property. The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) represents an important federal partner. However, the agency is limited in its ability to engage landowners outside of the established proclamation boundary or purchase federal funding.

» **DEVELOP PARTNERSHIPS WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENTS TO IMPLEMENT LAND USE PLANNING POLICY THAT PROTECTS THE TRAIL LANDSCAPE EXPERIENCE:**

Land use



IMAGE COURTESY OF LISA QUIGLEY

planning, including zoning and ordinance changes, could help protect the rural and scenic environment and recreational experience of the trail. In much of unincorporated Washington County, parcels can be divided into one- or two-acre parcels, effectively allowing for low-density subdivisions. Land use options could include working with the county to:

- **Lower the density of their rural zoning***, developing a Virginia Creeper Overlay which could lower density or require setbacks.
- **Enact a conservation subdivision ordinance***. This approach could provide for clustering of housing in areas away from the trail with required open space that could be used as the buffer for the trail.
- **Implement an ordinance overlay***, which prohibits high intensity uses (most of which are already restricted in the agricultural zones) and could require a certain distance setback from the trail. This could also be implemented in conjunction with the above options.

* Reaching out to large acreage adjacent landowners for conservation purposes may be a best use of time before a lot of investment is put into working with the county to rezone areas. Rezoning and overlays have the risk of creating tension between landowners along the trail and the VCTC if the landowners perceive that their property rights are being affected through rezoning. Therefore, it is recommended that this is done as a low priority measure for landscape protection.

» **WORK WITH COUNTY LEADERSHIP TO EXPLORE REINVIGORATING THE PURCHASE OF DEVELOPMENT RIGHTS (PDR) PROGRAM:**

Washington County’s PDR program allows landowners to voluntarily sell the right to develop their land. This program is managed by the Holston River Soil and Water Conservation District in partnership with the Virginia Outdoors Foundation (VOF), the easement holder. This program is currently inactive. Reinstating this program would be a long-term goal but it could be explored further.

» **ENGAGE LANDOWNERS WHO OWN HIGHEST PRIORITY PARCELS:**

Develop a landowner engagement strategy. Landowners who own larger parcels with high conservation value and important viewsheds should be prioritized for early outreach. Initial outreach can share the mission of the VCTC and how land use on adjacent and nearby land directly affects the trail experience. Provide options on ways to engage with VCTC to protect the trail experience, whether through voluntary measures, or through more formal agreements, like the right for first refusal. Building trusted relationships with these landowners over time may be fruitful. Work with the Holston River Soil and Water Conservation District and/or VOF in initial outreach, as they have already built these trusted relationships with many local farmers.

IMAGE
COURTESY OF
THE VIRGINIA
CREEPER
TRAIL
CONSERVANCY



TRAIL MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS



IMPLEMENT PROJECTS TO IMPROVE SAFETY AND CREATE THE “ONE TRAIL” EXPERIENCE

- » **TRESTLES ARE THE NUMBER ONE PRIORITY.** The top priority is funding and then repairing trestles across the trail. This should be partners and VCTC’s immediate focus.
- » **DEVELOP UNIFYING “ONE TRAIL” DESIGN STANDARDS.** To provide consistency across the trail, increase safety, and create a branded experience that unifies the trail, the following should be established:
 - **A uniform trail cross section** that sets standard width (10 feet), material surface, and clearance zones. Any routine maintenance or major repairs would follow this typical cross section.
 - **A trail design guide and on-trail signage implementation.** A universal signage family guide can inform all new or replacement signage on the trail. This guide could include trailhead entrance signage, trailhead kiosk signage (including what information should be standard on all kiosks and standardized maps), mileage markers, and signage at trail junctions with roads. This signage could reinforce the “one trail, united” focus.

- **Auto-wayfinding signage.** This signage, which could be implemented trail-wide, would direct motorists to the trail. With much of the trail still out of cell service, finding the trail needs to be sans-technology. Uniform and branded wayfinding can incorporate the trail logo but should follow VDOT standards if located within their right-of-way.
- **Standard treatment of trestle egresses.** One of the biggest current safety concerns are the edges of trestles which have “drop-offs” worn by repeated wear from bicycles. This typically occurs at bridges when a soft surface is adjacent to a hard sloped surface. Short term, these can be fixed with a course gravel and mixed fines, but a more permanent long-term solution could be to pave a concrete apron which gently slopes from the trestles until it is flush with the gravel.
- **Upgrade or add restrooms at busy trailheads.** The Watauga Trailhead currently has the greatest need.
- » **ADDRESS UNSAFE ROAD CROSSINGS. PRIORITIZE THE FOLLOWING TRAIL/ROAD CROSSINGS:**
 - **Reroute SR-58/Damascus gateway road crossing to pass by the Damascus Trail Center and avoid the intersection.** This crossing is singularly the biggest safety concern cited by many in the trail community. The trail could be rerouted to pass by the Trail Center and avoid the intersection completely.

- **Vails Mill Road Trail Crossing & Parking Improvement.** This is not officially a trailhead, but many park at this road crossing with the trail. Consider whether this or an adjacent area could be improved or if parking should be discouraged.
- **Creek Junction Access & Parking Improvement.** Provide better access to Creek Junction parking and signage on Highway 58.
- **Address drainage that is running from Chestnut Mountain Trail onto the road.**
- **Develop standard safety signage for motorists of all road crossings,** especially those at 35+ mile speeds. Work with VDOT to implement standard Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD) signage to implement trail crossing ahead warning signs.
- **Callahan’s Crossing.** Callahan’s Crossing is difficult and confusing.

» **BECOME THE CENTRALIZED TRAIL DATA MANAGER:** VCTC should work towards becoming the centralized trail manager, with a staff person who is tasked with managing and creating ways for partner data sharing. Some of the data that should eventually be aggregated could include:

- **Trail use counts,** including counter data, online user data, or other ways of tracking trail usage.
- **Safety and emergency data,** including collected custom reports made by the county, towns, and the USFS that could indicate hot spots for issues and allow for collaborative identification of remedies to these issues.
- **Trail conditions and maintenance needs, including a standardized way for volunteers, trail users, and VCTC to submit maintenance issues and record hours.** A volunteer database and volunteer hours, including all volunteers, volunteer rangers, etc., and a record of hours spent, which can often be used as in-kind donations to be used as match to grants if collected and reported.
- **An outfitter/business database** that can be quickly accessed for messaging to the business community about closures, issues, etc.
- **Geo-spatial data that provides comprehensive mapping of the trail.** This mapping could be updated annually and published online just for trail partners and/or eventually become publicly available. Coordinate with land managers to standardize data and identify data collection needs.



- **Adjacent landowners database, a list of landowners adjacent to the trail, which can be part of a volunteer “opt-in” list to provide important updates to the trail.** Also, use this list to begin to build communications with landowners related to conservation or other matters.
- **Collection of historic info,** including photos or other items.
- **Trail calendar, with trail events,** volunteer opportunities, etc.
- **Emergency management data,** that helps partners respond to safety issues.



IMPROVING EMERGENCY RESPONSE AND SAFETY ON THE TRAIL

- » **IMPROVE COMMUNICATIONS FOR TRAIL USERS & EMERGENCY RESPONDERS:** Explore opportunities to increase radio repeaters for emergency responder communications, expand cell service coverage, and explore ways broadband expansion may improve cellular communications on the trail. Text messages for emergency response could be an opportunity to explore as well. Further down the road, a “one trail” mobile phone app could provide trail users information on what to do in an emergency as well as information on general trail safety protocol as a proactive measure aimed at preventing incidents in the first place.
- » **ASSESS EMERGENCY RESPONDERS’ DATA TO UNDERSTAND POTENTIAL SAFETY CONCERNS/ MANAGEMENT NEEDS:** To understand common issues that need to be addressed, coordinate with town’s law enforcement and the county sheriff’s office to receive quarterly reports on what specific trail incidents

are reported. Collect information in a database that records the type of incident, general location, and other common data across the trail. Further down the road, a “one trail” app could crowd source maintenance issues.

- » **ADDRESS SOME OF THE MORE UNSAFE TRAIL CONDITIONS THAT CAUSE ACCIDENTS, SAFETY CONCERNS, OR DELAYED RESPONSE:** Top priorities include repair of egress at bridges where erosion is occurring and the widening of trail surface where it is narrow—especially in areas that reach or exceed capacity. Damascus sees some elements of crime that utilize the trail at night—lighting may be a potential solution. Some safety responders cited limited access with all-terrain vehicles past certain trestles. Outfitting responders with electric bikes could allow for faster response times as well as provide a less intimidating and more approachable “community policing” effort. Additionally, trail resurfacing is needed to create a consistent surface along the trail’s entirety.
- » **INCREASE WAYFINDING SIGNAGE TO ALLOW USERS TO LOCATE THEMSELVES:** Improve mile markers but also include name locations (i.e. Taylors Valley), install signs to indicate the nearest road crossing for quick location during emergency response.



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE TOWN OF ABINGDON, PHOTO BY SAM DEAN

TRAIL IMPACT RECOMMENDATIONS



For the VCTC to be able to understand the needs of the Virginia Creeper Trail from a management and funding perspective and to be able communicate the health and economic benefits provided by the trail, the impact of the trail will need to be measured and analyzed. The following recommendations summarize the starting points that should be taken to collect the user and economic data needed to measure the true impact of the trail.

TIMELINE FOR TRAIL MEASUREMENTS

Trail counters, Summer 2021

Trail Observation Measurement Techniques (Parking Lots/Physical Activity), Fall 2021

Visitor Survey, Summer 2022

MEASURING IMPACT

There are a variety of methods to measure impact, however, due to the Virginia Creeper Trail's length, its location through two counties, and its management by multiple agencies, coordination of these efforts is essential. Each type of measurement has limitations and will not capture the entire picture, so using a variety of techniques can ensure a broader view of who is using the Virginia Creeper Trail. **The following table displays a list of options to measure trail impact.**

OPTIONS FOR MEASUREMENT & EXAMPLES	WHAT TO MEASURE & WHY	LIMITATIONS	STRATEGY
<p>Quantity of Users</p> <p>Examples: Great Allegheny Passage Annual Trail Count (2020): https://michigantrails.org/wp-content/uploads/2020-Great-Allegheny-Passage-Trail-Count-Final-Report.pdf</p> <p>Empire State Trail User Projections: https://www.ny.gov/sites/default/files/atoms/files/EST_TrailUser-Projections_20180720.pdf</p> <p>North Carolina Non-Motorized Volume Data Program: https://itre.ncsu.edu/focus/bike-ped/nc-nmvd/</p>	<p>WHAT: How many people use the trail?</p> <p>WHY: The data demonstrates growing trail use to support future funding and grants.</p>	<p>Trail counters only collect the basic information of how many users are on the trail, they do not take into account the type of activity, duration, spending, motivations, or demographics.</p>	<p>Simple Trail Counts: Use volunteers/organizations/companies to count trail users using a robust counter-strategy.</p> <p>Permanent Counters: Strategically place permanent trail counters along the Virginia Creeper and plan for data download and analysis.</p>
<p>Type of Use</p> <p>Example: Active Living Research: https://activelivingresearch.org/soparc-system-observing-play-and-recreation-communities</p>	<p>WHAT: What type of activity people are doing on the trail (run, walk, bike, horseback riding, fishing, enjoying nature, etc.) along with group types and basic observational demographics.</p> <p>WHY: Physical activity is a complex behavior, influenced by many factors. Data may help enhance existing, and plan for future, trail amenities and identify business opportunities.</p>	<p>Observation of use enhances basic trail counting but is limited to only what the eye sees. It does not allow interaction with the user to ask more detailed follow-up questions.</p>	<p>The System for Observing Play and Recreation in Communities (SOPARC)</p> <p>Observations: Use volunteers to record activities observed on the trail.</p> <p>Trail Intercept Survey: Ask users how they are using, or would like to use, the trail.</p>

**THIS TABLE DISPLAYS A LIST OF OPTIONS FOR MEASURING TRAIL IMPACT.*

OPTIONS FOR MEASUREMENT & EXAMPLES	WHAT TO MEASURE & WHY	LIMITATIONS	STRATEGY
<p>Health Impact / Physical Activity/ Duration of Use/</p> <p>Examples: Measuring Trails Benefits for Public Health: https://headwaterseconomics.org/wp-content/uploads/trails-library-public-health-overview.pdf</p> <p>CDC Health Impact Resource Page: https://www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces/hia.htm</p> <p>People for Bikes Health Research Library: https://www.peopleforbikes.org/statistics/bicycling-and-lungs</p>	<p>WHAT: Active time on the trail to measure the physical activity of trail users.</p> <p>WHY: Data may interest public health providers and funders.</p>	<p>Choosing to measure health impact or physical activity needs to be purposeful and entail a detailed strategy to ensure data collected meets the need/purpose. Often health impacts for local residents are needed for funding/grants. Ensure new technology like Strava, etc. are explored to collect data from secondary sources.</p>	<p>Intercept Survey: Minutes of activity on the trail. In lieu of an intercept survey, some communities provide stations for self-reporting surveys using kiosks and/ or drop boxes.</p> <p>Device Information: Actual physical activity results from platforms such as Strava, AllTrails, etc.</p> <p>Health Impact Assessment (HIA): A health impact assessment is a tool that can help communities, decision-makers, and practitioners make choices that improve public health through community design.</p>
<p>Visitor Demographic</p> <p>Example: 2019 Ankeny Bicycle Tourism Plan https://www.ankenyiowa.gov/our-city/2019-ankeny-bicycle-tourism-plan</p>	<p>WHAT: Who are your trail users and from where do they come?</p> <p>WHY: Data may be used for targeted marketing and/or business development efforts. Data may also be used to differentiate local vs. visitor patterns and preferences.</p>	<p>Observation of use enhances basic trail counting but is limited to only what the eye sees. It does not allow interaction with the user to ask more detailed follow-up questions.</p> <p>Intercepting users at trailheads can be challenging and extremely time-consuming for survey takers. Often people do not want to stop and talk during their travel time/vacation.</p>	<p>Simple License Plate Survey: At designated times and locations record the home state of license plates on cars parked at pre-selected trailheads.</p> <p>Intercept Survey: Can ask a wide variety of questions such as zip code, education, reasons for visiting the trail, etc.</p> <p>Visitor Surveys at Lodging Establishments: Partner with local lodging providers to ask about trail use (e.g. will you be visiting the trail, did you visit the trail, what did you do, etc.)</p> <p>Visitor Zip Code Survey: Can use visitor zip code to understand the market dynamics of the area from which visitors are coming.</p>

*THIS TABLE DISPLAYS A LIST OF OPTIONS FOR MEASURING TRAIL IMPACT.

OPTIONS FOR MEASUREMENT & EXAMPLES	WHAT TO MEASURE & WHY	LIMITATIONS	STRATEGY
<p>Spending Impact</p> <p>Examples: An economic, health, and environmental benefits analysis of the Mounds Greenway for the Hoosier Environmental Council: https://issuu.com/altaplanning/docs/meet_at_the_mounds_economic_impact_</p> <p>City of Steamboat Springs: https://steamboatsprings.net/DocumentCenter/View/18921/TrailUseAndEconomicImpactStudy-CityOfSteamboatSprings-FINAL-May2019</p>	<p>WHAT: How much money do trail users spend before, during, and after their visit?</p> <p>WHY: Data may interest local businesses, may help attract new business and opportunities.</p>	<p>It's easy to administer surveys and questionnaires asking, however, this technique is limited by respondents' memories and perceptions.</p>	<p>Intercept Survey: How much did you spend before, during, after your most recent visit?</p> <p>Business Owner Surveys: Work with businesses to ask customers where they are from (zip code survey)/ why they are here?</p> <p>Sales Tax Revenue: Communities can track increased sales tax revenue at businesses near the trail.</p>
<p>Property Value Impact</p> <p>Examples: The Impact of Greenways on Property Values: Evidence from Austin, Texas https://www.nrpa.org/globalassets/journals/jlr/2005/volume-37/jlr-volume-37-number-3-pp-321-341.pdf</p> <p>Perceptions of How the Presence of Greenway Trails Affects the Value of Proximate Properties: https://www.americantrails.org/resources/perceptions-of-how-the-presence-of-greenway-trails-affects-the-value-of-proximate-properties</p> <p>The Value of Greenways https://www.sog.unc.edu/blogs/community-and-economic-development-ced/value-greenways</p>	<p>WHAT: What is the long-term impact of trails on property values and/or home prices near the trail?</p> <p>WHY: Some communities see rising home or property values as a positive impact.</p>	<p>There are many factors that impact property values and directly correlating outdoor recreation opportunities or greenways can be difficult.</p>	<p>Formal Study: Many things can affect property values. A formal study can determine if there is a correlation between trails and property values. A community should consider hiring a consultant that has completed similar studies.</p> <p>Home Prices: Working with a local realtor and the local tax office, a community can document changing prices of homes near the trail.</p>

*THIS TABLE DISPLAYS A LIST OF OPTIONS FOR MEASURING TRAIL IMPACT.

OPTIONS FOR MEASUREMENT & EXAMPLES	WHAT TO MEASURE & WHY	LIMITATIONS	STRATEGY
<p>Quality of Life Impact</p> <p>Examples: Center City Allentown Quality of Life Survey https://www.allentownpa.gov/Portals/0/files/CommunityDevelopment/QualityOfLifeSurveyResults.pdf</p> <p>City of Longmont Customer Satisfaction Surveys https://www.longmontcolorado.gov/community/customer-satisfaction-surveys</p>	<p>WHAT: Do community residents see the trail as an important community amenity?</p> <p>WHY: Many community residents consider trails as an important amenity that contributes to their quality of life.</p> <p>Understanding local sentiment may build support for additional trails.</p>	<p>Measuring quality of life and satisfaction is subjective for each person and includes a large scale with a variety of factors. This data should be collected with other public partners in a community to prioritize efforts/funding. Results may be difficult to act on in government settings.</p>	<p>Questions: Using a variety of tools (e.g. community-wide surveys, customer satisfaction surveys, questions asked during other planning efforts), communities can ask residents about trails. For example, ask residents to rank the value of trails, ask what community amenities they would like to see more of.</p>
<p>Tourism / Economic Development Efforts</p> <p>Example: Promoting Parks and Recreation's Role in Economic Development</p> <p>https://www.nrpa.org/publications-research/research-papers/promoting-parks-and-recreations-role-in-economic-development/</p>	<p>WHAT: Some communities work closely with economic development and tourism partners to promote trails.</p> <p>WHY: Communities with trails are attractive to potential businesses and tourists. Trails are an amenity that economic developers and tourism promoters can market to potential businesses and visitors.</p>	<p>These partnerships may be difficult to develop depending on the size, activity, and purpose of the community partners and economic development agency.</p>	<p>Partner with regional economic agencies to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote the trail Gather feedback Collect user data Connect with planning and development of the trail Work together to raise funds for trail maintenance
<p>Event Impact</p>	<p>WHAT: Communities that host events on their trails can learn from event attendees.</p> <p>WHY: Surveying event attendees can quantify the impact of the event (spending, where traveling from, demographics, etc.)</p> <p>Communicating with attendees after an event</p> <p>An event may result in repeat visits.</p>	<p>Collecting survey data can be challenging if events are taking place along the trail, not everyone is in the same place. Attendees may not want to fill out surveys. Follow-up event emails with the online surveys can be a more effective method.</p>	<p>Distribute a survey to participants at the finish of an event, or provide a survey link to participants after the event.</p> <p>Keep track of event attendee contact information to build a trail communication list.</p> <p>Include area tourism information in event packets to encourage return visits.</p>
<p>Economic Impact Study</p> <p>Example: Evaluating the Economic Impact of Shared Use Paths in North Carolina https://itre.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/NCDOT-2015-44_SUP-Project_Final-Report_optimized.pdf</p>	<p>WHAT: Identify extensive economic impacts through a formal economic impact modeling study such as IMPLAN.</p> <p>WHY: Understand spending habits and impacts on the region.</p>	<p>Small towns have a difficult time measuring impacts of money spent and have a low impact factor (number of times money turns over). Can be very expensive to gain access to the software.</p>	<p>Hire a consultant to develop and run the model to identify benefits related to jobs, wages, business output, and value-added products.</p>

*THIS TABLE DISPLAYS A LIST OF OPTIONS FOR MEASURING TRAIL IMPACT.

USER DATA COLLECTION

TRAIL MEASUREMENT STRATEGIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Consideration of trail counter placement is essential to understand the use of the entire 34-mile trail system. High level trail counts would be placed at all entry points. Low level trail counts would be placed at the main entrance for users and at both ends of the trail. Collection of trail data and analysis is the most time-consuming aspect of trail counters. Consideration of how much time it will take to download data, analyze, and report into a system for understandability is necessary in deciding how many trail counters to place on the trail. Furthermore, choosing one person is essential to oversee implementation, monitoring, and data collection.

BASIC TRAIL COUNTS (HIGH LEVEL)

Place Trail Counters:

- » Virginia Creeper Trail Welcome Center – Abingdon Trailhead- 300 Green Spring Road, Abingdon, VA 24210
- » Watauga Trailhead – 24350 Watauga Road, Abingdon, VA 24211
- » Alvarado Station – 21198 Alvarado Road, Abingdon, VA 24211
- » Damascus Town Park – 301 S Beaver Dam Ave, Damascus, VA 24236
- » Straight Branch Trailhead – Near 25738 Jeb Stuart Highway, Jefferson National Forest Damascus, VA 24236
- » Taylors Valley Trailhead – 23530 Taylor Valley Road, Jefferson National Forest, Damascus, VA 24236
- » Creek Junction Trailhead – 21285 Creek Junction Road, Jefferson National Forest, Damascus, VA 24236
- » Green Cove Station – Green Cove Community Center, 41221 County Road 600, Jefferson National Forest, Damascus, VA 24236
- » Whitetop Station – Whitetop Gap Road, Whitetop, VA 24292

BASIC TRAIL COUNTS (LOW LEVEL)

Place Trail Counters:

- » Virginia Creeper Trail Welcome Center – Abingdon

Trailhead- 300 Green Spring Road, Abingdon, VA 24210

- » Straight Branch Trailhead – Near 25738 Jeb Stuart Highway, Jefferson National Forest Damascus, VA 24236
- » Whitetop Station – Whitetop Gap Road, Whitetop, VA 24292

TRAIL COUNTER OPTIONS

Diamond Traffic Products (DTP) (\$585.00 per counter)

The TTC-4430 incorporates a faster microprocessor, larger memory capacity, and brighter display. Programming, data retrieval, and monitoring is now possible with a connected computer running their Centurion software. Data can be displayed showing the exact time/date of each record interval. Memory covers 1250 days of data using 1-hour intervals (about 30,000 intervals).

The Millennium Trail Counter is a portable, battery-operated instrument for counting trail usage in remote areas. The original Trail Counter was designed, developed, and manufactured for years under an agreement with the Forest Service.

The unit can be left in the field for long periods and operates on four “D” cell flashlight batteries. It is constructed with a light-weight, watertight aluminum housing which is visually identical to the old counter. The counter, consisting of a scanner and a reflector, is designed to bolt to the backside of a tree and is easy to conceal and install. The cast aluminum housing contains the electronics, optics, a 2-line 16-character OLED display, and a sonic device to aid in beam alignment and provision for the four “D” cell batteries in a lockable battery compartment.

The TTC-4430 can be ordered to provide the same operation as the previous unit (TTC-4420) “Classic” mode or optionally “Enhanced” mode.

Additional features while using the “Enhanced” mode:

- » Selectable intervals (1, 5, 15, 30 minutes, 1, 2, 3, 6, 12, or 24 hours)
- » Programmable “Study Time” - Stop data collection after a selected time frame.
- » Supports direct communication with Centurion v1.49 (and newer) to program, download, or monitor data in real-time.
- » Optional delays start to align with interval boundaries (i.e. next quarter hour or full hour).

- » Data file downloaded in “Enhanced” mode can contain optional values:
 - Complete Site ID and Info Lines
 - Weather and User ID
 - Data Start and End Time along with Study Summary
 - Site GPS Coordinates

In operation, the scanner is mounted on one side of the trail and the reflector on the other. The scanner housing has been designed to be as small as possible and is finished in dull camouflage; the infrared beam is not visible to the naked eye, and the counter makes no noise. Sturdy and rugged, the counter cannot be tripped by falling leaves, walking sticks swung by hikers or other small objects, and it will not register more than one count for long objects like horses, canoes and cycles.

