INCREASING ACCESS TO TRAILS AND OUTDOOR RECREATION
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INTRODUCTION
Virginia’s outdoor recreation economy generates $21.9 billion annually and employs between 197,000 and 230,000 residents. Virginia’s trail systems and outdoor recreation opportunities are critical to our sustainable growth, livability, public health, and to the identity of the Commonwealth. Whether it’s hiking, hunting, urban-based outdoor recreation or bicycling, Virginia’s outdoor recreation infrastructure must be safe, well maintained, and diverse enough to meet demand from the growing numbers of visitors and businesses who rely on these assets.

BACKGROUND
With 22 National Park Units, 38 State Parks, and the only Silver-level “Ride Center” as identified by the International Mountain Biking Association on the East Coast (Roanoke), Virginia’s identity is rooted in the outdoors. In fact, 57% of residents participate in some form of outdoor recreation each year; contributing to an industry that generates 1.2 billion dollars in tax revenue annually for the Commonwealth. Access to these Natural Areas was “very important” – a statistic that cuts across survey respondents said the protection of natural areas was “very important” – a statistic that cuts across all demographics. Access to these Natural Areas is influenced by numerous State entities including the State Trails Advisory Committee (STAC), formed through legislation in 2014 to advise DCR on trails and recreation economies. Representing multiple recreation types and the geographic breadth of the State, STAC supports DCR in developing the State’s recreation types and the geographic breadth of the State, STAC supports DCR in developing the State’s recreation economies. Representing multiple recreation types and