Specifications	
SIZE	10" x 3" x 7" (25.5cm x 7.5cm x 18cm)
CASE	Weathertight IP64 cast aluminum case with separated battery compartment
WEIGHT	8 Lbs. (3.6kg)
POWER	Four "D" alkaline batteries. Average life is 12-15 months.
DISPLAY	2-Line 16-Character OLED display
COUNT	Continuous volume grand total
MEMORY	Up to 1250 days of - (1-Hour Interval Data)
IR WAVE LENGTH	9400 A
DETECTION RANGE	65ft (~20 meters)
UNATTENDED OPERATION	1 year plus



Package:
TTC-4430 Ships with three lag bolts, four reflectors and keychain with magnet.

TRAFx Infrared Counting Equipment

The TRAFx system package, inclusive of all items shown, is currently \$2,215 USD. After ordering a system package, additional counters can be purchased at any time, with the cost per counter ranging from \$460 to \$540, depending on the quantity and type ordered. They also offer optional accessories.

TRAFx Infrared Trail Counter:

- » Counts people on trails, paths, and sidewalks
- » Advanced microelectronic design
- » High-quality infrared scope
- » Compact, unobtrusive, camouflaged design
- » Very long battery life (up to 10 years)
- » Large storage capacity (millions of counts)
- » Maximum range: 6m (20ft.)
- » Built for outside: -40C (-40F) to +55C (131F)
- » Very low operating costs (<\$1/year for batteries)
- » Mount on a tree, or put inside a low-cost, lockable electrical box
- » Field-proven, Generation 4 design (>10 year history)
- » Used from Alaska to Australia, in remote and urban areas

The TRAFx Infrared Trail Counter counts people — walkers, hikers, joggers, in-line skaters, horseback riders, cyclists, etc. — On trails, paths and sidewalks. It senses and detects the infrared wavelength that people emit. Unlike other trail counters, it does not require a receiving unit or reflector to operate. This results in a very compact, unobtrusive design that reduces risk of vandalism. The TRAFx Infrared Trail Counter also works well in winter conditions on snowshoe, ski and snowmobile trails. It uses three standard “AA size” alkaline batteries and has very long battery life.



IMAGE COURTESY OF EQUINOX

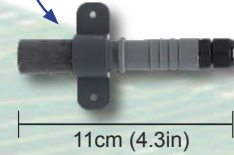
INFRARED TRAIL COUNTER

Generation 4.1

Key Info

- Counts people on trails, paths and sidewalks
- Advanced microelectronic design
- High-quality infrared scope
- Compact, unobtrusive, camouflaged design
- Very long battery life (up to 10 years)
- Large storage capacity (millions of counts)
- Maximum range: 6m (20ft.)
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- Mount on a tree, or put inside a low-cost, lockable electrical box
- Field-proven, Generation 4 design (>10 year history)
- Used from Alaska to Australia, in remote and urban areas

Infrared scope



1m (3.3ft) cable

7cm (2.8in)



11cm (4.3in)

TRAFx Counting System

TRAFx Dock

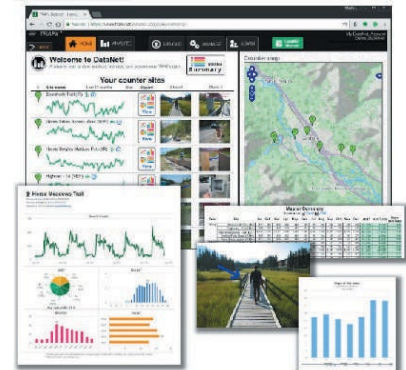
To download counters in the field (without PC)

To configure counters (with PC)



TRAFx DataNet

To view and manage your data



To produce professional reports in seconds.



Try the free Demo at www.trafx.net

Unique Design

The TRAFx Infrared Trail Counter counts people — walkers, hikers, joggers, inline skaters, horseback riders, cyclists, etc. — on trails, paths and sidewalks. It senses and detects the infrared wavelength that people emit. Unlike other trail counters, it does not require a receiving unit or reflector to operate. This results in a very compact, unobtrusive design, that reduces risk of vandalism. The TRAFx Infrared Trail

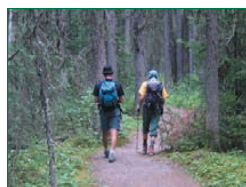
Counter also works well in winter conditions on snowshoe, ski and snowmobile trails. It uses three standard "AA size" alkaline batteries and has very long battery life. This versatile counter has proven itself from Alaska to Australia, from mountains to deserts, and from wilderness areas to urban areas. You can count on it :-)

Flexible Installation

Mount the infrared (IR) scope on a tree and hide the camouflaged case around the back. Or, in busy, open areas (e.g., urban parks), put it inside a low-cost, lockable electrical box attached to a post. Or, fully embed it in a post. Its small, high-quality IR scope can be pointed horizontal, or downwards.



IR scope



Lockable box



OTHER MEANS FOR DATA COLLECTION

OBSERVATION DATA COLLECTION

Systematic observation procedures are particularly important for assessing visitor profile and physical activity because they can be designed for a particular purpose and include protocols for quantifying specific behaviors or other categories of interest.

LICENSE PLATE DATA

Systematic protocols of collecting license plate states for main trailhead parking lots to understand locations of visitors.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

The System for Observing Play and Recreation in Parks (SOPARC) is a reliable and feasible instrument for assessing physical activity and associated contextual data in park and community settings. SOPARC was designed to obtain observational data on the number of participants and their physical activity levels during physical activity and leisure opportunities in parks and community environments. SOPARC uses codes to report physical activity, types of recreation, age category, gender, and race based on observations at scheduled times and observation sites.

Choose two observation spots where you get the most traffic and are convenient for someone to park. One observation spot should be for users traveling to/from Whitetop and another to/from Abingdon.

Data to collect :

- » Date
- » Site
- » Day of Week
- » Time of Day
- » Weather
- » Gender
- » Age (Youth, Young Adults, Middle Age, Mature)
- » Ethnicity
- » Activity
- » Recreation
- » Size of Group

DATA FROM USER GENERATED SOURCES (GOOGLE, STRAVA, ETC.)

- » What trails sections are more popular than others?
- » Which direction is more used, uphill or downhill?
- » Which trails sections' popularity has changed over time?
- » Which trails sections might deserve more maintenance attention?

ECONOMIC IMPACT

BUSINESS SURVEY

The following survey questions will be asked of regional commercial recreation businesses as a means of collecting aggregate data to research the economic impact provided to the local recreational industry sector.

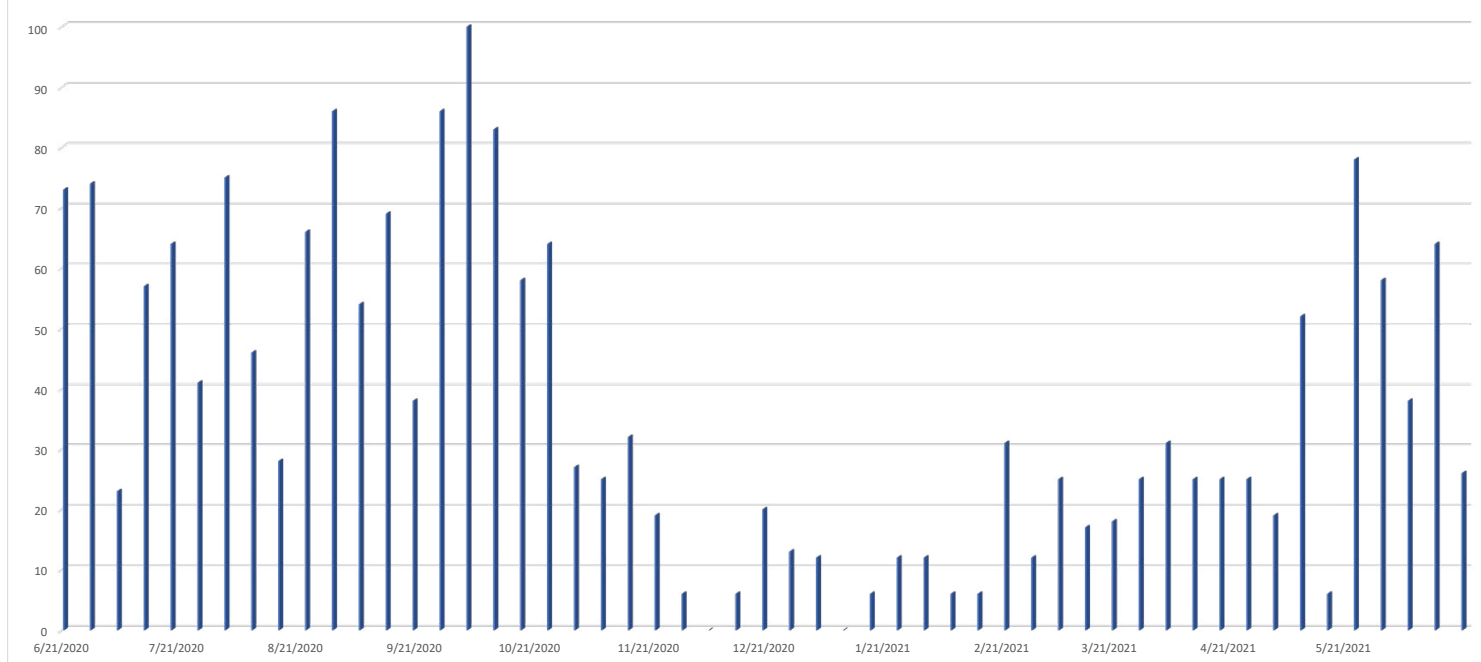
Business Survey Questions:

1. What months are you open for business?
2. Do you rent bicycles?
3. If yes, how many bicycles do you rent each month/year? (Which is best?)
4. Do you provide shuttles?
5. How many people do you shuttle a month/year?
6. Which direction do you recommend to clients? (Whitetop or Abingdon %?)
7. What is your annual sales?

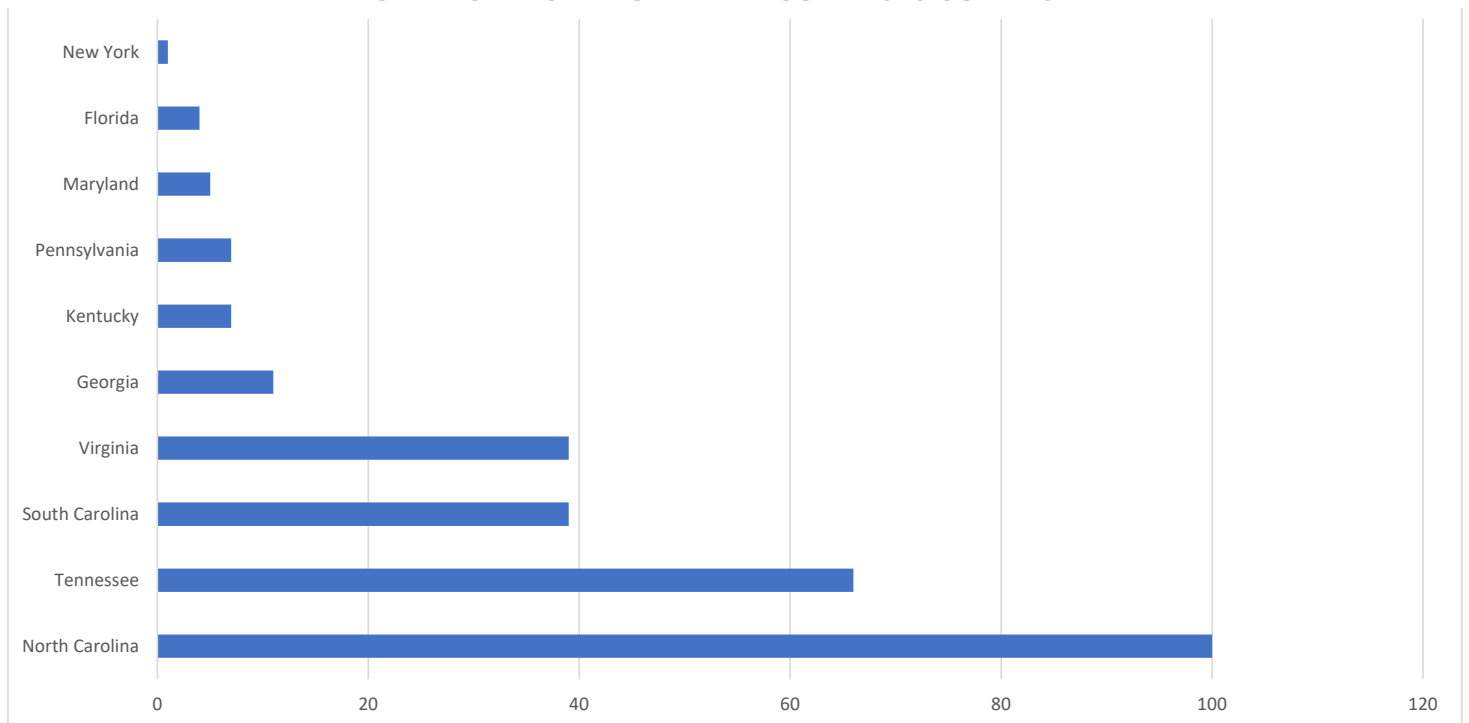
GOOGLE SEARCH TRENDS

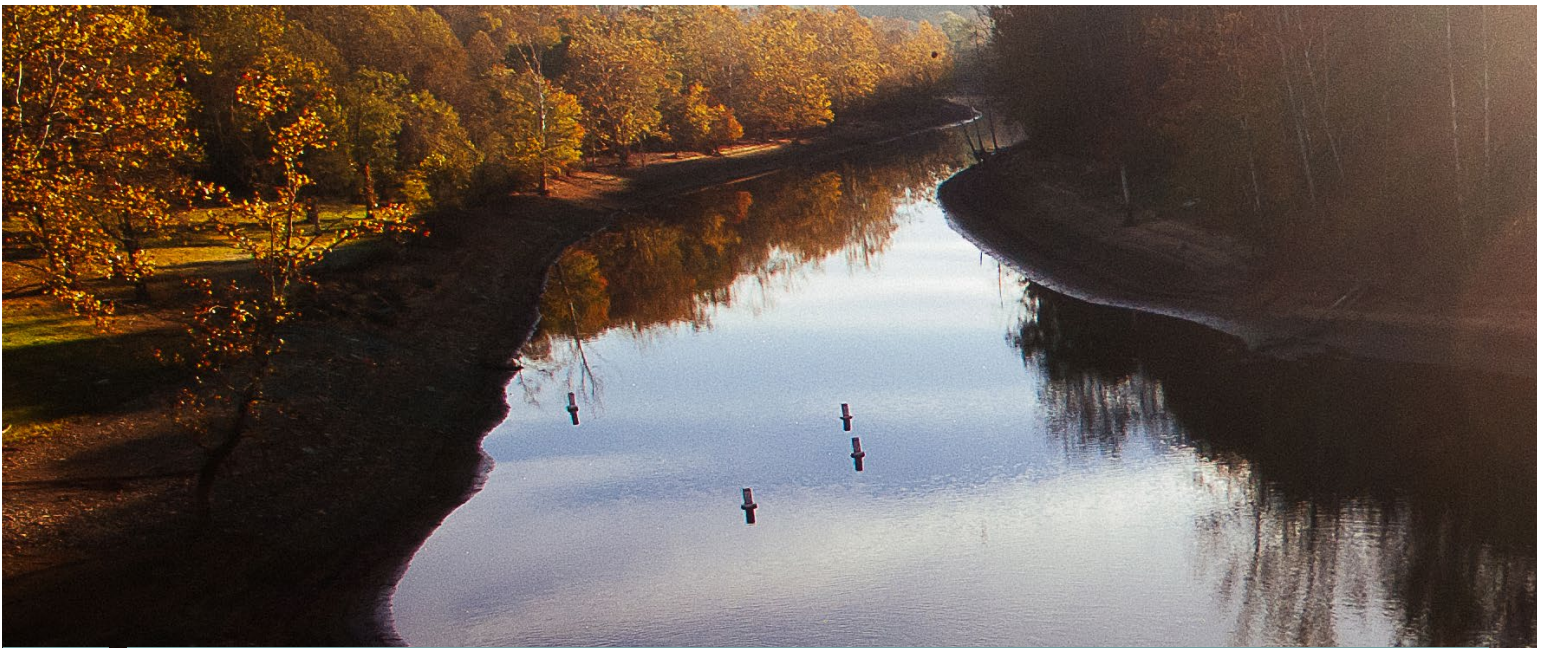
Search for “Virginia Creeper Trail” June 2020-2021 based on weeks and by state:

WEEKLY SEARCH ENGINE REQUEST JUNE 2020-JUNE 2021



STATE SEARCH ENGINE DATA JUNE 2020-JUNE 2021





BRAND, MARKETING, & OUTREACH RECOMMENDATIONS



ORGANIZATIONAL AWARENESS & IMPACT

- » **GARNER A BETTER UNDERSTANDING:** While there is general awareness and understanding of the trail itself, stakeholders have limited or inconsistent awareness of the broader functions and structure of the VCTC organization. The perspective about what the VCTC is, who they are, and what they do seems to vary depending on whether the stakeholders are trail users, businesses, local government, or partners. It was stated that many believe the public as a whole are not aware of the significant role and support that the VCTC plays in stewarding the trail they are using. A deeper dive into perceptions around value proposition and the impact of products and services via future surveys to key stakeholders and the public (both residents and tourists) will help guide future programming, inform effectiveness, and support future fundraising and development efforts.
- » **CLEAR AND CONSISTENT BRANDING:** Due to the wide array of understanding about the organization, the VCTC should first focus on establishing a clear and consistent brand identity prior to any significant investment in implementation and outreach tactics such as a new website, marketing materials, and trail signage. This should be formed by more substantial stakeholder engagement and surveying to ensure an impactful outcome and relevant brand activation.
- » **MEASURE THE DEMAND:** The VCTC is highly respected for the work they are perceived to do, however, there is a desire for them to take a larger more coordinated role in being the “one stop shop” for all trail related promotion, events, management, etc. A market and demand analysis should be facilitated to effectively capture all the existing assets, events, needs, signage, etc. to inform the scope and scale, and determine the resources needed to execute that “one stop shop” role that VCTC is being targeted as fulfilling.



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE TOWN OF ABINGDON, PHOTO BY SAM DEAN

- » **DATA SUPPORTS STORYTELLING AND FUNDRAISING:** Measuring the impact of the trail and the work that VCTC does will be key to future fundraising and development. For example, ensuring the appropriate methods are in place for regular trail counts, economic impact data capture, social media/communication ROI, are all areas worth their investment and necessary for supporting the future growth and capacity needs of the VCTC.

OUTREACH & ENGAGEMENT

- » **CONSISTENT OUTREACH TO KEY STAKEHOLDER GROUPS:** The reputation of the VCTC is positive, however, as referenced above, there is a need for increased outreach and engagement of key stakeholders to not only promote the trail but to solidify and communicate the role and value of the

VCTC. Due to capacity limitations, in the near term, the focus should be on leveraging VCTC's partners, retailers, outfitters, volunteers, and communities to help spread the word.

- » **SHORT TERM MARKETING UPDATES:** Before a new branding initiative can be completed, we recommend that temporary materials, maps, etc. that not only showcase the trail but also the VCTC, be more broadly distributed to retailers, public information/visitor centers, and handed out at events.
- » **LEVERAGE AND GROW VOLUNTEER CAPACITY:** Volunteers have been referenced as being the most engaged and dedicated group and a major asset to the VCTC. Providing more opportunities and increasing communication of those opportunities will help the VCTC better leverage volunteer support to fill some of the capacity gaps in the near term.



IMAGE COURTESY OF EQUINOX

OUTREACH & ENGAGEMENT CONTINUED

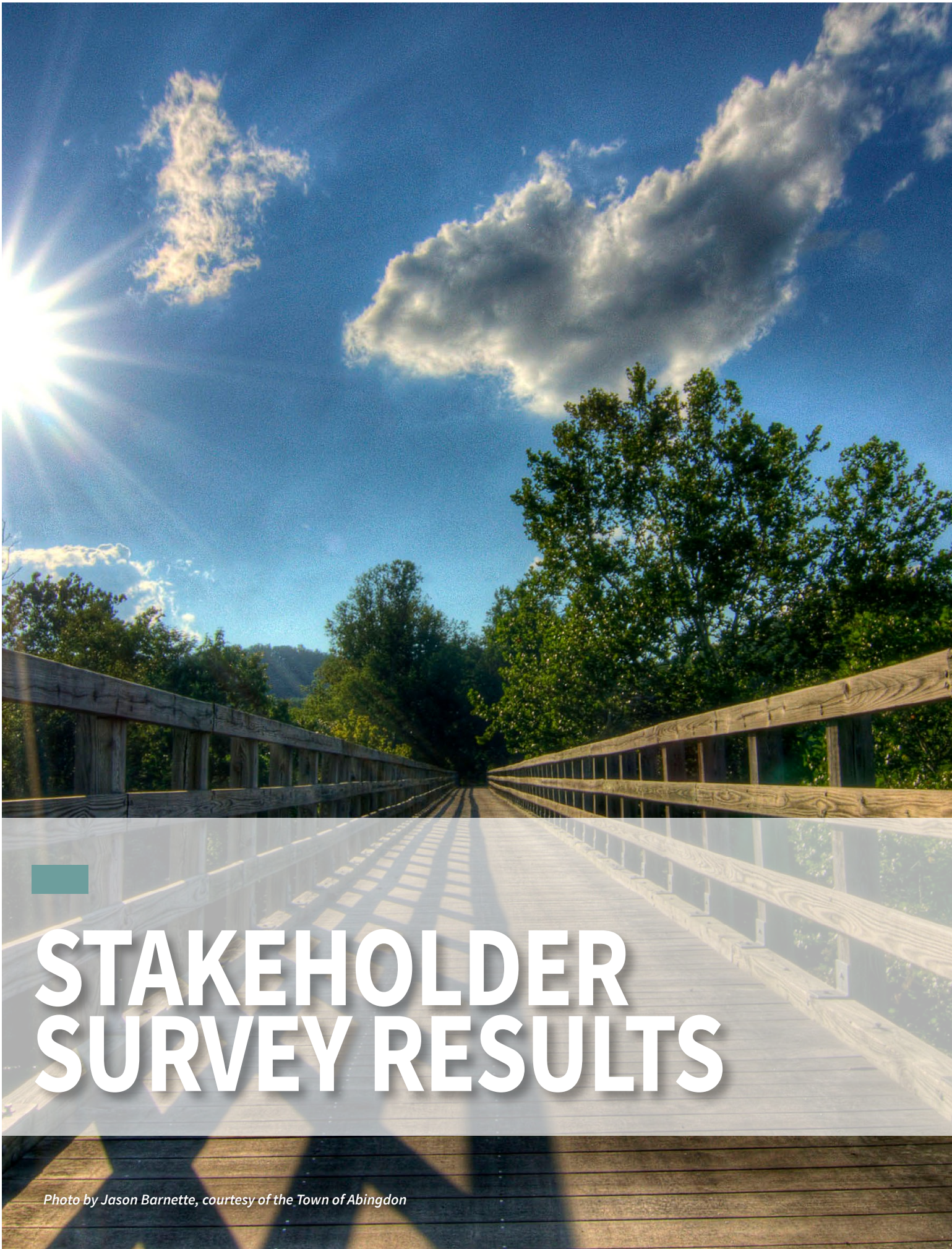
- » **WAYS TO GROW THE VOLUNTEER BASE FOR OUTREACH & ENGAGEMENT:** Utilize volunteers on the outreach and engagement side of the VCTC’s work.
- » **BUILD A MORE COMPREHENSIVE VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT PLAN:** Including a detailed manual and process, role and responsibilities, communication, and recognition. The following recommendations are a few examples of what that might include.
- » **DEVELOP A VOLUNTEER NEEDS LIST:** Volunteers can’t help if they don’t know how. Having a comprehensive list of support needs, beyond just helping with episodic events and working the visitors center, should be added to the current website, and built into the new website. Examples can be project oriented that might be able to leverage a local business (we need a new website), social media support, graphic design, map making, newsletter/communications support, etc.
- » **FACILITATE A VOLUNTEER RESOURCE INVENTORY:** Solicit feedback on the skills of VCTC’s core network of members and volunteers as well as the interests they have in supporting the operations of the organization. This can be facilitated in a spectrum of ways with the easiest approach being a “survey” asking current members what they do professionally that might benefit the VCTC or what they enjoy doing outside of their professional career that they’d like to contribute to the organization.
- » **ESTABLISH AN AMBASSADOR PROGRAM:** Volunteers can become extensions of the organization supporting the promotion of the trail and the organization while providing a service to visitors and residents using the trail. They can also be vital in capturing information and data related to usage and maintenance. The entire program can be designed and led by volunteers and provide perks/incentives for involvement donated by local communities and businesses. It is also recommended to utilize a communication platform like slack to better support independent volunteer coordination.
- » **HOLD REGULAR VCTC “MEET-UPS, ”:** Host more than just meetings. Meet-ups could be informal social gatherings at local businesses or casual rides. Sometimes just re-framing or providing a new label for “member meetings” can bring in a new audience and be perceived as more attractive.
- » **HOLD AN “END OF THE YEAR” BANQUET, AWARDS CEREMONY, AND CELEBRATION TO RECOGNIZE YOUR MAJOR VOLUNTEERS, SPONSORS, AND PARTNERS AND CELEBRATE THE VCTC.**



MARKETING & BRANDING

- » **DEVELOP A TRAIL HOT-LINE AND UTILIZE VOLUNTEERS TO MANAGE A TRAIL MAINTENANCE “HOT-LINE” AND ONE PLACE SOMEONE CAN REPORT ISSUES, ALERTS, ETC.**
- » **ENGAGE LOCAL BUSINESS:** Businesses along the trail and in the communities are another key stakeholder group that can be better leveraged. Here are some recommendations on how to better engage this core stakeholder group.
- » **HOST BUSINESS STAKEHOLDER SPECIFIC MEETINGS PERIODICALLY AND HAVE A BUSINESS PARTNER SPECIFIC NEWSLETTER:** This keeps businesses informed and updated on upcoming events, opportunities, maintenance issues, etc.
- » **IMPLEMENT A CONSISTENT SCHEDULE OF MATERIALS DISTRIBUTION BY UTILIZING VOLUNTEERS:** Use volunteers to deliver current maps and information to all types of local businesses.
- » **DEVELOP A “TRAIL FRIENDLY BUSINESS” PROGRAM:** Local businesses can offer support or discounts to trail users and receive recognition and promotion for their involvement.
- » **COMPREHENSIVE BRAND STRATEGY AND IMPLEMENTATION PLAN:** The next step in this process (following the conclusion of this strategic planning effort) should be developing a comprehensive brand strategy that includes both the trail and the VCTC, isn’t dependent on one town, connects the communities and all the trail assets together, and is led by the VCTC. Currently, there are multiple websites, social media pages, and other outlets and it isn’t clear who owns what page, where any revenue is going, and how to know which one is the trusted source. The development of this new “one stop shop” resource needs to engage the local communities and businesses who own those pages and be able to add value and bring additional exposure to their entity in order for them to buy-in to the new comprehensive approach
- » **FOLLOWING A NEW BRAND STRATEGY, THE IMPLEMENTATION PLAN SHOULD INCLUDE SIGNAGE, MAPPING, AND WEBSITE REVAMP THAT EFFECTIVELY REPRESENTS ALL THE COMMUNITIES, AMENITIES, BUSINESSES, AND THE VCTC. A TRAIL APP COULD ALSO BE A MAJOR TOOL FOR BOTH VISITORS AND SUPPORT THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE TRAIL**
- » **SHORT TERM WEBSITE UPDATES:** The current website doesn’t adequately reflect the VCTC and its role in supporting the trail. Without digging around on the site, one wouldn’t know there is any association with the organization to the trail. The current website should be updated to better define the VCTC’s role.
- » **SEO OPTIMIZATION:** Add Google and SEO optimization to any new website or social media presence to leverage all the visitors coming to the area more effectively.





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STAKEHOLDER SURVEY RESULTS

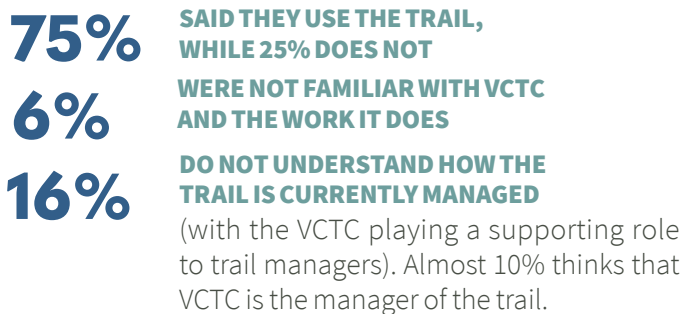
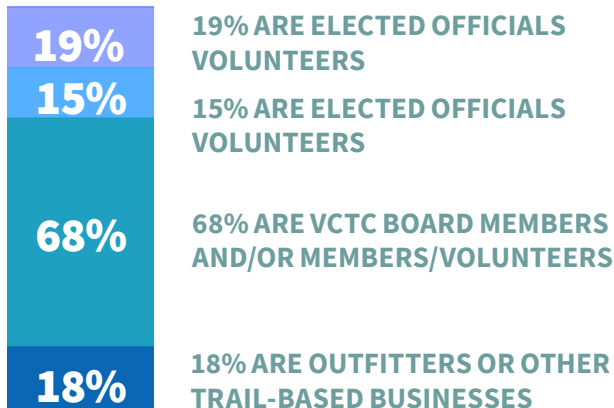
Photo by Jason Barnette, courtesy of the Town of Abingdon

WHAT WE HEARD

STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK - WHO TOOK THE SURVEY

*Note that some stakeholders overlapped in several categories. These results are based on 70 survey responses.

TYPES OF SURVEY RESPONDERS:



FEEDBACK ON VCTC

HOW VCTC SERVES THE TRAIL BEST

VCTC MAKES THE TRAIL FEEL AS “ONE”

VCTC helps balance competing interests and helps prioritize what is important trail-wide. The organization can be the single point of contact for the trail.

VCTC IS THE PREFERRED LIAISON FOR THE COMMUNITY & BUSINESSES

VCTC is the glue that makes the trail seem as one, even though several partners manage it. It serves as an

approachable liaison between the business and trail managers. VCTC builds partnerships that really benefit the trail and trail managers, businesses, and other partners each expressed great rapport that has been built with VCTC.

VCTC IS THE DRIVING FORCE IN COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND MARKETING

VCTC remains as the consistent voice in marketing the trail and is a resource for trail users and businesses. It helps keep goodwill towards the trail within the broader community.

VCTC IS THE ADVOCATE FOR THE TRAIL

VCTC is the best advocate for the entire trail and serves a role no other single organization can in advocating to elected officials and decision makers. It has also remained politically neutral, managing to garner support from diverse leaders.

VCTC IS VERY RESPONSIVE TO TRAIL NEEDS

VCTC can be the most responsive partner and in turn communicates well, especially when there are emergencies or opportunities that need to be seized upon.

VCTC FILLS IN MAINTENANCE GAPS

Through its volunteer coordination and supplementing of maintenance budget, VCTC fills gaps that would otherwise lessen the quality of the trail. Volunteer cleanups and responsiveness to safety/maintenance upgrades are the two areas deemed as most beneficial in its current work.

HOW VCTC COULD BETTER SERVE THE TRAIL

VCTC NEEDS TO EXPAND ITS CAPACITY

There is not enough staff hours to assist in all the needs of the trail. Having a strong direction and a clear vision of what is needed in the next five plus(+) years would help. Working committees should be created to expand capacity.

VCTC COULD BE MORE VISIBLE IN THE COMMUNITY, TO ITS OWN MEMBERSHIP, AND TO TRAIL USERS

Many in the community are unaware of VCTC’s presence, its mission, or issues facing the trail. Consistent and regular communications to the community and its own membership is needed. Transparency of meetings and work being accomplished is desired. Most trail users don’t know about VCTC and there is no mention of VCTC at any

entry point or at outfitters. Having a more visible presence and way to have representatives engage trail users in person would help. Volunteers who represent VCTC that are frontline (visitor or trail rangers) could help. VCTC will also need to fill the hole left with the loss of full-time Abingdon tourism staff. More visible volunteer recruitment is needed. A few have disengaged from VCTC meetings due to conflicts, difficulty in attending, or feeling like their voice is not heard.

VCTC COULD WORK WITH PARTNERS TO BETTER PLAN AND PLAY A BIGGER ROLE IN MANAGEMENT

Addressing maintenance and emergency issues seem by some to be reactive vs. proactive. Having a list of priority maintenance needs visible and in front of the trail managers at all times could help. Many feel that VCTC should play a bigger role in management, as they are the most nimble and have the best trail-wide perspective.

VCTC SHOULD BEGIN TO ADDRESS LARGER TRAIL ISSUES THAT COULD IMPACT TRAIL EXPERIENCE

Exterior threats (encroachments and viewshed impacts) as well as overuse/exceeding trail capacity both can negatively impact the trail. VCTC is best positioned to help lead trail managers on how to address these issues.

VCTC IS BEST POSITIONED TO HELP PROMOTE BUSINESSES, BUT IS CURRENTLY NOT DOING THAT

Businesses feel there is no good comprehensive resource to promote trail-side business. As VCTC is now the main front to promote the trail, a virtual or in-person resource is needed. Cross-promotions, or better use of the business community channels to create and maintain a mutually beneficial relationship could help.

HOW OFTEN STAKEHOLDERS ENGAGE WITH VCTC

- 43%** Weekly/monthly
- 26%** Every few months
- 11%** Once a year
- 19%** Can't remember last time they did

FEEDBACK ON THE TRAIL

CAPITAL PROJECTS & MAINTENANCE NEEDS

Stakeholders were asked to prioritize maintenance and capital project needs, with a chance for open response on any other projects they deem important.

PRIORITY CAPITAL OR MAINTENANCE PROJECTS

#1 TRAIL SURFACE IMPROVEMENTS

Fix issues with sudden grade changes before and after bridges, as this is a major safety issue. Work to have consistent widths and surface across the trail.

#2 REPAIR TRESTLES

Trestle repair will cost significant funding and is best done before there are major issues.

#3 TRAILHEAD EXPANSION/IMPROVEMENTS & SAFER/IMPROVED TRAIL CROSSINGS

CROSSINGS: The trail crossing of Route 58 in Damascus was mentioned on several occasions as the biggest concern. Drainage issues at Chestnut Mountain Road crossing.

TRAILHEADS: Abingdon and White Top Trailheads have the greatest pressure and need for expansion, but total capacity of the trail should be a consideration.

#4 INTEGRATED & CONSISTENT ON-TRAIL WAYFINDING FOR SAFETY AND USER LOCATION

#5 AUTOMOBILE-WAYFINDING TO GET TO THE TRAIL/TRAILHEADS

#6 CO-ALIGNING THE TRAIL AND BLUEWAY ACCESS

OTHER: Trash along right-of-way, control of invasive species, hazard tree maintenance, tree plantings to replace diseased trees and provide shade, increased amount of restrooms along the trail, signage to businesses/attractions, increased number of mile markers, marking of trail barriers to be more visible, better trailhead signage, addition of first aid stations, and access to water.

WHAT WE HEARD

SHORT/NEAR-TERM PRIORITIES FOR VCTC & THE TRAIL

CRITICALLY IMPORTANT

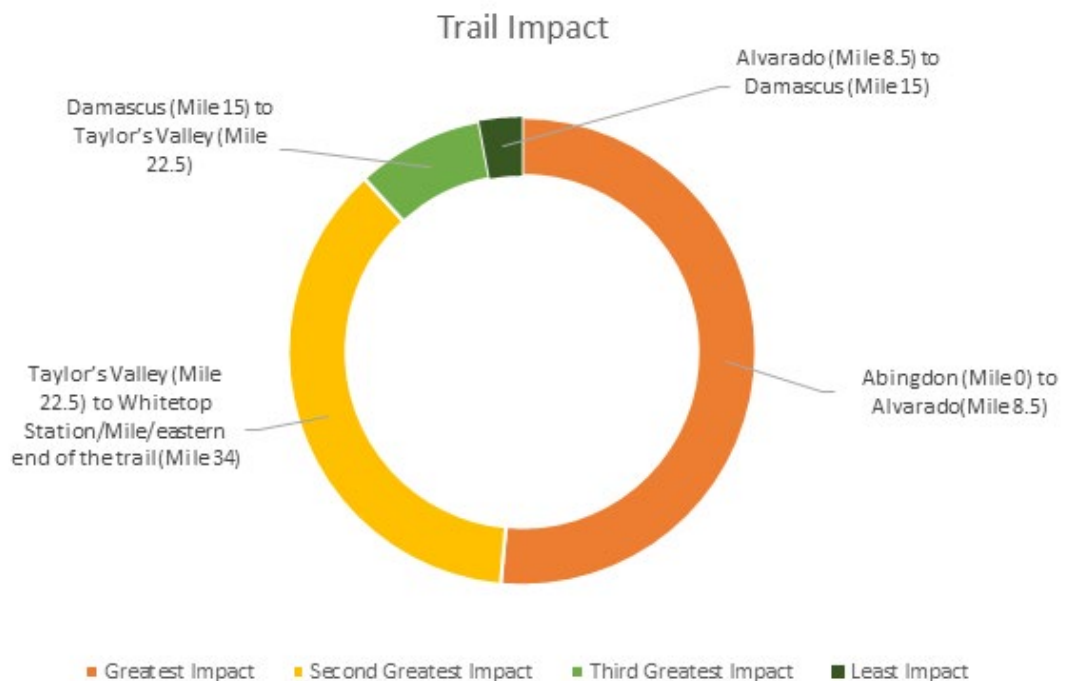
The most important short-term actions that stakeholders felt are important are related to external relationships to the trail and grant funding (in order of importance).

- » **ADDRESS ENCROACHMENTS & INCOMPATIBLE LAND USES.** Work with conservation partners to help protect lands around the trail that are being encroached upon by incompatible land uses.
- » **STRENGTHEN RELATIONSHIPS.** Strengthen relationships with trail communities and businesses.
- » **APPLY FOR GRANTS.** VCTC should apply for grants and be the administrator. Applying for larger grants was prioritized over applying for smaller grants or funding maintenance costs.
- » **BECOME THE LEAD IN COMMUNITY AND TRAIL USER COMMUNICATIONS.** Centrally coordinate and broadcast trail information via social media, traditional media, website, and mass emails about critical trail info.

IMPORTANT

The following are of secondary importance to stakeholders (in order of importance):

- » **MEASURE POSITIVE IMPACTS OF THE TRAIL.** This could include health, economic, number of users, etc. This ranks higher than the next action.
- » **BECOME THE REPOSITORY FOR TRAIL NEEDS.** Become a centralized record keeper for trail conditions and needed repairs.
- » **IMPLEMENT COHESIVE WAYFINDING TRAILWIDE.** Coordinate a collaborative and cohesive wayfinding signage system throughout the trail.
- » **STRENGTHEN COORDINATED EMERGENCY RESPONSE.** Work with emergency responders to strengthen strategies on coordinated emergency



AREAS WHERE SOME FEEL VCTC SHOULD NOT PLAY A ROLE

(Note: comments on this were not significant, # indicates amount of responses):

Fundraising for general maintenance costs (8), Coordinate trail-wide management data (5),

MEDIUM/LONG-TERM PRIORITIES FOR VCTC & THE TRAIL

CRITICALLY IMPORTANT

BECOME A VOICE FOR THE TRAIL EXTERNALLY TO MORE PARTNERS. Become a “voice” for the trail and advocate for more funding from federal, state, and local governments, foundations, and corporations. Advocate with state trail advocacy groups to the general assembly and to local boards/councils regularly.

BECOME A LAND TRUST/OR WORK WITH LAND TRUSTS TO CONSERVE THE TRAIL CORRIDOR. Become or work with a land trust/conservation organization(s) and help protect the larger trail landscape from encroachments and incompatible trail uses.

TAKE A LEAD IN TRAIL PROMOTION TO TRAIL USERS. Take a lead role in publicly promoting the trail and providing the public with information and education about trail. Partner with others on tourism promotions.

IMPORTANT

- » **FUNDRAISE FOR LARGER CAPITAL PROJECTS.** Assist in fundraising for larger capital projects.
- » **BECOME A MORE ACTIVE TRAIL MANAGEMENT PARTNER.** Become a stronger and more active “on the ground” trail management partner.

OTHER PRIORITIES MENTIONED

(Note these were not in the survey but based on conversations, these should receive the highest priority)

BUILD VCTC’S CAPACITY. This was not an option in the survey, because it goes without saying that VCTC would need to build capacity (through staff or volunteers) to accomplish much of this work. Several stakeholders mentioned how critical this is.

IMPLEMENT A FEE STRUCTURE. Implement a fee on structure to support the trail.

WHAT WE HEARD

Note: these are the exact results of the survey. They were not edited for content, clarity, or grammar. There were a total of 70 stakeholder responses to this survey.

What is the type of relationship you have with the Trail? (check ALL that apply)

	Number of Response(s)	Response Ratio
VCTC Board member (current or former)	8	11.4%
VCTC member (current or former)	23	32.9%
Trail volunteer (current or former)	19	27.1%
Trail manager, or affiliation with an organization that manages the Trail	10	14.3%
Elected official or political-related field	9	12.9%
Business owner - Outfitter (that benefits from the Trail)	5	7.1%
Business owner - Other	7	10.0%
In the emergency management/law enforcement field	2	2.9%
In the tourism-related field	14	20.0%
In a planning-related field	5	7.1%
Use the Trail (walk, bike, run, etc.)	53	75.7%
Vegetation Management (Trees)	1	1.4%
USFS Bike Patrol	1	1.4%
Past President	1	1.4%
As a former member of Congress I helped the effort to fund a variety of Creeper Trail improvements	1	1.4%
Long chapter in book I wrote about Damascus giving early railroad history & how recreational trail evolved.	1	1.4%
We built a rain garden at the trailhead in Abingdon to eliminate a muddy spot in the trail. The garden soaks up the water that used to accumulate on the trail..	1	1.4%
State government - conservation	1	1.4%
Former Mayor of Abingdon, Coauthor Virginia Creeper Trail Companion	1	1.4%
Conservation professional/GIS	1	1.4%
Town of Abingdon	1	1.4%
Trail goes through my property	1	1.4%
In the historical field	1	1.4%
Partner with VCTC on ride	1	1.4%
Work helping with first aid and bicycle maintenance on trail from WT to Damascus.	1	1.4%
Manage the Capital Trail	1	1.4%
Abingdon EDA and Infrastructure committees	1	1.4%
Mendota Trail Volunteer	1	1.4%
Board member of neighboring walking - biking trail	1	1.4%
Total	70	100%

DETAILED SURVEY RESULTS

Tell us what you know about the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy...

How aware are you of the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy (VCTC) and its mission? The current mission of the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy is: “The VCTC is dedicated to the maintenance and preservation of the Creeper Trail corridor. The VCTC partners with other trail stakeholders to support a safe and enjoyable experience for all trail users”.

	Number of Response(s)	Response Ratio
1 (Not Aware)	2	2.9%
2	2	2.9%
3	8	11.4%
4	16	22.9%
5 (Very Aware)	42	60.0%
Total	70	100%

What is your current understanding of how the Trail is managed? (one of these options is a true statement)

	Number of Response(s)	Response Ratio
The trail is managed by the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy (VCTC)	7	10.1%
The trail is managed by the US Forest Service with support by the VCTC	3	4.3%
The trail is managed by the Towns of Abingdon, Damascus, the US Forest Service, with support by the VCTC	59	85.5%
Total	69	100%

Please provide feedback related to the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy (VCTC)

What do you think should be the organizational mission for the future of the VCTC? Please write a few sentences that encompass the major role(s) it should play as it relates to the Virginia Creeper Trail.

61 responses

The VCTC should be considered as one of the trail managers. It should be afforded the opportunity to be a major player in the future of the VCT and have a considered opinion of the future development and plans as the trail continues to grow.

To ‘maintain’ the trail in a state that limits encroachment by development, preserves viewsheds, implements standards for signage and wayfinding, and adopts a pro-active maintenance and improvements schedule that the Towns and USFS can follow.

#1: The safety of the trail users. #2 The safety of those who maintain the trail. #3 The quality of the experience of the trail users. #4 Management of the vegetation adjacent to the trail (especially non-native invasive species).

The VCTC should continue to assisting in efforts to maintain and promote the Virginia Creeper Trail.

The VCTC has and should maintain a major role in the sustainability and viability of the VCT.

Safety and security tops. Keep trail owners informed of trail needs and improvements and ways to obtain funding.

The VCTC should provide informational and volunteer support to assist the three entities responsible for the trail to accomplish their identified goals.

1. Bring to the attention of the Abingdon town manager and council trail maintenance needs as well as needed capital improvements and actively urge funding for those projects. (One long-standing maintenance need is to make smooth the approaches to the trestles so that bikers do not encounter drop offs where the trail meets the trestles. Even a one inch drop off approaching a trestle can blow bike tires.) 2. Raise funds and directly fund items like more benches, trail side explanatory signs, etc. 3. Conduct periodic surveys of the extent of trail use and the estimated economic impact as a way to convince Abingdon town management to allocate funds for trail projects. Previous surveys have underestimated the economic effects.

Foster trail stewardship, preservation of natural resources; community engagement

To preserve the beauty and integrity of the trail while encouraging year round use of the trail .To educate users, organizations and the community in trail preservation to sustain the natural use of the trail for recreation

I think the VCTC has done a good job. Continuing to move forward and progress.

From reading the infographic about the master plan, it seems a high priority will be increasing capacity, which should be a cornerstone for any organization. Without enough resources, an organization will struggle to accomplish its goals. I do not know what the VCTC already has in terms of capacity and so it is difficult to describe what might be needed.

In the future, I'd like to see the VCTC take a bigger role with the trail and possibly relieve the USFS of some of its duties.

Trail management. Trail advocacy. Community Partnerships. Be one of the key sources for the trail management for the future. Be the key source for trail event and activity coordination. Promote sustainability of the trail as ONE trail. Help with grants and funding.

Help keep up the trail with clean ups, support the trail projects, make suggestions on improving the trail.

To protect and support the accessibility of the public to the trail. To continue to insure that the trail is clean and litter free.

Continue to build community support and protection of the trail corridor. Keep trail managers aware of current physical needs of the trail.

The mission should be to support the trail owners in matters of safety, maintenance, view shed preservation and user education about trail history and their enjoyment of the great outdoors of our region.

Augment trail amenities, publicize for greater trail use during off season, seek to extend the trail with connections in Abingdon and perhaps to the Mendota Trail. Is there any hope of extending the trail to West Jefferson, NC?

VCTC provides volunteer opportunities to assist in maintenance of the trail and facilities. VCTC should be a voice that promotes and teaches the community about this natural resource. VCTC is an advocate for the trail and should be part of any decisions pertaining to its future

The VCTC should manage the use and maintenance of the trail. It should also make sure the trail is not over developed or over commercialized.

The VCTC

(Modeled on VA Capital Trail Foundation) Protect, promote, and enhance the Virginia Creeper Trail, and to serve as a resource, community builder, and connector to other trails throughout the Commonwealth

Preserve and improve trail. Act as a vehicle to facilitate coordination among trail managers.

Maintenance and improvement of the trail. Marketing the trail to tourists.

Consolidate and organize support for the trail. Measure the economic impact of the trail to garner support from local municipalities. Organize volunteers and raise funds for trail maintenance.

Coordinate Town of Abingdon and USFS, advocate, and conserve the Trail and corridor

Advocacy, Fundraising, United voice for trail users, recreation business owner support

Ensure proper management of the entire trail-- signage, trail, trestles, etc.; Engage landowners, communities and businesses along the trail in management, marketing, access; Protect/conservate the natural areas along the trail to keep out invasive plants

Provide the organizational support to facilitate conservation, trail improvements and management. I also believe the VCTC should be the primary marketing partner for the trail, with support from the managing entities.

Maintenance and preservation of the Creeper Trail corridor and it's viewshed

I'm relatively new to the USFS-GW Jeff so I think I'm still in a learning phase.

Trail safety

Preserve the environment surrounding the trail for an enjoyable user experience and for ecosystem preservation.

To help protect, promote, and preserve the VCT.

Oversight of trail management and long term planning and development. Co-ordination with political subdivisions which encompass areas through which the trail passes to encompass areas such as planning and economic development.

Support of the Trail, its expansion and connection to other trails, preservation of trail

viewshed protection, fundraising for staffing and maintenance, and volunteer engagement.

To preserve, and maintain the trail so that it can be enjoyed for years to come. Maintain the beautification of the trail and do several clean up days a year to help with that. Hold several events on the trail to help support the future of the trail.

Vetting Events that will be held on the trail, clean-up, maintenance of benches, shelters and signs.

Conservancy of the VCT. Support (provide opportunities to promote their business) local business that provide complementary experiences and amenities (ie. wineries, breweries, restaurants, lodging, outfitters, etc.) for VCT visitors (which will increase tax revenues for the community).

Be the reliable authoritative info source and curator of the VCT experience. Be the model nonprofit for the area. Have a bulletproof reputation as an honest broker for creative problem solving and pragmatic solutions. Cultivate sustainable processes that are resilient to personnel change.

Be the reliable authoritative info source and curator of the VCT experience. Be the model nonprofit for the area. Have a bulletproof reputation as an honest broker for creative problem solving and pragmatic solutions. Cultivate sustainable processes that are resilient to personnel change.

Assuring that the VCT is safe and well maintained
 Working to keep areas within sight of the trail as visually appealing as possible
 Assuring that adequate financial resources are available

Continue to maintain and if possible upgrade the trail

Continue advocacy, promotion, and enhancements for ENTIRE trail by coordinating with the three organizations that have ownership and maintenance responsibilities for trail. Promote trail consistency regrading signing, amenities, width

VCT should provide a safe and user supported trail for a diversity of people ranging in ages, activities, and reason they are on the VCT. User support includes informative signage along the trail; restrooms; protective small weather shelters; numerous trash receptacles; phone and internet access; emergency first aid; bicycle repair tools/parts; food and beverage options; and surface maintenance.

Working jointly with the Towns and Forestry Service to preserve the VCT and along with working with the tourism entities to promote the trail.

To work together with the other organizations to make the Creeper Trail one of Virginia's best tourist destination or recreational uses.

I haven't worked for the Conservancy long enough to offer a real organizational assessment, but I know that when all of the Trail owners work together with the Conservancy, it helps us to get more done quickly and effectively.

to manage and advocate for the entirety of the trail

To support the preservation of Virginia Creeper Trail for present and future generations; to promote the wise use of the trail; and to serve as a resource for the trail's stakeholders.

Providing volunteers for trail maintenance and as volunteers to help people with accidents, etc. and supervision/oversight in letting the towns and USFS know of maintenance problems

VCTC should work with towns and managing partners to help maintain and protect the VCT and provide a safe recreational environment.

I imagine the mission of the VCTC is to ensure the Virginia Creeper Trail is sustained and cherished by our community and our guests. I'd hope that includes maintenance, education, outreach, and accessibility while being aware of the impact on our natural resources.

The VCTC should coordinate with the U.S. Forest Service, the two towns and outfitters to address safety concerns, trail maintenance issues.

Protect, preserve and promote the VCT and surrounding communities to ensure the conservation of open spaces and trail access for all users.

To help manage keeping the trail well-maintained and provide information both use and safety to those using the trail.

Promote, enhance, and manage the Virginia Creeper Trail. Potentially have it grow with more access points.

Management to preserve natural beauty and to connect to communities

Protect, preserve and promote the VCT and surrounding communities to ensure the conservation of open spaces and trail access for all users.

See below...

Please list the TOP PRIORITY goal you think the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy should be responsible for within the next 5-10 years.

62 responses

Sustainability

Secure conservation easements or land acquisitions to prevent development directly adjacent to the trail, especially from Watauga Road thru to and including the Smith Farm

SAFETY of the trail users and maintenance staff.

Promotion and assisting in maintaining the Virginia Creeper Trail.

Along with Abingdon and Damascus, establish guidelines to sustain the VCT in the most natural state possible, especially addressing business frontage along the VCT.

Trail maintenance, especially trestle maintenance.

The VCTC should anticipate future problems in use of the trail (electric vehicles, trail degradation, commercial development etc.) and work with the governing bodies to address these problems.

Number 1 above

Trail upgrades and repairs to enhance visitor safety and enjoyment

sustainable use

Making sure the trail is maintained. Maintaining a good reputation on the trail keeps people wanting to use it. With that, we continue to get more visitors.

I strongly believe the management groups need to focus much more on the SAFETY part if its mission... So many accidents with such high usage... Accident statistics should be kept along with location of each accident so that improvements in safety could be implemented on certain sections.

To make sure the trail is open and accessible to the area residents and tourists.

Trail Maintenance

Sustainability

Preserve the trail and it's adjacent corridor.

Suggestions on improving the trail, and what to do about elec. bikes, need to limit the size and horse power.

Maintenance of the Trail and getting more folks involved in the activity of the trail. Continue to work with outside groups that want use the trail like running teams and groups of walkers like the Yeti people.

Continue building and maintaining community support for the trail.

Safety of trail users.

Extending and connecting the trail to other trails.

Advocacy

Maintenance and planning for bridge replacement

Stabilizing the structure of maintenance (short term & long term), capital improvements, strategic planning, management coordination, public relations, etc. to bring all of teh managing partners under one umbrella.

Working with others to help lawmakers recognize trails are facilities that need designated maintenance funding as part of our public health infrastructure

Assist trail managers in identifying needed improvements

Maintenance of the trail.

Protect and conserve the trail

Corridor protection

Trial sustainability

Proper trail maintenance as more and more people visit the trail

Trail conservation and management

Comprehensive plan on trail infrastructure maintenance and replacement, including emergency funding

I'm relatively new to the USFS-GW Jeff so I think I'm still in a learning phase.

Severe weather shelters

Maintaining a safe and enjoyable trail.

Become the forefront organization in trail user awareness.

Oversight of trail maintenance and development.

Protection of the Trail corridor

Fundraising - which could then be allocated to each trail sections top priority. Example - viewshed protection may be needed more in the residential and corporate districts and trestle maintenance could be a higher priority on other areas. The VCTC could work with each maintaining organization to identify the Top Priority.

Maintaining the beautification of the trail.

Liaison between Towns, Forest Service, bike shops and outdoor outfitters

Maintain the scenic beauty of the VCT viewshed.

Purchase of a highly visible adjacent parcel to demonstrate our conservation role in the public mind.

Assuring adequate safety for users. This would entail providing communication access for cell phones to be used in emergency situations as well as having EMT services available.

As the bridges age the financial burden may be hard to meet without state or federal assistance

Promoting Trail integrity and quality, primarily with respect to trestles and trail cross-section width

Engaging volunteers who have the time and physical ability to assist with trail maintenance and others who are skilled in fundraising.

Being the Overseer of the VCT

Maintenance of the trail, communication to those who use it and community awareness.

I know there are some fabulous opportunities and ideas within the Conservancy for ways to engage with our community even more than we do now, especially concerning how the Trail could increase equity and social justice in our region.

Top priority is to maintain and repair trail condition - all other objectives dependent on this.

Ensure the trail remains safe, well maintained, and easily accessible.

Dealing with the large numbers of bikers

Helping with funding or volunteer help in maintaining the WT to Damascus section of the trail. The trestle ends need maintenance in providing a safer approach. They are raised 2-3 inches in some cases, causing pinch flats and hazards.

Maintain the condition of the trail including its natural rural setting

Safety issues.

Protection of view sheds and trail from development.

Overall awareness of the trail to those who use it. Helping agencies provide useful information to those who use it and work in conjunction with them for whatever help is needed.

Maintaining the trail at a high level

Preserving the natural beauty of the trail

Protection of view sheds and trail from development.

Please list the SECOND PRIORITY goal you think the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy should be responsible for within the next 5-10 years.

61 responses

Economic Development

Adopt pro-active maintenance schedules, especially as it relates to the deterioration of the trestles....for example, there should be NO vegetation allowed to grow beneath the trestles as it holds moisture and accelerates damage to the structural elements

Quality of the experience of the trail user.

Assuring the ongoing efforts of the VCTC.

Establish a comprehensive safety communication network throughout the entire VCT. Cell service is erratic to non-existent on many miles of the VCT.

Safety, more and more people using the trail.

There are multiple right-of-way intrusions onto the trail in the National Forest, Damascus and Abingdon areas. These should all be identified and a consistent corrective plan should be established, with no favoritism shown.

Number 2 above

Volunteerism (volunteers to help with maintenance, staffing visitor centers)

DETAILED SURVEY RESULTS

education of sustainable use

Continued Conservation

Improved safety education for riders while going up the mountain by shuttling companies.

Identify the trail's needs related to structural integrity, expansion and ancillary services (restrooms, stopping points, vistas, maps, signage, etc.)

To identify improvements that may be needed along the trail.

Gain more control of the trail

Advocacy

News letters, working with partners.

Present positive images of the trail through social media.

Encouraging trail maintainers to adequately monitor and address the physical needs of the trail.

Support of owners in trail maintenance.

Help manage trail congestion and improve slow months: Build use during the off-season and coordinate bike hauling/release times to spread out use and avoid use above safe capacity.

Providing opportunities to assist in trail maintenance.

Holding the line on commercial development.

Work with managing partners to begin setting up staff and resources for future projects (capital or conservation).

Educating trail users on the importance of trip preparation, playing well with others, and giving back through trail maintenance or advocacy

More public education about VCTC's role.

Marketing the trail.

Promote and advertise the trail.

Invasive species control and education

Recreational advocate

Ensuring there's enough parking at access points (lot in Town of Abingdon needs to be enlarged).

Marketing and promotion

Using various methods, protect the trail corridor's integrity and facilitate conservation of view shed.

I'm relatively new to the USFS-GW Jeff so I think I'm still in a learning phase.

Improve trail drainage

Expand connectors to the trail, providing a more continuous user experience.

Transition member culture and growth from Club to Conservancy.

Long term planning in coordination with political subdivisions served.

Linking Creeper Trail to other regional trails

organizational capacity - develop strategic partnerships, engage new entities, and engage new volunteers.

Preserve the assets along the trail.

Maintenance of signs, shelters and benches

Provide a save and unspoiled experience for visitors to the VCT.

Fundraising

Implementing a user fee for users of the shuttle services, perhaps \$1.00 per person, to be collected by the shops providing this service (with perhaps \$.25 per fee kept by the shuttle provider). Medical emergency services costs for trail users should at least be partially covered by these fees.

As other places see the remarkable success of the trail there may be more similar trails come to fruition

Assisting TOA, TOD, and USFS in getting additional buy-in, contributions and sponsorship by those that most benefit from the trail but don't currently contribute at all or in proportion to benefit - Washington County, bike shops, etc

Partnering with property and business owners along the trail to coordinate and assist VCTC with its goals above.

Working with the different arms that sustain the trail

communication to those who use it.

Conservation

Pointing ur wildflowers that should be preserved and not mowed

Managing surface issues due to erosion.

Connecting with the community and region to increase awareness of the trail as a resource for recreation, education, and as an important part of our economy.

Parking and trail access issues.

Employ staff for trail safety, security.

Safety is a major priority making sure it is safe for those who use it.

Making sure the trail is promoted and fully utilized

Connecting the trail to communities for the purposes of healthy activity.

Employ staff for trail safety, security.

assure access points are multiple and appropriate especially in heavier used locations (e.g. trailhead in Town of Abingdon).
Parking and trail conditions in these areas should be prioritized.

Please list the THIRD PRIORITY goal you think the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy should be responsible for within the next 5-10 years.

58 responses

Community Partnerships

Work with a tree conservationist to selectively identify trees or branches that need to be removed *before* they become a problem.

Invasive species management.

Reaching out to youth organizations and encouraging the next generation's interest in continuing the efforts of assisting in managing of the Virginia Creeper Trail.

In cooperation with the various shuttle services, establish an on-trail assistance service to help USFS volunteers assist trail users encountering difficulties.

environmental impact.

Anticipate an increased use of the trail by the general public and address such issues as restricted hours, restricted number of bikers, and other measures to lessen the overcrowding that increasingly impacts trail usage.

Number 3 above

community outreach

maintenance

Might not be a priority but some dog water fountains are much needed. Families outings are cut short do to a lack of convenience for their furry companion in the summer heat.

To continue to coordinate litter cleanup days and to partner with organizations that also organize cleanups.

Informing more people about this wonderful trail and helping them get outside

Building community partnerships

Working with support groups.

Work with other state and national organizations to keep the trail strong and vibrant.

Maintain a (notice list) or extended calendar of future changes and maintenance plans and the stage/status of those plans.

View shed protection through land acquisition or owner easements.

Increase nature and local cultural signage.

Promotion and education

Look into procurement of property to extend the trail .

Organizing the creations of uniform code, regulations, strategies, etc. related to PR, branding, marketing, signs, maintenance routines, materials specifications, etc. to be used along or related to the Trail

Strengthening the trail as part of a network that connects neighborhoods to services, promoting business development and agritourism

This plan.

Improvement of the trail.

Garner more support for the trail from local municipalities.

Reinvestment in the trail, facilities, resurfacing, erosion & sediment control

Partnership marketing

Updating signage along the trail (some information signs are aged, cracked)

Adding features to the trail i.e. benches, foot bridges, etc where strategically identified.

Supplement the trail owner's maintenance with volunteer efforts

Apply for grants, advocate for staffing and funding, etc.

Improve Trail owner accountability.

Development of information to assist in attracting visitors to the trail

Trail Safety

viewshed protection - especially with the expansion with US 58 and corporate areas near Damascus and Abingdon. Maybe the VCT could adopt a specific development standard similar to zoning for residential areas and signage but with native plants? I'm thinking Hilton Head has a signage restriction that does not allow billboards, maybe the VCTC could provide funding to property owners to create a native plant boundary in new developments?

Do events along the trail.

Help staff the welcome center and trail center

Provide a visual presence for local businesses to promote themselves to visitors to the VCT.

Creation of an app for phone users

Assuring that development does not impinge upon the quality of the VCT experience.

Maintenance may become increasingly difficult

Signage consistency and amenities

Scheduling and delivering semiannual presentations to the Washington County Board of Supervisors and the Abingdon and Damascus Town Councils. Given that VCT related tourism is the primary source of revenue for all three entities, these governing bodies need to be more involved in supporting trail enhancement projects.

Safety

community awareness.

Education

Maintenance

Develop a long-range plan for the future integrity and viability of the trail.

Educate/inform about all access points/locations in attempt to distribute volume of users accross trail's length.

Providing guidelines that will allow for suitable ebikes, yet discourage or ban bikes that are too powerful or those that run in throttle mode only.

Connect with resources and organizations beyond our region to share best practices, find funding resources, and marketing.

Trying to promote the lower section of trail from Abingdon to Damascus.

Expansion of secondary trails to the VCT.

Helping other get involved in projection to make it appealing to other for the best experience for those who use it.

Partnering with businesses to for economic development on or near the trail.

Encouraging use while encouraging environmental protection.

Expansion of secondary trails to the VCT.

What do you think that the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy does well as an organization and what value does it bring to you, your organization and/or community?

59 responses

Advocacy for the VCT. The VCTC currently works with all three trail owners. It is the one organization that all three trail owners rely on to share information and resources.

forming the Conservancy has elevated the status of the organization and lends more legitimacy to them in the eyes of trail users

Tremendous asset in bringing people out in nature. I consider it a gift in my personal life .

Maintains the trail through fundraisers and volunteer groups.

The VCTC aids in maintenance and improvement of the VCT, helping make the VCT experience enjoyable and safe for trail users. Not only the personal value of having such a beautiful trail so close to walk & bike, but the enormous economic impact on Damascus, especially, and Abingdon.

The VTC has done an excellent job of addressing the previous concerns listed above, from signage (vdot) rerouting 58/91 intersection. Medical devices. The VTC is the driving force to get things done and help the trail owners.

Publicity and good will seem to be in abundance.

The benches and interpretative signs are great.

current planning efforts

no idea

They are maintaining one of our treasures. The Creeper Trail plays a crucial roll in getting visitors to visit our town and keeping our locals happy with such a beautiful/convenient place for activities. The VCTC keeps this going and with out the Creeper Trail, people will find things to do elsewhere.

I always hear about the cleanups and am glad the organization organizes these events. This is helpful to the two organizations I manage that also conduct cleanups in the region.

It does a great job with its website, informing the public, getting supplies to USFS, getting volunteers to help with trail maintenance and cleanup, and keeping a great relationship with businesses connected to the trail.

Professionalism. Trail support. Advocacy. Belief in the future of the trail. Consistency.

Advising what is needed to keep the trail up.

Keeping the trail on people’s mind and supporting its mission.

Helps membership understand the points of view of various trail stakeholders.

Partners well with trail owners and business owners and regional organizations/stakeholders.

Trail promotion

Fundraising through trail rides to support mission of VCTC

The trail is maintained pretty well. I personally use the trail often for training my high school cross country team. I also like to cycle it regularly. It has a great economic impact on the county.

Coordination

VA Creeper Trail is an amazing asset for the state in part because of the Conservancy's stewardship

Communicates well and helps facilitate communication among trail managers. VCTC serves as a vital role to help promote and improve the trail, which connect multiple jurisdictions. This contributes to the quality of life for area residents and attracts visitors to support local business.

Recruits volunteers, participates in community activities, brings tourists.

Acts as an advocate and voice for the trail. Organizes and consolidates support.

Has done a good job with existing resources

Communication, storytelling,

Not sure of VCTC's current work-- assume they help coordinate trail maintenance and marketing; Having a community-based group with local partners is great for the communities along the trail

The Conservancy is full of dedicated trail enthusiasts, and so I trust that they are constantly monitoring the trail to identify safety hazards, overuse and other important conservation issues. Personally, this means I trust that when I hop on the trail with my family, we will enjoy our experience and be safe. For my business, the trail supports a quality of life standard that plays a major role in the vitality of our region. This in turn supports my business, which relies on supporting independent businesses and non-profits.

The Conservancy has done a great job advocating for trail safety and user enjoyment. And in times past 1000's of hours of volunteer work.

I'm relatively new to the USFS-GW Jeff so I think I'm still in a learning phase.

Supplements managers fiscal resources

It provides great opportunity for people to enjoy the great outdoors. It is well maintained, safe, and enjoyable for all ages and families.

Maintains excellent relationship with Trail owners.

Single point of contact for information, maintenance and planning.

Trail maintenance

Partnership development. The VCTC works collaboratively with many local and regional entities to develop programs and initiatives,

They are very involved in the trail happenings, lots of volunteers to help in various ways, and they do a great job helping maintain this wonderful asset.

Providing a family friendly experience to all levels of athletic ability. Visitors to the VCT seek complementary experiences such as visiting a local winery.

Coordination of the three trail owners who would otherwise operate in competition or at divergent purposes

Trail maintenance, planning for long term maintenance (and responding to emergency situations such as tornado damage)

The organization has functioned very well and the Creeper Trail is very vital in attracting tourists to Abingdon and Damascus excellent partner and advocate to/for the Town of Abingdon

The VCTC's 25+ year legacy, drawn from early trail leaders and volunteers, inspires continued passion for the VCT.

Yes

Makes a great place for recreation and outdoor adventures.

The Conservancy does an amazing job of both engaging visitors and locals who use the Trail and facilitating communication among all of the stakeholders in the Trail.

The VCTC is great at overseeing the maintenance on the trail as well as a great liason between the businesses and owners of the trail.

I really don't know that much about the Conservancy.

Lisa Quigley is a great organizer and publicist. We work together well on the trail ride.

Reaches out to Abingdon community.

The Trail is a treasure that embodies much of what I'd hope is our core identity - a beautiful rural resource that brings us together as a community and lets us be know in the world. It brings in tourists, it is a great setting for education, and it is such fun recreation.

Promotes the trail through it's website.

Well regarded organization honoring the mission of advocacy for the trail. Has avoided political controversies in difficult era.

Always love partnering with other trail organizations

Maintain a respect for the Trail

Well regarded organization honoring the mission of advocacy for the trail. Has avoided political controversies in difficult era.

Don't know enough to answer

In what ways could the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy better serve the trail and its partners? How could the VCTC become a more essential partner to you, your business, or your organization?

56 responses

The VCTC already makes valuable connections between the trail owners and the organizations/businesses that use the trail as a means of livelihood. The VCTC advocates for better resources and partnerships to build a stronger economy.

Listen to experts. All maintenance is currently reactive rather than proactive. Let's change that.

IDK.

The VCTC should be a more visible organization within the community.

This is a bit redundant for me. Please see above.

They have done a good job in their efforts to bring all the owners and businesses involved to the table.

The VCTC could be more aggressive in addressing problem areas on the trail. There seems to be a quiet toleration among membership for areas that are increasingly trashed.

Become more of a force in mobilizing support for the Abingdon town government to fund trail projects which the conservancy has identified as needed. I'm not using the word "lobby" but I think you get my point.

communication to members and the community could be improved

publicizing the existence of the Conservancy- what it does , being more visible to the daily users of the trail

The VCTC has been great so far. If there's a way to help with allowing E-Bikes in the national forest side of the trail, that would be extremely helpful. Being a business that depends on tourist, we have talked to a lot of older folks with physical limitations who aren't coming to this area for vacation simply because of the rules regarding E-Bikes. E-Bikes allow them to ride with their families and use our trail where they couldn't otherwise. Its a rule that needs to be changed so the VCT is for everyone, not just those who are physically superior.

Continued focus on Trail's viewshed which has been tarnished at the trailhead by the sports complex.

Continued support for the promotion of ONE trail not three section. They are a great partner.

Working with the cleanup events could be a good way to partner with us. I am not sure if other areas of the trail could use rain gardens to improve drainage (although there may not be enough space) but if so, we could partner on such projects if funding can be obtained.

VCTC (and Lisa) does a wonderful job as far as I am concerned. I only wish they had an even bigger role (and the USFS had a smaller role) because of how well the VCTC works with everyone and genuinely cares about the trail and businesses.

Keeping the trail head office open at more times in the summer.

From the view of a frequent trail user: keep a list of critical trail maintenance needs/status constantly in front of Damascus, Abingdon and USFS.

Develop a strategic plan for long term vision.

Find ways to better advertise nearby local businesses.

Promote its mission more effectively so as to engage users of the trail in its ongoing value and presence in the region.

The VCTC could look into a couple of areas for safety ie Alvarado station.

Repositioning itself into a stronger position with the managing partners

Consider joining the Virginia Trails Alliance (free) to support trail advocacy efforts <http://www.virginiatrails.org/>, sign up to get the Greenways and Trails E-news and submit content

Assist towns through increased volunteerism at trail visitors centers.

Have a kiosk with rack cards of businesses adjacent to trail and to connector trails.

Perhaps become more visible within the community. I think many people are not aware of the good work they do.

My work at DCR is not directly related to the VCT but as a recreational within the region, and as a nearby resident, issues of carrying capacity and long-term conservation should be addressed so it is not "loved to death."

Added capacity, direct asks for next five years. What is the need?

I'd love to see the Abingdon trailhead get all the English Ivy, privet, and poison ivy removed and promote native plants. I'd keep the signage for local businesses along the trail low so that it doesn't start to look like buildboards (seeing more pop up in the Alvarado area and it takes away from the natural environment... could just keep the signs at major access points where the business is located but consolidated and not scattered along the trail).

With the lack of a full-time Abingdon tourism department, I believe the VCTC will have to take a more active role in marketing the trail to maintain the trail's profile and awareness.

I'd like to see the Conservancy facilitate conservation of viewshed properties by working with partners on things like easements, planning / zoning, education

Help advocate for staffing, funding, etc.

Improve access to meeting minutes

Possibly immediate access in emergencies.

Become a powerhouse organization to conduct its mission.

The more the conservancy is visible in the community the better. Lisa's interaction with Abingdon's EDA has been very helpful.

improve safety and officially permit use of E Bikes

maybe fundraising for trail projects and collaborating with trail owners on developing fundraising strategies? The VCTC works very closely with partners and our organization on many initiatives - programming, development projects, interpretation, grants, and partnership development

More can be done by the organization to help the forest service and the crowded end of the trail, whether it be volunteer work days, funding to help with maintenance, or supervision.

Help with volunteers at the welcome center

By providing the opportunity for businesses to promote themselves, in a tasteful way, to visitors to the VCT.

Incentivize best practices and new ideas by awarding grants

The VCT is a vital source of tourist income for the area. Any activities that help to achieve this would be important.

Overall I think the Conservancy serves the community very well

I have only praise and gratitude

Essential marketing about the VCTC and ways individuals and organizations can participate is needed. Every trail entrance/parking area should have signage that clearly explains who we are, volunteer opportunities, how to donate, and who to contact.

More updates

Make the community and businesses more aware of what they do.

It seems like the Conservancy has more responsibilities than we do agency, or the ability to make decisions about the Trail, and I think that sometimes hinders our progress.

they do a great job now

Increased visibility

It is fine already.

The Virginia Creeper Trail is the VCTC, the two towns of Abingdon & Damascus, the U.S. Forest Service, the Outfitters, The Restaurants, the tourist! When you have this many people, and organizations, each with their own agenda trying to do what they think is best for the trail things can get a little confusing, I think the VCTC could serve as a moderator for all these people.

VCTF could do a some great partnership opportunities for cross promotion. Bike the Creeper Trail and the Capital Trail in the month of October and get a shirt... something like that.

Focus on the importance of the trail in promoting healthy community

I am not familiar with the Conservancy to provide good feedback here, but I think there is limited awareness of the entity generally. Perhaps if users were more aware of mission and issues related to trail, it might increase the user's feeling of mutual goals to keep the trail clean, safe, and maintained.

How much do you interact with staff, the board, or communications from the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy over the course of a year?

	Number of Response(s)	Response Ratio
Weekly	15	24.2%
Monthly	12	19.4%
Every few months	16	25.8%
Once a year	7	11.3%
Can't remember last time I talked to or received something from them	12	19.4%
Total	62	100%

What barriers, if any, reduce your interactions with the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy? For example: lack of response from VCTC, unaware that the VCTC exists, bad past experience working with the VCTC, etc.

55 responses

The Staff and Board are always accessible and available for discussions.

none

Don't know who serves on the Conservancy.

I have no problems with my interactions with the VCTC.

COVID 19

None are

After ten years of beating a drum trying to get attention and action one tends to grow weary.

No barriers

Need to form committees of volunteers to help. Too much work for Exec. Director!

mostly unaware of existence- am familiar because of spouses involvement

No barriers as of yet.

Too many meetings in my life plus I have not felt my voice mattered much at meetings in the past

Don't interact

No real barriers. I met someone from the organization years ago at an event. I have meant to contact the organization about partnering on cleanups, but just did not get that done.

N/A

DETAILED SURVEY RESULTS

They are always involved and connected to the trail owners.

No barriers noted.

A conduit, other than actual VCTC meetings, to pass along trail needs and issues as they are recognized.

No barriers.

My initiative and need

Since pandemic, monthly meetings ceased and I have not received any updates from staff even though I am a lifetime member.

None

Distance, I work in Richmond

None

Unaware that VCTC exists

Perhaps just being too busy for more interactions.

N/A

Haven't worked with them before and don't see them when I use the trail. Since I'm local, I don't need someone to explain the trail. If there are opportunities to recruit volunteers for trail work, I don't ever see it advertised at the trailheads.

n/a

Access to news letter and minutes

Time

None

None at this time

Lack of info concerning board meetings and trail activities

none

None

Unawareness that the VCTC exists or what role it plays

none

Website out of date info

none

No barriers but I would expect a positive response

no barriers that i experience

meeting dates/time

N/A

Not enough info on where they can be contacted.

I work for the Conservancy.

None

I stopped going to meeting when I felt as if the trail from WT to Damascus was not seen as much of a priority, even though, it has many more visitors. My spouse and I have worked individually on drainage issues, cleared fallen limbs, etc. above Damascus. The USFS is short staffed and they can't be expected to take care of some of the daily issues.

Not very aware

No Barrier's exist

None

Time :-)

Personal time commitments

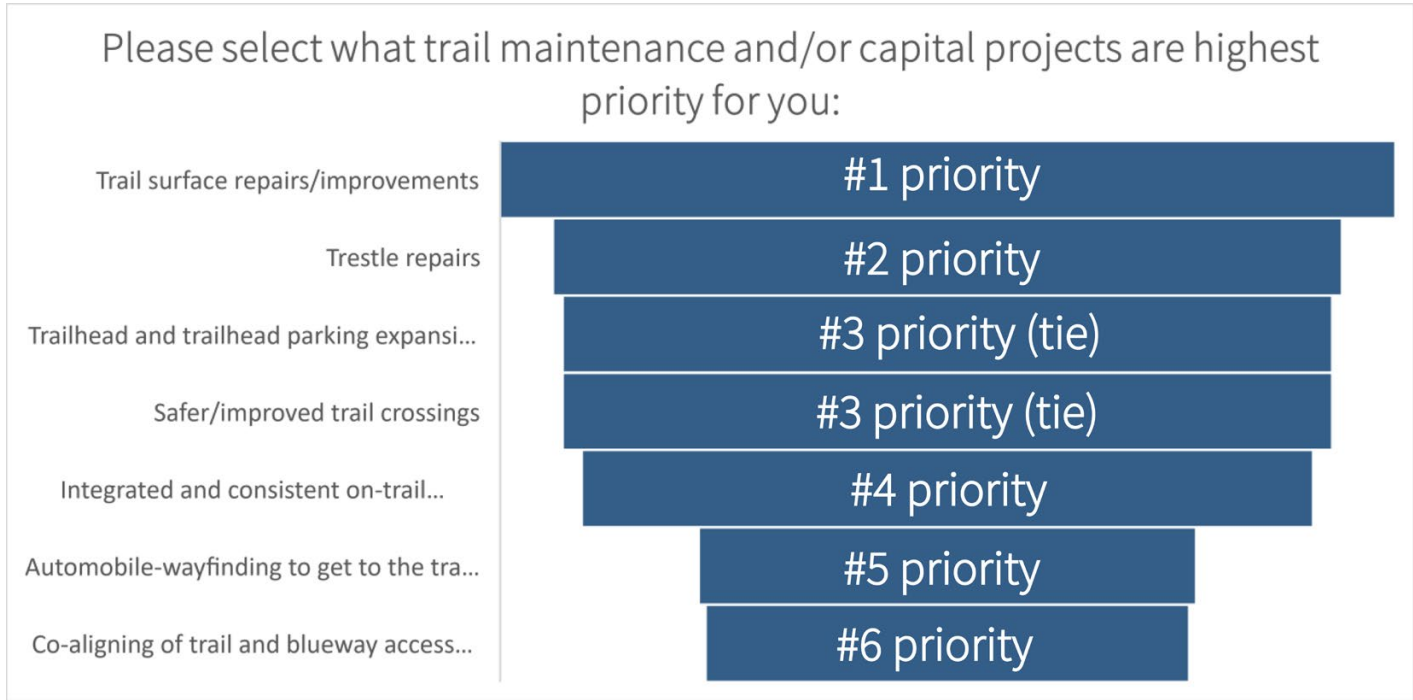
None

Generally, I don't think most citizens and users are aware of the entity and what its mission is.

Would you consider any of the following ways to support the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy (multiple responses allowed)? Note: this does not commit you to anything, but helps us understand the general interest of supporters in the future.

	Number of Response(s)	Response Ratio
As a volunteer for maintenance days	32	51.6%
As a volunteer trail ambassador or trail patrol	11	17.7%
As a volunteer using my specialized skill set (please list below as a comment in "Other")	10	16.1%
As a project leader	6	9.7%
Joining as an annual member	28	45.2%
Considering become a donor at a level higher than annual membership and/or a business sponsor	8	12.9%
Being involved in a VCTC working committee	23	37.1%
Being involved in a leadership circle	14	22.6%
Being on the board	15	24.2%
As a representative for an agency partner	16	25.8%
As an advocate	36	58.1%
I maintain the website www.vacreepertrail.us. Or used to maintain it; it is rather outdated now.	1	1.6%
The Historical Society can help tell the history of the Virginia Creeper and the trail.	1	1.6%
Partnering on projects (cleanups, maybe rain gardens)	1	1.6%
I decided to get involved more over the past few years with Mt Rogers ATC. I've felt that they were more interested in our volunteer skills.	1	1.6%
Tree planting/maintenance/removal	1	1.6%
In my role as trails coordinator, I can provide technical assistance and sometimes connect members with other trail managers who have done similar work in the past, share best practices, etc.	1	1.6%
Already involved in the majority of the list above.	1	1.6%
as a civil engineer i think i can help tackle real world issues (safety, drainage, etc.) on the trail itself	1	1.6%
I work for the Conservancy.	1	1.6%
Event Planner/Website Designer/Marketing	1	1.6%
Being a representative as a small business owner.	1	1.6%
IT/GIS	1	1.6%
Bike mechanic at various VCTC events.	1	1.6%
Total	62	100%

Please provide feedback on the Virginia Creeper Trail to know how the VCTC can best support the trail



Optional: Please feel free to expand on any of the above priorities, i.e. specific parking areas or section of trails that need improvement

22 responses

Trestle maintenance/repair is THE most important issue for the trail. They are extremely difficult and expensive to replace if anything happens to them, and the current insurance coverage is not sufficient to pay to replace a trestle.

Cleaning the restrooms.

Trail crossing at Damascus rt 58 at the town park. Big headache.

Top priority: cleaning up areas where people have trashed the right-of-way. Preventing these intrusions in the future.

See answer the first question

trestle decking; tread gravel (especially where there are rocks and grass in the trail)

safety on the trail is first priority but this is dependent on the trail surface- too many signs on parts of trail (abingdon end) that do not blend in with the natural environment Sign for parking lot at Watauga Road faces the trail not oncoming traffic- also the road from this parking lot does not make sense where the lines for the trail are painted. This is a nice parking lot but with the signs pointing in an incorrect direction it is not utilized. When leaving this parking lot and turning right onto Watauga road there is danger of hitting bikers or runners even when stopped due to the angle and the trail lines. This needs work.

I do not encourage building a bathroom at this sight due to the vagrancy that already exists in the original lot. It would have been nice if the town had bought the cabin and turned it into a Creeper Trail Info /nature center with bike rentals and first aid. I would suggest having a first aid station at Alvarado- possibly maintained by volunteers.

I didn't answer since I do not know the trail very well.

I know it's hard, but the Highway 58 crossing in Damascus (needs a plan).

Emergency contact where cellphone service is down, wifi options

The parking area at the Abingdon Trailhead is confusing and unimpressive

It's most important that the trail be managed as one trail, not sections of trails managed by different agencies.

Carrying capacity should be considered - you can't continue to expand parking areas in perpetuity. Commercial bike rental places should pay fees per customer.

Whitetop trailhead extremely congested during peak season.

Town of Abingdon trailhead needs to be enlarged; new Abingdon trailhead sign in the parking lot with improved landscaping (currently looks really tired with old railroad ties, dead plants, etc.).

US 58 crossing at Damascus Town Park - Highest Priority

Condition of trail in National Forest managed areas and between Alvarado and Damascus

Place trash cans at regular intervals

Parking at the Trailhead is at near capacity and needs improvements

consistent trail widths

I really don't know. I'm not close enough to the situation to know the needs.

I would like to see parking expanded at the Winterham crossing.

Are there other projects/needs not listed that you think are important?

23 responses

With the number of trees that come down annually as well as the number of Ash Trees dyeing from disease there is a real need for tree replacement.

No

committee for outreach, website and publicity

Manned first aid station at Alvarado, major campaign on maintaining the beauty of our area and active teaching, demonstration not pamphlets- providing this education on the trail itself to daily users

Dog water fountain at Abingdon trailhead would be essential

We are losing Ash Trees along the trail and will need to replant trees along the view shed.

Water, shade and bathrooms are always important too.

One that is not seen is the possibility of having an access to the shopping center to avoid walking on Greensprings road.

Specifically: drainage at the Chestnut Mountain Road crossing (this is mainly a VDOT issue) and just above mile marker 17.

Restrooms, trash cans, repair to trailbed.

Trail extension

Conservation projects, landscaping, encroachment issues, invasive plants, dead trees due to invasive pathogens

See above answer.

Opportunity for every user of the trail to contribute \$2 to trail sustainability. A two for the trail campaign.

There need to be more bathroom options at access points.

Marketing & public relations

Cell phone coverage along entire Trail.

possibly a co-op opportunity for signage/ marketing materials to access small businesses along the trail? Thinking the Winery, Breweries, Restaurants, ect.

Marking the trail barriers so they will be clearly visible to bike riders

The mile marker posts maybe could be expanded to 1/2 mile markers

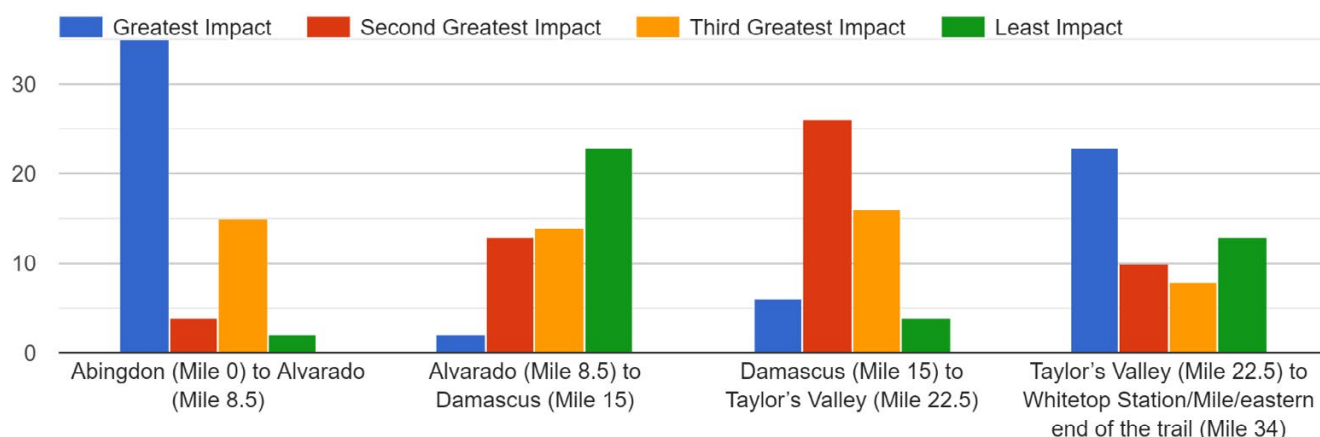
no

Visibility - what's on the trail, how do I access it, how do I use it (e-bikes? horses? dogs?), what should I expect to encounter when I step onto the trail.

History - how did the trail come about, the story of the railroad, people who lived along the route of the railroad, the lumber industry that used the railroad, etc.

I think the VCTC and towns can determine this better than me.

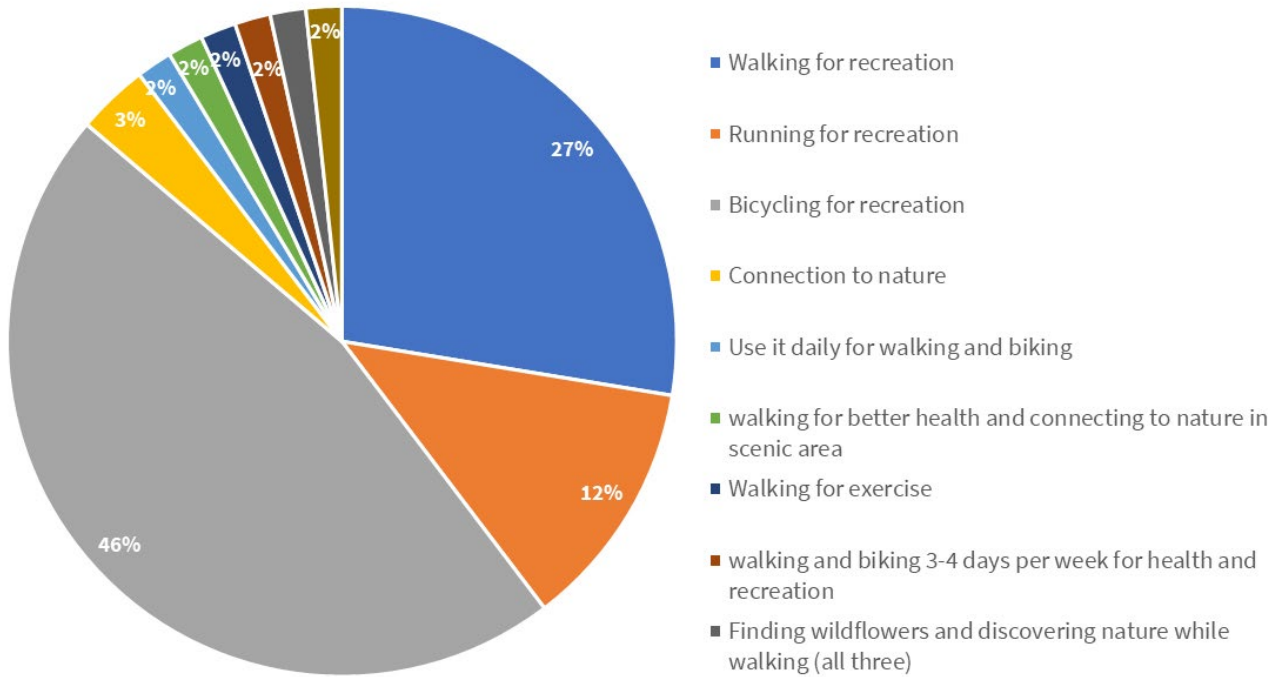
What section of the trail do you see the greatest use and user impact to?



Optional: If you are a regular Virginia Creeper Trail user, meaning you visit the Trail at least once a month, what do you primarily use the trail for?

	Number of Response(s)	Response Ratio
Walking for recreation	16	27.1%
Running for recreation	7	11.9%
Bicycling for recreation	27	45.8%
Transportation	0	0%
Connection to nature	2	3.4%
Social Interactions	0	0%
Use it daily for walking and biking	1	1.7%
walking for better health and connecting to nature in scenic area	1	1.7%
Walking for exercise	1	1.7%
walking and biking 3-4 days per week for health and recreation	1	1.7%
Finding wildflowers and discovering nature while walking (all three)	1	1.7%
All of the above and more!	1	1.7%
Total	59	100%

Optional: If you are a regular Virginia Creeper Trail user, meaning you visit the Trail at least once a month, what do you primarily use the trail for?



What do you (or if you're not a trail user, what do you think others) value the most about the Virginia Creeper Trail experience? (choose top three)

	Number of Response(s)	Response Ratio
Physical and mental health benefits	41	69.5%
Connection to nature	33	55.9%
The connection to a trail town and associated experiences	17	28.8%
Ease of use of the trail for many types of abilities	22	37.3%
Multiple trailheads for access point selection	12	20.3%
Feeling safe while using the trail (while walking, biking, running, etc.)	22	37.3%
Variety of unique views/rural landscapes and ecological areas	29	49.2%
Answering for the tourists I talk to on a daily bases.	1	1.7%
Opportunity for social interaction. Meeting a friend, family time, classes and meetups that gather on the trail.	1	1.7%
Total	59	100%

What do you think is the greatest challenge, threat, or concern you have for the Virginia Creeper Trail, short and long term?

58 responses

Trestle repairs.

the biggest threat is development encroaching on the trail and on viewsheds.

Overuse...wear and tear on the trail

Encroachment by business or residential building.

As above, long term: dilution of the VCT experience by businesses utilizing trail frontage.

Funding

"A slow and unaddressed degradation of the trail, from trail surface to trash to structures built on the trail."

To me, the greatest concern is how popular the trail is becoming and a lack of maintenance, especially on the USFS side, which could lead to more bike wrecks and make people reconsider returning.

Being at the table and considered as a equal as a trail manager.

Maintenance

Lack of town support.

Like all the very popular outdoor sites in our area: managing the people on busy trail days.

Capacity to manage long term tourism growth and trail usage.

I don't think the Abingdon town management and council understand know important the trail is to the town's economy. People from out of the area who visit because of the trail often stay in local hostelries and eat at local restaurants making a substantial economic contribution. Yet the town in one recent year only allocated about \$5000 to trial related expenditures. By contrast the Barter Theater receives annual subsidies in the 6 figures in addition to use of the town owned theater building rent free. Barter Theater is certainly important to the local tourism economy, but I question whether it's economic contribution exceeds that of the trail (Hence the need for periodic surveys to determine trail use and economic effect. A clearer perception of the trail's economic benefit is needed.)

Keeping maintenance up, given the number of different uses, and expectations of visitors

trash and not taking care of the natural environment

Just protecting the trail in general. Trestles and trail surface maintenance.

Continues to be maintained- bathrooms, trail surface, downed trees, keep hunters off trail

I don't really know, unless it would be a lack of funding or manpower for crucial maintenance issues.

Congestion and safety

Inaction by city government that delays or refunds necessary maintenance and improvement.

Over commercialization

Tressell failure, county budget support, forest service priority spending.

short- parking; long- protecting the natural environment along the trail as more and more people visit **the trail**

Careless development of surrounding areas and trail encroachments

Maintaining volunteer support

Another public health crisis.

The greatest challenge is maintaining and conserving the trail for the future

Lack of quantifying the tremendous economic impact the trail has on our region. This could lead to a general undervaluing of the trail for local municipalities and other stake-holders. Leading to the trail falling into disrepair or being damaged/ diminished by competing interests.

Carrying capacity and development of trail corridor

While there are multiple trail management agencies, i think the agencies need to work together for cooperative management.

Overuse

funding

Trestle repair/replacement and transition grade erosion at trestle ends. Impacts from zoning, viewshed, and encroachment.

Over use. Need to spread out trail users by improved access points. Safety

Competition from other trails

financial support

Overuse without proper maintenance.

Fire

Maintenance of trestles which is costly and some areas need more gravel

trestles

The volume of trail users is challenging the trail infrastructure and inadequate support services. Serious partners (i.e., local governments, committed and able volunteers) are needed now more than ever.

As more people become aware of the trail its an ongoing challenge to keep everyone safe and with trail maintenance.

Too many folks using it and not enough time set apart for maintenance and repairs.

I think it's important for local government, business, and organizations to understand the impact that the Trail has on our region because without that support the Conservancy can only do so much. I think there's a tension between catering to tourism, which is essential to our local economy, and preserving the Trail in the long term for people who live here.

The USFS lack of understanding of just how important and integral the trail is to the community of Damascus. (i.e. the time they closed the trail due to a hurricane that brought rain to 1.5 to 2 hours east of the trail and we didn't see any rain. I lost 10's of thousands of dollars in those few days and the town lost considerably more)

Overuse

Too many bikers on weekends

Overuse without proper maintenance.

It might be good to manage the impact of development near the trail corridor.

Short term would be trail maintenance, long term would be efforts to get cell coverage on upper end of trail.

Getting other involved

Overuse, lack of maintenance funding

Encroachment of commercial development

Erosion, trestle upkeep, overcrowding

Overcrowding and limited cell phone service

The trail has become an asset for the citizens that live here and the tourism industry. The maintenance both short and long term is key to it's success.

I want to make sure the Virginia Creeper Trail is around for generations to come. So, identifying funding and cultivating gift-giving for preservation and conservation of the trail.

What do you think is the greatest opportunity for the Virginia Creeper Trail, short and long term?

53 responses

Sustainability for the future.

the trail is an economic engine in and of itself, fueling many local businesses...we need to make sure elected officials understand this

Publicity of it's priorities/projects

More public events, festivals focusing on the Virginia Creeper Trail.

"Short term: continue to assist with trail maintenance and the VCT experience.
Long term: help align Abingdon, Damascus and the USFS guidelines to maintain the sustainability of the VCT and expand the safety network/communications along the VCT. "

The greatest opportunity is that people are looking for ways to get outside and this trail is absolutely beautiful.

Promotion of the trail. Sustainability and community partnerships.

It makes Abingdon glow in the minds of visitors to it! Many people know of our town by the Creeper Trail. It is the gem of Abingdon and should always be treated in that way as it provides visitors and business opportunities to Abingdon.

My personal suggestion: pave the trail (approximately) between mile marker 14 & 17. This would make this section a year-round asset to the Damascus community.

Provide healthful outdoor recreation for families.

See above answer

Bring in tourists; maintaining natural vegetation along the trail

conservation of our natural environment both on the trail and in our community , education of keeping our planet clean and sustainable by starting with the trail

The VCT is key for keeping our area a destination for tourists. Keep the trail going, keep the tourists coming, keep out local businesses thriving.

Promoting the trail for visitors to encourage more tourists to visit this area.

Help Washington County's economy re-emerge from the pandemic, build the economy by supporting trail, theater, restaurant, lodging packages

Promoting educational components focused on conservation, environmental care and wellness for all creatures.

Helping to develop other trails in the area using VCTC experience.

It's incredible userbase and notoriety, dedicated local users

short- Need more events on the trail (biking, running, etc.); long- having access to this beautiful asset is good for any community so ensuring that it continues to be open and accessible to people

Be the voice for the trail and trail users when working with partners

More advocacy at state level is raising awareness of need for dedicated maintenance funding

Renewed interest in outdoor activities as a result of COVID-19.

Coordinated efforts to utilize the trail sections in balance for various different uses at different times to get more use with less impact on particular areas

There has been a National shift toward outdoor recreation. The trail has the opportunity to become (or should I say, continue to become)a national magnate for our region if properly cared for.

environmental education

Extend trail into NC to reduce crowding

Tourism

Become the dominate outdoor recreation location.

Connect with other trails in the area and develop new trails

Enhance tourism in the surrounding subdivisions. The Bristol casino will bring more tourists to the area and some may want to use the trail.

local support - turning users into maintainers, volunteers, and donors

Short Term: Provide more information to VCT to experience more of what the community offers. Long term: Connect to the New River Trail State Park

Encouraging use of the trail between Damascus and Abingdon. Seems that most visitors use the shuttle from Damascus without experiencing the beauty of the trip towards Abingdon/ Alvarado

The trail is a tremendous tourist draw for the area. Damascus drastically depends on it

trail success and use is real, so need to find ways to accommodate crowds while maintaining positive experience

Enhancing support services (see goals above) in order for the VCT to provide first class experiences for residences and tourists . With competing trails across the region, state, and country, the VCT must "ramp up" its offerings for all users.

Having the natural beauty and all of the assets that have evolved since making the railroad a scenic trail.

The great outdoors-acknowledging it.

Short term, folks are wanting to get outside and use the Trail and visit our region. I think the same is true long term -- ecotourism is increasingly popular, and social media seems to have attracted more tourists from a larger area to our region. I think it's great for both our short and long term goals that we're making connections with a greater variety of local organizations, like Future Black Leaders in Bristol, and thinking outside of the box about who we collaborate with.

if the trail is maintained and well managed it will help to bring jobs, businesses, and visitors to the area.

Primary tourism draw for the area.

Short term: the post-covid surge in travel and outdoor recreation; Longer term: further integrating the Trail as an essential part of our community's "branding" and identity.

short term would be a festival of some sort to raise money for the VCTC to help with maintaining the trail, long term would be extending the trail into NC

The most significant opportunity for VCT is to provide safety for those using the trail while maintaining its prestigious appearance for others to appreciate and continue use.

For us, it could be partnership.

Explore revenue /conservation fees from shuttle users.

Community engagement beyond tourism

Keep the gem polished....trail maintenance, erosion mitigation

It brings tourism to SW Virginia

To continue to improve and to be the best hiking/biking trail in the US.

Teaching the public the importance of conservation by providing them access to the outdoors in a safe and fun way

What do you think are the top priorities for the role of the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy’s in the near, medium, and long term future?

The Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy (VCTC) is considering NEAR TO MEDIUM TERM OPTIONS for how it might support the trail in the future. What do you think should be its top priorities?

	Number of Response(s)
Grant application writing and administration:	
Critically Important	28
Important	27
Not Important	0
This is not something VCTC should do	1
Assist in fundraising for smaller capital projects (less than \$10,000):	
Critically Important	24
Important	31
Not Important	1
This is not something VCTC should do	0
Assist in fundraising for larger capital projects (more than \$10,000):	
Critically Important	23
Important	29
Not Important	2
This is not something VCTC should do	1
Assist in fundraising for general maintenance costs:	
Critically Important	24
Important	19
Not Important	6
This is not something VCTC should do	8
Measure positive impacts to the trail (economic, user numbers, health, etc):	
Critically Important	23
Important	30
Not Important	2
This is not something VCTC should do	1
Work with conservation partners to help protect lands around the trail that are being encroached upon by incompatible land uses:	
Critically Important	35
Important	18
Not Important	4
This is not something VCTC should do	2
Become a coordinator for a collaborative and cohesive wayfinding signage system throughout the trail:	
Critically Important	12
Important	31

Not Important	11
This is not something VCTC should do	3
Become a coordinator for trail-wide management data (GIS, etc.):	
Critically Important	9
Important	31
Not Important	10
This is not something VCTC should do	4
Strengthen relationships with trail communities and businesses:	
Critically Important	31
Important	25
Not Important	1
This is not something VCTC should do	0
Work with emergency responders to strengthen strategies on coordinated emergency response:	
Critically Important	17
Important	30
Not Important	6
This is not something VCTC should do	4
Become a centralized organizer/recordkeeper of trail conditions and needed repairs:	
Critically Important	23
Important	24
Not Important	6
This is not something VCTC should do	3
Work with emergency responders to strengthen strategies on coordinated emergency response:	
Critically Important	29
Important	24
Not Important	2
This is not something VCTC should do	0

Are there other near to medium term ways for the VCTC to support the trail not included above?

15 responses

Trail surface maintenance.

No

Maintain a strong organization - organize committees of volunteers

Continue to provide funds/volunteer support for short-term needs (trail surface materials) during owner short-falls.

extend trail into NC

No

Strengthen ties to state advocacy groups for more support from General Assembly

Secure donation boxes at trailheads -similar to Tsali

Maybe this is already developed but it would be good to have guidelines/protocol for who can post a sign along the trail, how big it is, where it's posted, etc.

No

Possibly coordinate with the towns of Abingdon and Damascus as well as Washington County in placing ads in publications such as Southern Living

Must be advocates at least semi annually with governing boards/counsels

Not close enough to the management of the trail to intelligently answer this.

I don't know your organization well, but strengthen board of directors and figure out staff capacity and needs.

The Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy is considering MEDIUM TO LONG TERM OPTIONS for how it might support the trail in the future. What do you think should be its top priority?

	Number of Response(s)
Become a land trust/conservation organization and help protect the larger trail landscape from encroachments and incompatible trail uses:	
Critically Important	32
Important	21
Not Important	4
This is not something VCTC should do	0
Become a stronger and more active “on the ground” trail management partner:	
Critically Important	17
Important	36
Not Important	6
This is not something VCTC should do	1
Take a lead role in publicly promoting the trail and providing the public with information and education about trail:	
Critically Important	33
Important	18
Not Important	3
This is not something VCTC should do	1
Become a “voice” for the trail and advocate for more funding from federal, state, and local governments, foundations, and corporations:	
Critically Important	46
Important	10
Not Important	0
This is not something VCTC should do	1
Assist in fundraising larger capital projects:	
Critically Important	24
Important	24
Not Important	4
This is not something VCTC should do	3

Are there other medium to long term ways for the VCTC to support the trail not included above?

7 responses

Recruit volunteers and trail supporters

No

No

Implement commercial fee structure for bike rental and shuttle businesses. They are profiting from under-funded public-infrastructure.

No

It seems like many of the projects listed are projects on the VCTC radar, maybe grow internal capacity so Lisa and her board have more support?

As I mentioned above the coordination of all 3 government entities

Are there any concerns you have about any of the proposed roles the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy is considering? If yes, please explain....

13 responses

No

No

Staffing!

No. Good list

No concerns. Thanks for all you do! So many people come here to ride the VCT and go home with wonderful memories thanks to people doing things behind the scenes.

I am proud of this organization and the work that is being done. Keep up the good work.

Regarding fundraising, The Town of Abingdon, Washington County, and USFS should pay their fair share as should commercial entities that profit from the trail.

Capacity and funding

Organizational strength through delegation, commitment, and diversity.

No

no

No I think the very nature of this survey indicates the desire to get the public involved

Too many local restaurants, shops, etc. are closed on Sundays and Mondays in Abingdon and Washington County. During the spring, summer, and fall seasons weekend tourists are frustrated by these closures. VCTC and governing bodies should provide visitors with available/recommended options either on the VCT website and/or signage at trail exits.

WHAT WE HEARD

TRAIL MANAGERS FOCUS GROUP

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE TRAIL & THE TRAIL'S FUTURE

WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE GREATEST CHALLENGE, THREAT, OR CONCERN YOU HAVE ABOUT THE VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL?

Forest Service: Trestles have been prioritized, engineering inspections for all trestles. Doing the work is very challenging. Leveraging Great American Outdoors Act (5 year window).

- » NO monies budgeted towards the Trail management or saved in an account.
- » USFS doesn't have a 5-year plan for trail management.
- » Staff shortages make it difficult to work with VCTC from a capacity standpoint.
- » Usually, users are telling USFS instead of being proactive.
- » Volunteers with bike patrol respond to emergencies, but Chris the LEO is required to be on scene but takes an hour or two.
- » Communication is highly important to respond to folks if there is an issue.
- » Premier user experience-make sure this is a premier experience.
- » Have a managerial presence but have front country representatives as a volunteer cadre.
- » Have a trail manager that could help coordinate everything across agencies.
- » It would be great to see a trail ranger every few miles. Need capacity for: patrol, managing visitor interactions, inspections, funding mechanism, and staff time to manage engineering.
- » Volunteer program coordinator will help build volunteers, will be ramping up for this. Important that the public USFS sees more of the presence.
- » Public safety and coordination are a huge deal.
- » USFS may consider a fee? A GS-5 and 4 seasonal who could work on the trail.

Abingdon: John Dew - the condition of the trestles; we've had two studies over the last 20 years that have detailed the work that needs to be done of the trestles. We have a consultant working on Trestle 4, but the work is needed everywhere and having the funding for the maintenance is a big challenge.

Funding for resources and long term maintenance are the biggest challenge.

Trestle repairs are the #1 priority.

What we're doing now is the stuff we have been talking about doing for the last 25 years. The change of the VCTC from a club into an organization is a great positive and necessary step. It's been 20 years since the 2001 study on the condition of the trestles, and there is a lot of work described in this study that still needs to be done. Use of the Trail is continually increasing and that's very visible from our perspective. These steps are overdue, but it is very important that they still happen now.

WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE GREATEST CHALLENGE, THREAT, OR CONCERN YOU HAVE ABOUT THE VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL?

Forest Service: Engineering reports should be shared between all partners so the other half of the trail managers understand what the USFS is going through. A long-term maintenance plan should be initiated. Maintenance of relationships of all entities involved should be a #1 priority for this cohesion. Mount Rogers National Recreation Area (MRNRA) has been working to improve relationships.

WHAT ARE THE MAINTENANCE NEEDS YOU HAVE?

Forest Service: Drainage really needs to be fixed across the trail; the culverts are not getting maintenance. Standing water pools on the uphill side of the trail in many areas. This may not be at the top of the list but it is still a need. Some of the wing walls of the trestles are coming off and creating issues.

Drainage on the trails should be a priority maintenance issue. The culverts are sitting in the bottom of the drains that need maintenance, they are not flowing free. Culvert maintenance is not the very top priority, but it should be discussed.

Damascus: Deferred maintenance is something that needs to occur, but also encroachments need to be prioritized and addressed.

Abingdon: Getting consistent ROW widths across the entirety of the Trail is important. Also parking is currently inconsistent at the trailhead parking areas.

Sanitation and trash cleanup is not a major issue on the trail right now, and it seems to be managed efficiently.

EMERGENCY RESPONSE QUESTION: TELL US YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF COORDINATED EMERGENCY RESPONSE AND HOW IT WORKS ON THE TRAIL. WHAT THINGS WORK WELL AND ARE THERE NEEDS OR CHALLENGES TRAIL WIDE? HOW MIGHT VCTC BE ABLE TO HELP WITH ANY NEEDS?

Forest Service: Volunteer groups, Grayson County Whitetop area gets involved there: community of Rugby. Sheriffs in local counties respond. There needs to be a coordinated response planned for a whole trail (not just for segments), but nothing like this has been developed yet for the whole Trail. COMMUNICATION is an issue; broadband is going in but doesn't improve cellular service. This problem needs to be resolved. It will need to be a coordinated effort. There are only a few spots that are covered with receivers.

Abingdon: EMS services have a pretty good hold on their access to the Trail. They can get into the trail through a universal key that works on all of the bollards.

If any emergency response needs to use the trestles, this creates a risk in their current state since they cannot safely handle emergency vehicles traveling over them.

Damascus: Emergency services are pretty well coordinated.

TRAIL LANDSCAPE PROTECTION QUESTIONS: ARE THERE PARTS OF THE TRAIL LANDSCAPE THAT YOU FEEL ARE THREATENED FROM A DEVELOPMENT OR NATURAL RESOURCE PERSPECTIVE? IF SO, WHERE ARE THEY AND WHAT ARE THE THREATS? DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION HAVE PLANS OR INTEREST IN ACTIVELY ADDRESSING THESE THREATS?

Abingdon: I know there are 3 properties/farms that are up for sale and they are currently being sold to become subdivisions - between Abingdon and Alvarado.

Damascus: The section of trail on the Damascus side (towards USFS land) is less at threat from development. We do have some industrial sites that may be redevelopment areas which may become a threat depending on who develops them.

TRAIL IMPACTS AND MANAGEMENT: DO YOU FEEL THE TRAIL IS BEING ADVERSELY IMPACTED BY USE OR EXCEEDING ITS CAPACITY AND WHAT WAYS DO YOU SEE THAT CAN BE ADDRESSED OR MITIGATED? WHAT IF ANY ROLE DO YOU SEE THAT VCTC COULD PROVIDE TO HELP WITH THIS?

Forest Service: E-bike traffic is so heavy you won't see the trails anymore. Lisa: a lot of wear on the Trail. 30% increase in 2019. Don't have a good handle on usage numbers. DCR has trail counters they can use. E-bikes are going to be a big demand. Special use events. No trail limits except on USFS.

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING ROLES DO YOU THINK ARE MOST IMPORTANT FOR VCTC AS IT RELATES TO THE TRAIL?

- » **Become a land trust and help protect the larger trail landscape from encroachments and incompatible trail uses**
- » **Become a stronger and more active “on the ground” trail management partner**
- » **Take a lead role in promoting the trail and providing the public with information and education about trail**
- » **Become a “voice” for the trail and advocate for more funding from federal, state, and local governments, foundations, and corporations**
- » **Assist in fundraising larger capital projects**

Damascus: All of the above; but it is a tough answer. It should be a coordinator and be an umbrella and work in that manner, particularly because the other managing partners cannot function that way. Bureaucracy gets in the way, whereas that doesn't have to be a case for the VCTC.

Abingdon: I agree with that response, but see fundraising as an important role because VCTC may have more opportunities than the government partners.

Now that they are a conservancy they have a much more defined presence. The org can be there to help coordinate between partners and between landowners. This is a very important role to serve.

WE'VE HEARD THAT THE FOLLOWING ITEMS ARE PRIORITY FOR CAPITAL/DEFERRED MAINTENANCE. WHAT ELSE WOULD YOU LIST AT THE TOP?

SURVEY RESPONSE: Overall survey response, in priority include:

- » Bridge repair high priority
- » Trail surface repairs
- » Safer improved crossings
- » Trailhead/trailhead parking improvements
- » Integrated wayfinding
- » Co-aligning with blueway access

Trestle repairs are #1.

Abingdon: Surfaces are important, and intersections/crossings between roads are an important safety concern. We have worked with VDOT for many years but there is a lot to do. Trestles repairs are #1 for safety purposes.

Damascus: Retreading, coordinating trail process and signage is a long-term priority and may not need to happen as soon.

WHAT WE HEARD

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE VCTC AND ITS FUTURE

PLEASE RANK THE TOP GOALS OF THE VCTC YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE THEM ACHIEVE IN THE FUTURE.

SURVEY RESPONSE: Trail managers response includes:

- » Bridge repair high priority
- » Maintenance and trail sustainability
- » Assist trail managers in maintenance
- » Liason for management
- » Marketing and events
- » Fundraising

Forest Service: Have no better partner on the MRNRA than VCTC. They could enact the fee structure, some sort of fee managed by VCTC. Consistent signage is needed. If VCTC was keeper of dollars, if it could apply to lands it would help with a trail-wide strategy. Fees could be collected by USFS. No formal agreement, but it will help. Would like to see a maintenance and operations annual plan and what (how much funding) is needed in its entirety. What does that cost look like for a year? All partners need to have something that they collectively agree on. USFS has been overwhelmed by COVID so there have been a lot of competing resources. Plan should identify future needs (i.e. fees, etc).

Abingdon: Long-term sustainability of the trail should be the #1 responsibility of VCTC.

Us, as municipalities, can easily get distracted with our other important work and therefore cant always focus on the trail. The VCTC should have the long term role of making sure we don't lose our focus on the trail.

Prioritizing the protections/conservation of the trail. They can speak for all of our interests and act in ways we can't when our hands are tied politically and by bureaucracy. They are in a position where they can actually focus on the trail.

WHAT BARRIERS, IF ANY, REDUCE YOUR INTERACTIONS WITH VCTC?

Forest Service: We are not entirely certain that we know what a trail wide organization really looks like. We would like to see it defined as what it will really take. Really understand the trail holistically and entirely - annual maintenance and operations,

we would like to see what that will really take from a funding perspective.

Historically it has been looked at as one trail, and the towns have adopted some of the management procedures that we use at the USFS. We need a long-term plan that we can all live with and collaborate under. It needs to identify future needs. We need something that we share with our folks at the USFS, this way we will have a much stronger argument on our side to get support and be given the resources we need to do our jobs.

Do you think it's important to have different MOAs to better define the roles of the managing partners, including the municipalities?

Abingdon: I think it is very important to write down and define our roles because in the absence of that we can lose track of our goals.

I agree. Having a defined set of responsibilities and designation of structure will be very important, that way problems will not just be pushed to someone else.

Damascus: Also there is duplication of efforts happening now which can be minimized if the roles are more clearly defined.

Having the Conservancy take a bigger role will be huge, and having defined roles as well.

TOURISM/BUSINESS FOCUS GROUP

VCTC QUESTIONS

IN YOUR OWN WORDS, WHO IS THE VCTC AND WHAT PURPOSE DO THEY SERVE?

Businesses: VCTC fills a lot of gaps, is one of the biggest assets for the trail to keep folks up-to-date. If money is given to VCTC they know it stays locally. VCTC (Lisa) can be sent a text if there is maintenance issue and they are quick to respond, otherwise it takes a lot longer. USFS takes a day or two. Lots of volunteers take maintenance on themselves. Take out the bureaucracy or hard to reach people. Wish VCTC had more control.

Lean on for rural communities to get started in outdoor rec arena, people always looking at creeper and towns as example and best practice

Damascus: Not sure about who, but the why is maintenance, upkeep, history, promotion of purpose and function

VA Tourism Corp: The group of people who use trail, care about trail, preserve trail and bring together groups to take care of it, fundraising

Abingdon: Liaison to the owners of the trail, the towns, the shops, and outfitters all together, The glue for all the orgs

Guardians of the trail, the advocate, public relations, rules of the trail

WHAT DO YOU THINK THAT THE VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL CONSERVANCY DOES WELL AS AN ORGANIZATION AND WHAT VALUE DOES IT BRING TO YOU OR YOUR ORGANIZATION, BUSINESS, OR AGENCY?

VA Tourism Corp: Lisa has done a great job with state office to keep us up to date, ID issues and how the state can help

Abingdon: Assessing what the trail needs, upgrades, repairs, clean up days, good job of assessing all of the needs, working with volunteers, etc

I've worked with them on events, never met a group of more dedicated volunteers, had to turn away volunteers, great job managing that, haven't seen that in any other group

Friends of SWVA: Keeping trail maintenance up, I'm on trail 6-7 days a week, trash is picked up. Marketing the trail is good too. Most people I talk to have heard about the trail

HOW COULD VCTC BECOME A MORE ESSENTIAL PARTNER TO YOUR BUSINESS OR ORG?

Businesses: Would be great for more vending, foodtrucks, etc. along the trail for people to spend money and local econ development.

Abingdon: Manage more of the events along the trail for the towns, keeping up with races and runs, VCTC could facilitate more of the events for the communities. VCTC could be central point of contact

Expand offerings of the trail experiences along the trail like mountain biking and pump tracks

VCTC could use more capacity, not just grants for the trail but funding for staff. Could get buy in from all the communities to support more capacity

One thing that is concerning is that the USFS isn't issuing any new permits

Damascus: If more of the businesses knew more about the trail and VCTC it could help bring more resources

IF YOU HAD TO CHOOSE, WHAT WOULD BE ONE THING THAT THE VCTC COULD DO THAT WOULD HELP BETTER SUPPORT YOUR BUSINESS OR AGENCY?

Businesses: Happy with VCTC, having a centralised liaison, is very, very important. Michael does advisory board meetings and texts Lisa a lot. Lisa is quick to respond.

Damascus: Just started a local store, we need more information about the trail, maps, details, route planning, shuttle bus info, etc. some of that exists today but it isn't easy

VA Tourism Corp: Connecting businesses with the trail. We've spent a year and half on state trails plan and regional plan (we have research) Outdoor rec is the biggest priority. 90% of stakeholders said that trail development was top priority, especially connecting the towns that the trails go through

Abingdon: I'll echo prior comments, comprehensive brand strategy that isn't dependent on one town and connects them all together (need capacity & need more support)

HOW MUCH DO YOU INTERACT WITH STAFF, THE BOARD, OR COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL CONSERVANCY OVER THE COURSE OF A YEAR? WHAT DO YOUR INTERACTIONS TYPICALLY REVOLVE AROUND?

Businesses: I talk to her monthly, pitching ideas, how we work together, etc.

Abingdon: We interact almost daily, we see her often (abingdon). COVID definitely enhanced that. Very operational focused

VA Tourism Corp: We talk a few times a year and one in-person meeting (state office)

Damascus: Not as much as I'd like to. Lisa came to a town council meeting, was super informative would like to see more. Met once or twice over the past few months. Not getting regular communications.

Volunteers: I used to be more involved as a Town of Abingdon employee but I'm a just a volunteer and friend now. Once a month

Not much communication as a volunteer unless there is a need. Would be great to hear more about what the group is doing, need more regular updates. I know where to get info but regular person may not know

Conservancy needs a comprehensive brand voice.

Friends of SWVA: I'm working with them more now that we are in this process (SWVA). The rest of the team communicated monthly

WHAT WE HEARD

WHAT IS YOUR VIEW OF THE PERFORMANCE OF THE VCTC AND THEIR LEADERSHIP? HOW ARE THEY VIEWED REGIONALLY FROM YOUR PERSPECTIVE AND EXPERIENCE?

Businesses: Pre-COVID there was some members they knew. Michael knows most people, but Lisa is always main contact.

You have this iconic trail that everyone wants to see but you never hear about them leadership

Abingdon: We don't know much about the board, who is on it, etc but we know they are good volunteers

Damascus: We don't hear much about the leadership in Damascus. Would be nice to know the public is able to attend meetings, learn, provide feedback

Friends of SWVA: I've never heard any negative feedback about leadership. No news is good news.

Volunteers: I've been to a board meeting. They are full of people who aren't on the board (public meetings) I'm not sure how widely known that is.

Lisa is the face of the VCTC, only feedback is that she is so busy.

MEASURING IMPACT OF THE TRAIL: VCTC WOULD NEED TO COLLECT USER DATA THROUGH TRAIL INTERCEPT SURVEYS, TRAIL COUNTS, AND COLLECTING TAX AND SALES DATA. DO YOU HAVE ANY THOUGHTS OR CONCERNS ABOUT THIS?

Businesses: Data for 20 years for Sun Dog, 8 years from Yetti Trail Runners. USFS will have the numbers. Consider doing an anonymous survey.

TRAIL QUESTIONS

WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE GREATEST CHALLENGE, THREAT, OR CONCERN YOU HAVE ABOUT THE VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL?

Businesses: USFS's lack of attention to the trail has made a challenge, folks can't don't really participate in helping with this. Seems like a big step/difficult to coordinate. Basic stuff like repairing surface. Can't control dollars locally for permitting fees. Outfitters are helping with the Conservancy as they are really picking up the slack. Would like more control of dollars and make sure they stay locally. Overcrowding is some times an issue. Maintenance is the biggest. Fixing entrances and

exits to the bridge is a safety issue. Vineyards is half mile off of trail, no bike lanes. Working to get a bike lane/better access to businesses. Signage is an issue for how to get to the winery and navigating how to get signage.

Opportunity to widen the trail in key areas. Its multi-use so we need to make room for everyone, if there is space

Wayfinding and signage - add emergency/evac signage. Mile markers are not enough, need waypoints.

Damascus: All about communication, new part of trail in Damascus doesn't have any signage, communication, etc. No one knows where to go, what is getting built. I hear all the negative complaining about parking spots being used for the Creeper Trail.

Abingdon: Maintenance! Our new finance dir is interested in including our section of maintenance in operating budget

Every runner knows where there is water and restrooms. We need to improve access (two bathrooms close, random porta potty) Put that on the map so people can plan out breaks. Map may exist but it doesn't ID key amenities

Drama around communities and businesses and who is responsible for marketing, PR, etc. competing interests.

We are having an issue with the USFS section restrooms. Its a problem we are all dealing

Friends of SWVA: I'll echo the restroom issue. Being a runner it's an issue towards White Top area. Even if there is one, it is closed.

WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE GREATEST OPPORTUNITY FOR THE TRAIL?

Businesses: Jason created an interactive map, thought it would be really useful to have. An app or something would be really helpful. Nearest place for help. Access, history, and other things could be included. Average age is getting younger and this would work for a lot of folks. Trail business, adjacent business and hours. Ways to book lodging. Sell advertising to businesses. Callahan crossing a big problem. Signage is a huge opportunity. Have a main point of contact is important--a tourism contact, or event coordinator would be helpful. Who are the best resources to direct to and better collaboration. Damascus has a business group, but not all participate. Abingdon is good at marketing but it feels a little competitive between them and Damascus. Making sure entrances are inviting and signage gets you there. Package visits. The more the trail is enhanced, the more folks will visit

Damascus: bike repair stations (will be one in Damascus). Bike retailers provide tool kit to people they drop off

Abingdon: Parking and Maintenance due to use and the improve the trestles, permanent bathroom

Gateway will be a huge asset and be the attention we need

Parking isn't easy, its random and frustrating

WHAT ARE THE TOP NEEDS FOR THE TRAIL, MAYBE CONSIDERED IN ORDER OF IMPORTANCE? (MAINTENANCE, CAPITAL PROJECTS, MANAGEMENT ISSUES, ETC) THINK ABOUT FROM THE LENS OF THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE.

Businesses: Safe crossing-especially a cross walk in Damascus. Transition on Trestles a huge priority to fix. Top third of the trail near Callohaun's Crossing is where everyone gets lost. VDOT is working on a bridge over the top of the trail (near Whitetop?) Events parking is a problem, cars get towed. Need for more parking. Abingdon and Whitetop Trailheads are full. Park parking in Damascus gets full. Watagua isn't very big. Straight Branch is also often full. Winery is starting to see ebikes and others parking and shuttling. More ebikes are being noticed on the trail. Outfitters may be wanting to push towns and USFS on ebike policy.

TRAIL IMPACTS AND MANAGEMENT: DO YOU FEEL THE TRAIL IS BEING ADVERSELY IMPACTED BY USE OR EXCEEDING ITS CAPACITY AND WHAT WAYS DO YOU SEE THAT CAN BE ADDRESSED OR MITIGATED? WHAT IF ANY ROLE DO YOU SEE THAT VCTC COULD PROVIDE TO HELP WITH THIS?

Packed parking lots, weekends especially

Going uphill isn't a good idea

Area we serve is a huge market, expanded beyond driving

CONSERVATION FOCUS GROUP

CONSERVATION PRIORITIES DISCUSSION

WHAT ARE THE KEY TRAIL LANDSCAPE EXPERIENCES AND VALUES TO CONSERVE?

As of now, some view the Trail as 3 separate trails and not as a single trail. This is because of the different trail experiences provided by different sections such as the land from Whitetop through the U.S. Forest Service land, Damascus to Alvarado, and Alvarado to Abingdon.

Whitetop to Damascus: this area is fairly unique with its water and trestles and farmland that could be developed/at risk of development

Zoning should be investigated in this area

MRNRA can help to start conversations with landowners.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) can be used for purchase of farmland

The land in the viewsheds that are available for purchase on the real estate market

It will be important to find a way to track the real estate market so that VCTC can proceed with the purchase of land that is available, once a funding mechanism is established.

Smith Farm

Land owned by the White family

Potential Priority: Ironhorse campground to Mile Marker 15

Generating station nearby – could there be incentives given to landowners so that their land is not developed?

Alvarado to Damascus

This is “no mans’ land”

Beautification may be needed in brownfield areas in this corridor

The area of where the trail passes through the Great Knobs (around Mile Marker 2 & 3)

The natural resources in this area are worth conserving

Main Viewsheds (from survey and focus group):

White Top Station

Green Cove Station

Taylor's Valley

Smith Farm

The Great Knobs area (MM 2-3)

WHAT ARE SOME POTENTIAL CONSERVATION TOOLS THAT CAN BE USED TO CONSERVE PRIORITY LANDS?

Conservation easements

Holston River Soil & Water Conservation District (HRSWCD) (<https://holstonriverswcd.weebly.com/>)

Natural Heritage data

Local Natural Heritage priority is given to aquatic resources along the South Holston River are probably the most worth conserving from a Natural Heritage perspective. Natural

WHAT WE HEARD

Heritage conservation priorities and what land is available from a real estate perspective doesn't always match up with the timing

Virginia Land Conservation Foundation (VLCF) – land acquisition fund that may be useful for this

- » \$1,500,000 for farmland preservation
- » \$1,500,000 for forestland preservation
- » \$1,500,000 for historic preservation
- » \$1,500,000 for natural area protection
- » **\$1,500,000 for open spaces and parks** (may be most applicable for this purpose)
- » Brownfield Acquisition fund - may be useful for trail beautification

National Park Service (NPS) Visual Resource Inventory (VRI)

- » Some of this methodology can be used to identify and analyze viewsheds

WHAT ARE SOME POTENTIAL KEY PARTNERS AND PARTNERSHIPS?

Potential Partnerships (from survey and focus group):

- » Trail owners
- » Virginia Outdoors Foundation (VOF)
- » Washington County BoS (Zoning Overlay)
- » Private donors
- » VA General Assembly (appropriation)
- » Major employers in area (messaging)
- » IMBA/SORBA (bike park development/construction)
- » The Nature Conservancy
- » Potential conservation minded private parties
- » Local governments
- » A yet-unformed Outdoor Recreation Authority
- » Citizen groups

- » Holston River Soil & Water Conservation District (HRSWCD) – have easements in the area (<https://holstonriverswcd.weebly.com/> or <https://vaswcd.org/>)

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT FOCUS GROUP

SAFETY & EMERGENCY RESPONSE DISCUSSION

WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST SAFETY/EMERGENCY RESPONSE ISSUES YOU ARE SEEING ON THE TRAIL? ARE THERE COMMON THEMES TO THE INCIDENTS YOU ARE RESPONDING TO?

Damascus Police Chief: I will say from our standpoint the trouble we have with the Creeper in Town and up the mountain is vagrants and the criminal element using the trail in town because of darkness and ease of access. It seems a lot of our thefts are on foot and occur between the park and trestle 17. This is a dark stretch and easy to use and hide. We do not have many medical calls in the Town limits and it seems from the park down we do not have much of an issue. The section from Food City to the park is isolated and I wish lights could be installed

Abingdon Police Chief: Pulled year of incidents and mostly within the parking lots. Crashing, run-in, thefts. Tapered off over the years. One vandalism of coke machines. A few arrests in parking lots, for stolen bikes, outstanding warrants, intoxication. Fire department responds to missing people on the trail, which happens quite frequently. Tried call boxes but difficult to maintain and they go out of commission and don't replace.

Trail User/U.S. Forest Service Trail Patrol: Spend lots of time and don't see a lot of illegal activity, mostly littering. A lot of issues could be addressed by communications and information. Biggest problem is between Damascus to White Top, by riders being inattentive to what is on the trail. Groups don't have emergency plan for injury or loss. Encourage folks to have a plan and how to keep a group together. Riders who are inattentive and unfamiliar with their equipment. Groups (usually families) who do not have an emergency plan.

WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST SAFETY/EMERGENCY RESPONSE ISSUES YOU ARE SEEING ON THE TRAIL? ARE THERE COMMON THEMES TO THE INCIDENTS YOU ARE RESPONDING TO?

Abingdon Police Chief: Regular communications is “kind of nightmare in this area”, portable radios can’t reach towers. AT&T First net for cell towers does help, new towers put in Damascus that helps Abingdon response. Washington County Sheriffs office responds for all 911 calls and usually fields trail user calls and they don’t get many direct calls until it is a law enforcement issue. The county responds typically unless it is clearly trailheads owned by Abingdon (i.e Watagua Trailhead) or within the Town. Will patrol the trailheads at night sometimes.

Trail User/U.S. Forest Service Trail Patrol: It would be helpful to have phone numbers that can be reached by text. If there were text numbers it is easier to reach out via text. Also would be helpful to have emergency numbers you can text for maintenance issues. Gerry has a phone that can satellite text which has allowed him to text to a national emergency response number for major injuries. Having an emergency number that could be reached by text would be helpful. This would also be helpful for emergency maintenance issues, fallen trees etc.

HOW DOES VCTC CURRENTLY ASSIST, AND HOW DO YOU SEE IN THE FUTURE VCTC ASSISTING (IF AT ALL) IN EMERGENCY RESPONSE AND SAFETY ISSUES?

Abingdon Police Chief and Abingdon Town Manager: Maybe missing an opportunity here. Manager feels that VCTC could coordinate more and be an arm of the three trail managers, to unify, organize, and be a neutral third party that can facilitate discussions among the three managers. VCTC could bring up issues they see are common.

Trail User/U.S. Forest Service Trail Patrol: Agree with Abingdon’s input, VCTC should be a coordinator and facilitate resolving common issues across the trail.

ARE CURRENT COMMUNICATIONS ACROSS THE DIFFERENT EMERGENCY RESPONSE JURISDICTIONS WORKING EFFECTIVELY AND ARE THERE AREAS WAYS TO IMPROVE? ON THAT NOTE, LACK OF CELL/OR RADIO COVERAGE IS A COMMON COMPLAINT. IS THIS A CRITICAL CHALLENGE AND IF SO ANY THOUGHTS ON SOLUTIONS?

Damascus Police Chief: Our communications are adequate as we updated repeaters to our patrol vehicles. Social media is is by the Town of Abingdon.

Abingdon Police Chief and Abingdon Town Manager: Suggest asking Abingdon Director of Parks regarding coordination during trailwide closures or emergency closures.

Trail User/U.S. Forest Service Trail Patrol.: An emergency phone at Grassy Ridge road crossing. An available number to text. Would also be good for all vendors to have a text number.

WHAT TRAIL MAINTENANCE ISSUES (TRAIL TREADWAY DRAINAGE PROBLEMS, ROAD CROSSINGS, VEHICLE BOLLARDS, TRESTLE APPROACHES, ETC.) ARE YOU AWARE OF THAT COULD LEAD TO SAFETY CONCERNS?

Abingdon Police Chief: Think it more has to relate to inexperience than maintenance issues.

Trail User/U.S. Forest Service Trail Patrol: Drainage just above mile marker 17 is very serious. At the very least installing a shallow drain in the center of this area would be helpful in the near term. VDOT should be asked to address drainage from Chestnut Mountain road onto the trail; this is a serious problem with a relatively easy fix. General drainage issues below Green Cove have exposed many large rocks that are causing frequent incidents. Many trestle edges are sharp and cause many flat tires. The new crossing under the Hwy 91 bridge is great, but it needs a center painted line to encourage bikes to (keep right). Ultimately there needs to be a railing on the stream side to protect riders from the drop-off and boulders.

ARE THERE MANY INCIDENTS OF VANDALISM, THEFT, TRESPASSING, USER CONFLICTS, OR DANGEROUS USER BEHAVIORS THAT HAVE BEEN REPORTED?

Damascus Police Chief: It seems a lot of our thefts are on foot and occur between the park and trestle 17. This is a dark stretch and easy to use and hide.

Abingdon Police Chief: Mostly trespass after hours of trailhead. Sometimes homeless use the restrooms. Would like to have more cameras.

Trail User/U.S. Forest Service Trail Patrol: I’ve ridden many thousands of miles on the trail and do not consider this a significant problem, as a trail user. Perhaps encouraging large youth groups to have good supervision would fall in this category.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE TOP PRIORITIES TO ADDRESS SAFETY OF TRAIL USERS (SIGNAGE, INCREASING PATROLS, ON- AND OFF-TRAIL MESSAGING AND EDUCATION, ETC.)? WHAT DO YOU THINK WOULD HAVE THE BIGGEST IMPACT TO DECREASE INCIDENTS?

Damascus Police Chief: Hopefully we can look for military surplus UTVs that would help with patrol of the area. The areas that concern me is South Shady with bikes crossing and at the park. There is also concerns about bikes riding from the Creeper down Douglas Drive back to bike shops. This is no fault of the Bike Shops, they explain where to come off trail. The crossing from the Creeper trail over to the Wicked Chicken restaurant is a concern also.

WHAT WE HEARD

Trail User/U.S. Forest Service Trail Patrol: I'm very aware that this would be very difficult, but an end-of-the-day safety check/patrol would be an ideal improvement. Installing a bike maintenance station at Green Cove would help alleviate accidents caused by poor bike condition. Also (a personal thought): rental bike conditions late in the summer are a problem, so perhaps all vendors should have a maintenance stand-down day to concentrate on the the physical condition of their rental equipment.

WHAT WOULD BE THE BEST WAY TO HAVE A FEEDBACK LOOP ABOUT WHERE INCIDENTS ARE OCCURRING AND IF THEIR ARE SAFETY ISSUES THAT ARE CAUSING THEM? IS THERE A POSSIBILITY IN SHARING THIS DATA OR COPYING VCTC ON INCIDENTS?

Abingdon Police Chief: Would be happy to share data. Did a yearly analysis that only took a short time.



ORGANIZATION ASSESSMENT & STRUCTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

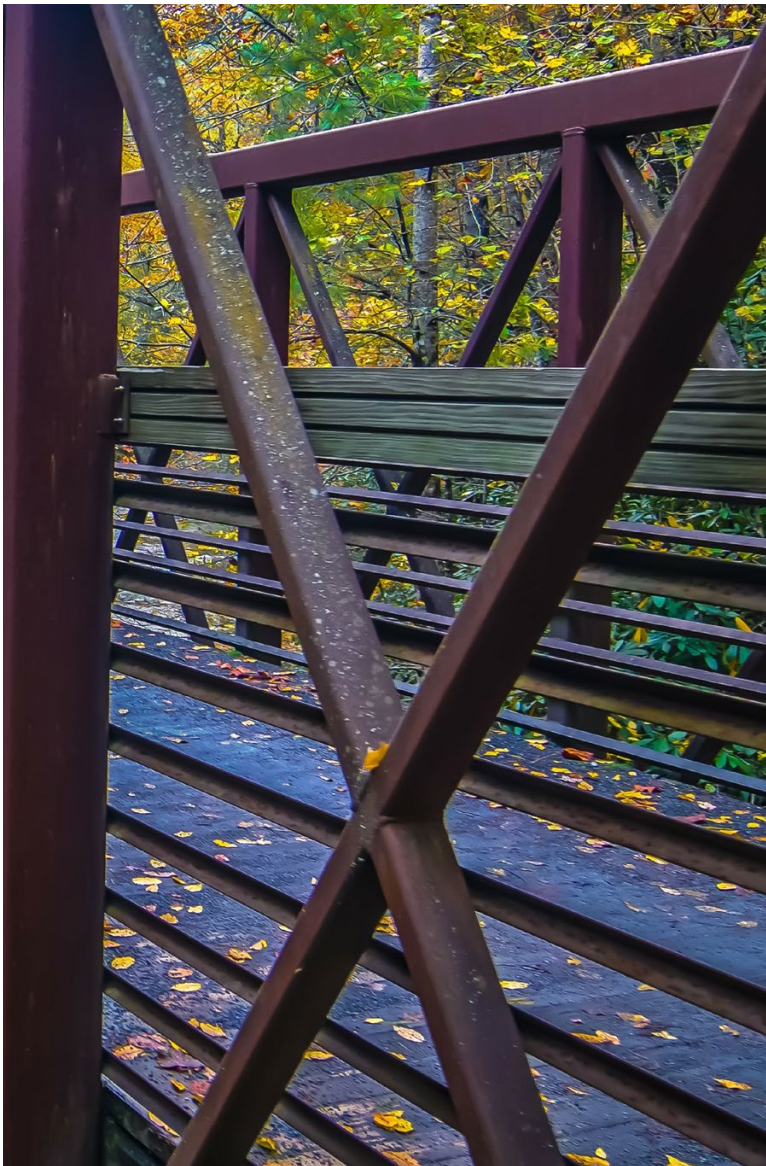


RESTRUCTURING THE ORGANIZATION

- » **BUILD FROM THE INSIDE OUT:** Start by energizing the core of the organization — its board of directors and staff — around the concepts outlined in the Master Plan. Expand the board. Bring in and welcome new board members and volunteers interested in promoting and protecting the Virginia Creeper Trail. Focus on improving board governance practices, which can make board service more fulfilling, enjoyable, and productive.

» ESTABLISH AND EMPOWER A NOMINATING COMMITTEE:

- The Nominating Committee should be comprised of three board members and at least one “outsider” with strong local name recognition and a commitment to the protection and promotion of the trail.
- The Nominating Committee should be authorized and directed to seek and recruit new board members and assist in their orientation and training.
- The committee can invite potential board members to serve on committees first, as a means of orienting them to the organization and gauging their potential for board service.



BOARD & COMMITTEES, GOVERNANCE

- » **ESTABLISH A TRAIL CONSERVATION COMMITTEE**
- » **ESTABLISH A DEVELOPMENT AND FUNDRAISING COMMITTEE**
- » **ESTABLISH AN EVENTS COMMITTEE**
- » **SEE ALSO “BEST PRACTICES” BELOW**

BECOMING A LAND TRUST (EARLY THOUGHTS)

- » **VCTC WOULD BE BEST SERVED BY PARTNERING WITH OTHER ESTABLISHED LAND TRUSTS:** VCTC does not have the financial or personnel resources at this time to become a land trust that holds fee or easement interests in land.
- » **VCTC WOULD NEED TO REACH A HIGH BAR TO BECOME AN ACCREDITED LAND TRUST:** Given the recent Virginia Office of Inspector General report recommendation that land trusts holding easements or donations of land for Land Preservation Tax Credits be accredited by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission, becoming a land trust capable of holding conservation easements does not appear to be realistic at this time.

STAFFING NEEDS & STAFF EXPANSION

- » **THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR’S TIME & ENERGY NEED TO BE FULLY-FOCUSED ON GENERATING SUSTAINABLE & DIVERSE SOURCES OF INCOME:** Fundraising, grant writing, and development should be the primary focus of the executive director. To accomplish this, VCTC needs to bring on additional staff, as funding and resources permit.

- » **CREATE A “PRESIDENT’S ADVISORY COUNCIL”:** Create a council of prominent local citizens, recently retired elected officials, potential large donors, past board members, and others who do not have the time or inclination to serve on the board.
- » **IF VCTC DECIDES TO BECOME A LAND TRUST, AMEND THE ARTICLES OF INCORPORATION:** If VCTC decides to hold fee properties or easements, amend the Articles of Incorporation to state VCTC’s new statement of purpose as a land trust/conservation organization (required by law).
- » **UPDATE VCTC’S BYLAWS:** If necessary, update the Bylaws to (1) provide for conservation activities; (2) transition organization away from being a membership-based organization.

» **STAFF ARE NEEDED TO FULFILL THE FOLLOWING ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES (IN ORDER OF IMPORTANCE):**

- Administrative duties (so that the executive director can focus on the aforementioned duties)
- Marketing, branding, and outreach
- Information and education about the trail
- Membership and development coordination
- Land conservation and trail management
- Volunteer management
- Volunteer support for events

OPTIONAL ROLES THAT THE ORGANIZATION MIGHT TAKE ON PER PARTNER FEEDBACK

- » **POSITION VCTC TO SERVE AS THE CENTRAL HUB FOR “ONE TRAIL”:** As a nonprofit organization solely devoted to protecting and promoting the Virginia Creeper Trail, VCTC is ideally suited to serve as the central coordinator that facilitates coordination and collaboration among partners in administering the Virginia Creeper Trail as “One Trail.”
- » **ONE-STOP SHOP:** Initially, VCTC should seek to become the “one-stop shop” for information about the trail, monitoring trail use, trail amenities, safety, and other aspects of visitor use. VCTC also should provide a regular forum for land-owning agencies to work together toward uniform policies trail wide.
- » **FINANCIAL RECIPIENT:** The VCTC could serve as the financial recipient of “opt-in” or “opt-out” donations for bike rentals.

PARTNER RELATIONSHIP RECOMMENDATIONS

- » **BECOME A CONSERVANCY, NOT A LAND TRUST:** VCTC would best serve as a conservancy that conducts fundraising, advance coordination, planning, and landowner outreach while partnering with state, quasi-state, and non-profit land trusts. See more about this in the conservation recommendations.

- » **DEVELOP A FORMAL MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING (MOU) OR COOPERATIVE AGREEMENT:** VCTC should develop formal MOUs with the land-managing/land-owning agencies devoted to the concept of “One Trail,” using the Appalachian Trail Conservancy model for statewide MOUs.

BEST PRACTICES FOR VCTC & THE BOARD

- » **ESTABLISH AND EMPOWER A NOMINATING COMMITTEE:** Focus organizational energy on improving board governance practices to make board service more fulfilling, enjoyable, and productive; bring in new board members, committee members, and volunteers; and rapidly improve VCTC’s visibility, effectiveness, and influence in protecting and promoting the Virginia Creeper Trail.
- » **IMPLEMENT NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONAL BEST PRACTICES:** Implement a suite of specific best practices for good nonprofit governance. Charter and utilize three committees – a Trail Conservation Committee, a Marketing and Outreach Committee, and a Development Committee – to address critical program needs..
- » **BOARD MEMBER EXPECTATIONS:** Develop a one- or two-page “Board member expectations” agreement that defines Board service for current and new Board members (including clear financial giving expectations).
- » **ORIENTATION:** Hold orientation sessions for new Board members, with a current Board member serving as a mentor for each new Board member.
- » **CALENDAR:** Create a calendar of regular (quarterly) Board meetings, with committee meetings held at least two weeks in advance of each Board meeting.
- » **ATTENDANCE:** Create an expectation for regular attendance at Board meetings, distribution of an agenda and advance materials before Board meetings, and Board minutes for each meeting.
- » **FINANCIAL REPORTS:** Ensure that the Board reviews financial reports and the IRS Form 990.

- » **COMMITTEE REPORTS:** Require brief written or oral committee reports at Board meetings.
- » **PERFORMANCE REVIEW:** Annually review the performance, compensation, and benefits for the executive director.
- » **AGENDAS:** Create a “consent agenda” and “action agenda” as part of each Board meeting agenda.
- » **POLICIES AND PROCEDURES:** Develop a concise portfolio of Board-approved governance policies and procedures (conflict-of-interest, document retention, gift acceptance).
- » **ORIENTATION:** Create a Board orientation and training handbook.
- » **RISK MANAGEMENT:** Conduct a risk management exercise, obtain D&O insurance and, as necessary, obtain event liability riders for specific events.



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE TOWN OF ABINGDON, PHOTO BY JASON BARNETTE

APPENDIX B

 VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL MASTER PLAN

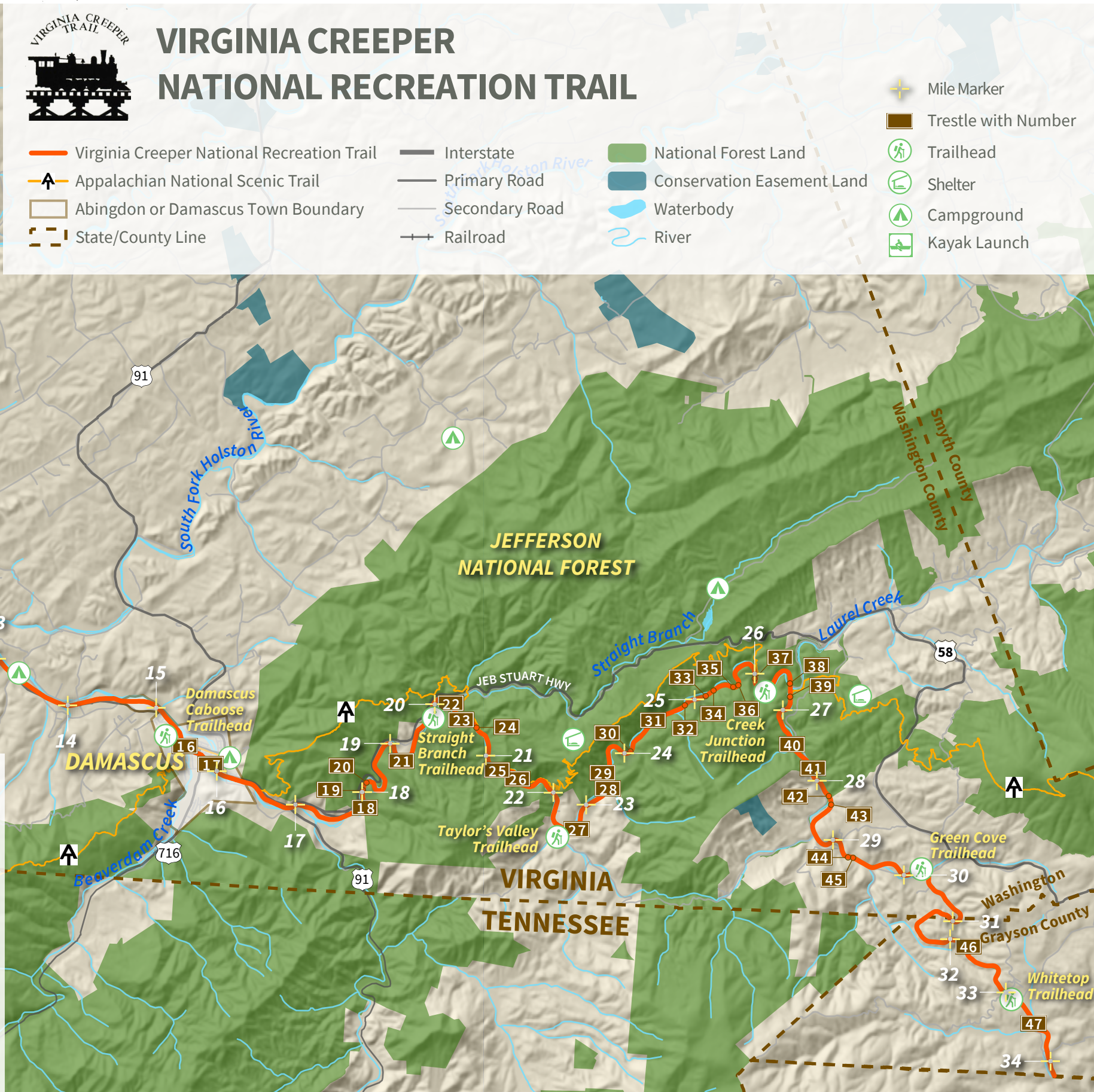
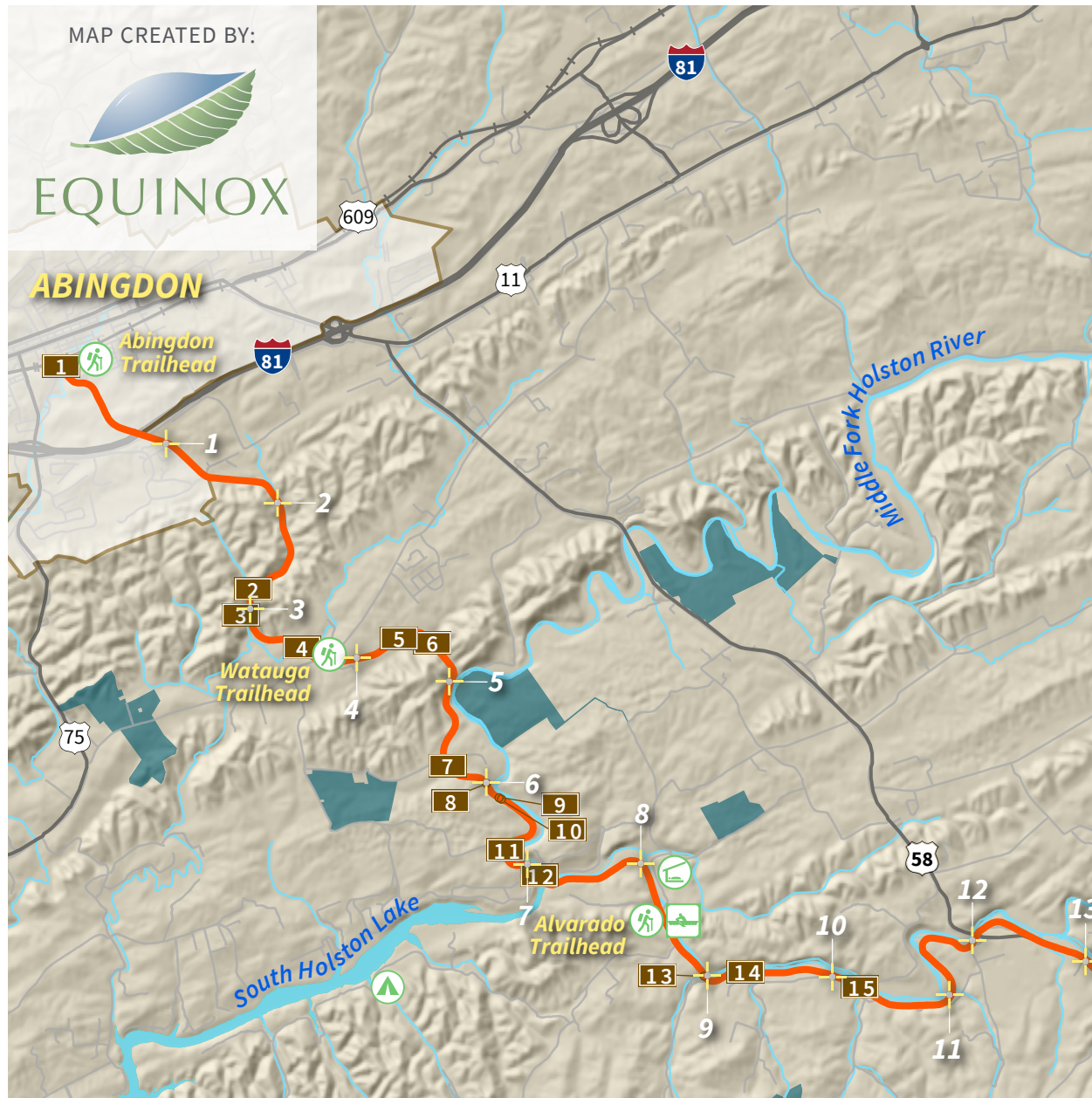
VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL MAPS

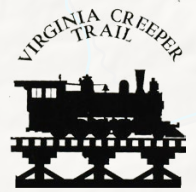
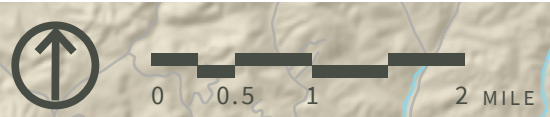
MAP CREATED BY:



VIRGINIA CREEPER NATIONAL RECREATION TRAIL

- Virginia Creeper National Recreation Trail
- Appalachian National Scenic Trail
- Abingdon or Damascus Town Boundary
- State/County Line
- Interstate
- Primary Road
- Secondary Road
- Railroad
- National Forest Land
- Conservation Easement Land
- Waterbody
- River
- Mile Marker
- Trestle with Number
- Trailhead
- Shelter
- Campground
- Kayak Launch





VIRGINIA CREEPER NATIONAL RECREATION TRAIL

- Virginia Creeper National Recreation Trail
- Appalachian National Scenic Trail
- Abingdon & Damascus Boundary
- State/County Line
- Interstate
- Primary Road
- Secondary Road
- Railroad
- National Forest Land
- Conservation Easement Land
- Waterbody
- River
- Mile Marker
- Road Crossing
- Trailhead/Kiosk

ABINGDON

WATAUGA TRAILHEAD

- 2022 Abingdon will upgrade the road crossing and parking. Explore funding for and implement trailhead upgrades to restroom, bike repair station, and hydration station.

ALVARADO TRAILHEAD

- 2022 Add in parking and trail reroute.

DAMASCUS/SR 58 CROSSING

Alternative route & improvements:

- 2022-2023 Strategize funding of a planning/engineering study.
- 2025 Apply for VDOT planning & construction grant if fundings is still needed.
- 2025-2026 Kick-off planning & design, construction in 2026.

CREEK JUNCTION TRAILHEAD

Provide better access to parking and add signage on Hwy 58.

CALLAHAN'S CROSSING

- 2024 Upgrade crossing, which is currently confusing and difficult. This can align with a scheduled VDOT project.

GREEN COVE STATION

- 2024 Instate the VCTC's presence as a manager of Green Cove Station.

VAILS MILL RD. CROSSING

Unofficial parking occurs here.

- 2022-2024 Explore if improvements are needed and monitor parking.
- 2025-2026 Implement improved parking, if needed.

WHITETOP GAP RD. CROSSING

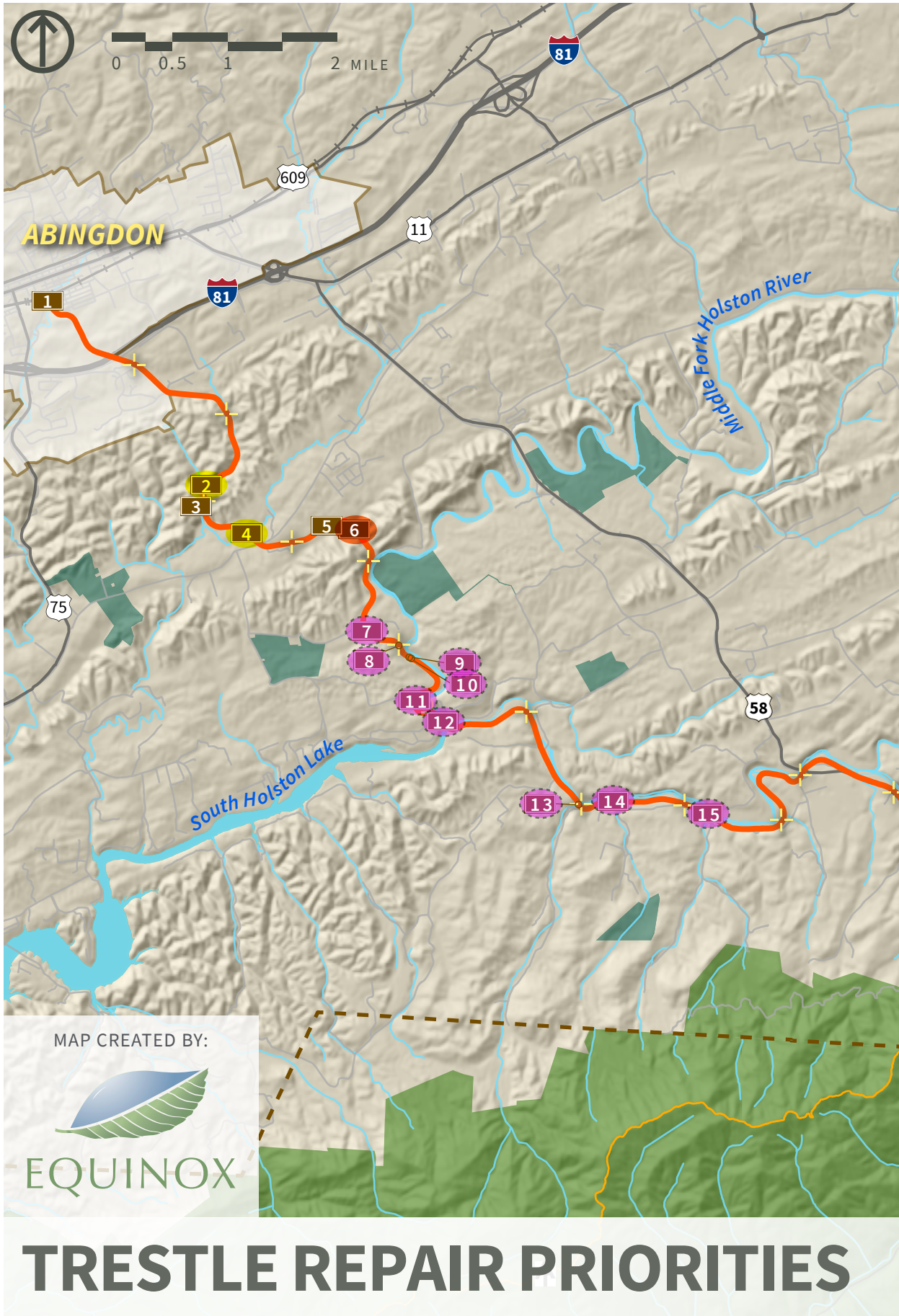
- 2025 VDOT to upgrade crossing.

WHITETOP STATION TRAILHEAD

- 2024-2025 Explore with USFS long-term expansion of trailhead as it exceeds capacity.



TRAILHEAD & ROAD CROSSING IMPROVEMENT NEEDS



VIRGINIA CREEPER NATIONAL RECREATION TRAIL

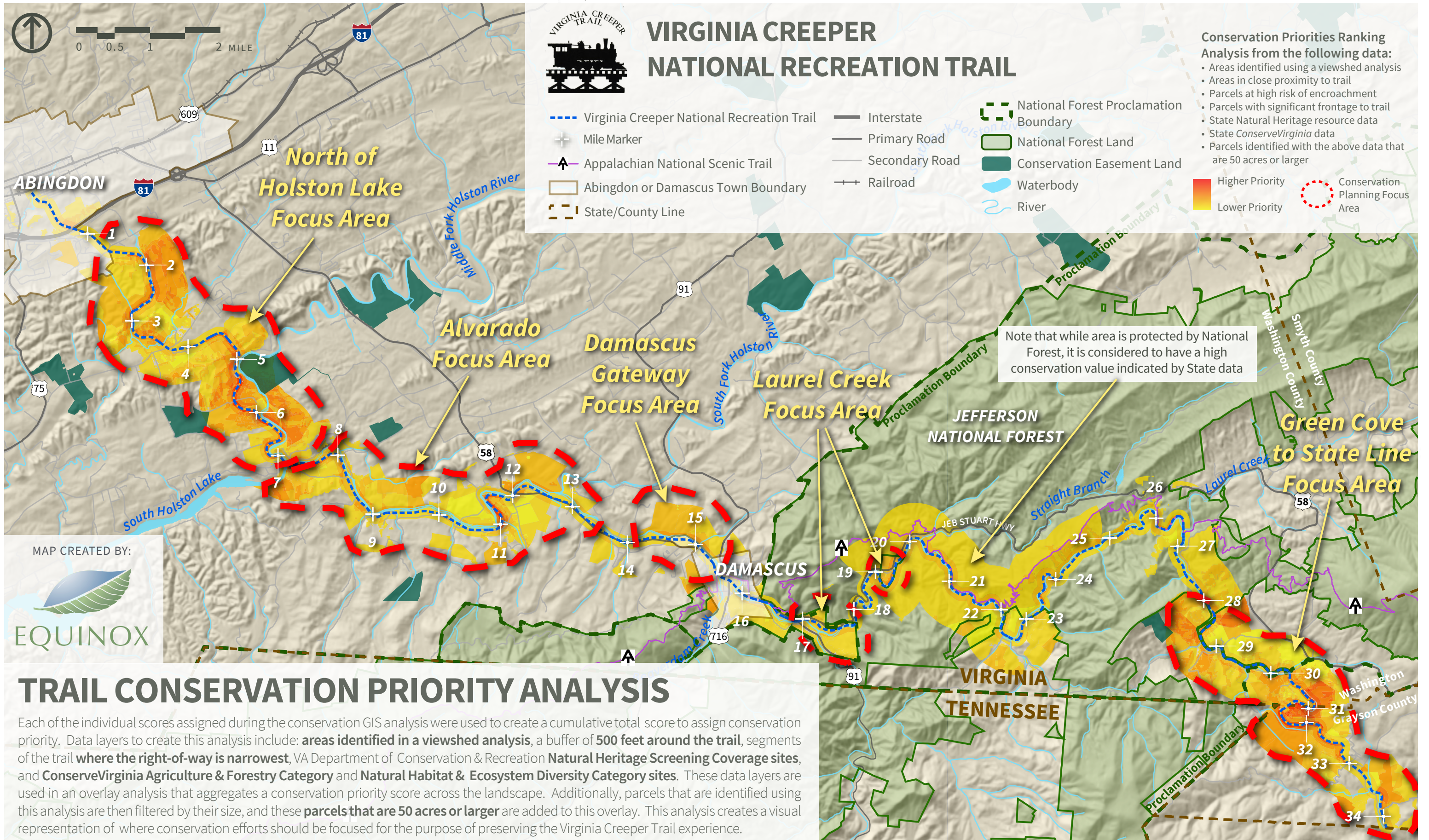
Virginia Creeper National Recreation Trail	Interstate	National Forest Land	Mile Marker
Appalachian National Scenic Trail	Primary Road	Conservation Easement Land	#1 Priority Repair Trestle
Abingdon or Damascus Town Boundary	Secondary Road	Waterbody	#2 Priority Repair Trestle
State/County Line	Railroad	River	Need New/Updated Trestle Engineering Study

MAP CREATED BY:



TRESTLE REPAIR PRIORITIES

Note: Trestles (16) and (17) are owned by the National Park Service and repairs would need to be coordinated/negotiated with the agency.



TRAIL CONSERVATION PRIORITY ANALYSIS

Each of the individual scores assigned during the conservation GIS analysis were used to create a cumulative total score to assign conservation priority. Data layers to create this analysis include: **areas identified in a viewshed analysis**, a buffer of **500 feet around the trail**, segments of the trail **where the right-of-way is narrowest**, VA Department of Conservation & Recreation **Natural Heritage Screening Coverage sites**, and **ConserveVirginia Agriculture & Forestry Category** and **Natural Habitat & Ecosystem Diversity Category sites**. These data layers are used in an overlay analysis that aggregates a conservation priority score across the landscape. Additionally, parcels that are identified using this analysis are then filtered by their size, and these **parcels that are 50 acres or larger** are added to this overlay. This analysis creates a visual representation of where conservation efforts should be focused for the purpose of preserving the Virginia Creeper Trail experience.

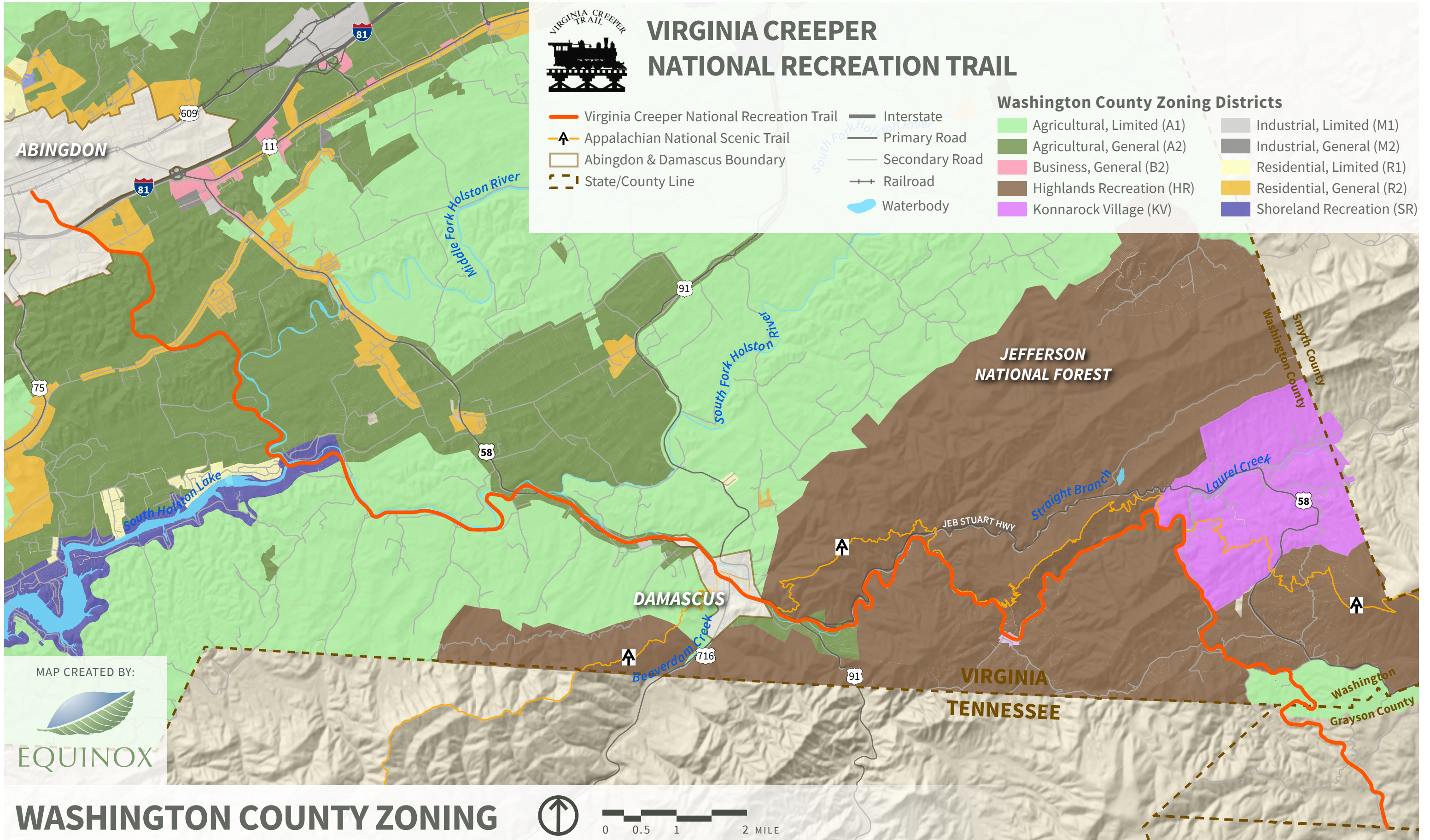


VIRGINIA CREEPER NATIONAL RECREATION TRAIL

- Virginia Creeper National Recreation Trail
- Appalachian National Scenic Trail
- Abingdon & Damascus Boundary
- State/County Line
- Interstate
- Primary Road
- Secondary Road
- Railroad
- Waterbody

Washington County Zoning Districts

- Agricultural, Limited (A1)
- Agricultural, General (A2)
- Business, General (B2)
- Highlands Recreation (HR)
- Konnarock Village (KV)
- Industrial, Limited (M1)
- Industrial, General (M2)
- Residential, Limited (R1)
- Residential, General (R2)
- Shoreland Recreation (SR)



MAP CREATED BY:



WASHINGTON COUNTY ZONING



0 0.5 1 2 MILE

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U.S. Forest Service – **Mount Rogers National Recreation Area**

U.S. Forest Service – **George Washington and Jefferson National Forests**

Town of Abingdon – Department of Parks, Town Manager's office, Department of Public Works, Abingdon Police Department, Abingdon Fire Department, Finance Department, Tourism, Community Development and Economic Development Departments, Town of Abingdon Arborist, Tourism Advisory Committee and the Economic Development Authority for the Town of Abingdon

The Mayor of Abingdon and the Town Council

Town of Damascus – Town Manager's office, Damascus Police Department, Damascus Volunteer Fire Department, Damascus Volunteer Rescue Department

The Mayor of Damascus and the Town Council

Washington County – Office of the County Administrator, Budget & Finance Office, County Attorney's Office, Zoning, Washington County Volunteer Fire and Rescue Squads, Community Development, Washington Planning Commission, Washington County Industrial Development Authority, Washington County Park Authority, and the Washington County Sheriff's Office

Washington County Chamber of Commerce

Grayson County – County Board of Supervisors, the Office of the County Administrator, Mount Rogers Fire and Rescue and Grayson County Sheriff's Office

Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy's Board of Directors

Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy's membership

Virginia Creeper Trail Advisory Board (VCTAB)

Virginia Department of Transportation

Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR)

DCR's Natural Heritage Program

Virginia Outdoors Foundation

Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD)

Mount Rogers Planning District (MRPDC)

Virginia Department of Forestry

Appalachian Trail Conservancy (DTC) and the staff of the Damascus Trail Center

The Nature Conservancy – Clinch Valley Program

Mendota Trail Conservancy

Virginia Tourism Corp

Appalachian Regional Commission

Tobacco Region Revitalization Commission

Former US House of Representative Rick Boucher

U.S. Senator Tim Kaine

Regional Office of Senator Kaine

US Senator Mark Warner

Delegate Israel O'Quinn

Delegate Todd Pillion

Office of US Representative Morgan Griffith

Friends of Southwest Virginia

Virginia Capital Trail

Sustain Abingdon

Abingdon Arts Depot

Holston Mountain Artisans

Virginia Highlands Festival

Washington County Historical Society

Trailhead Designs

Barter Theatre

Adventure Damascus/Sundog Outfitters

Creeper Trail Bike Rental & Shuttle

Yeti Trail Runners

Abingdon Vineyards

LOCAL LEADERS, STAKEHOLDERS, & VOLUNTEERS:

Rachel Fowlkes
Jennifer Wampler
Dan Smith
Scott Wilson
Claiborne Woodall
Tim Williams
Dean McCall
Wayne Miller
Laura Blevins
Belle Avery
Jason Green
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Rees & Kathy Shearer
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Myra Martin
Ed Morgan
Ed Davis
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Carol Doss
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John Dew
Dr. Matthew Loos
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Neta Farmer
Susan Coleman

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Chris Butcher
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The Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy

March 2022

The **VIRGINIA CREEPER TRAIL** *Conservancy*
One Trail, By the Hands of Many

PREPARED BY:



WITH ASSISTANCE FROM:
Don Owen with Lands Trails &
Parks LLC, Dr. Melissa Weddell,
and Andy Williamson

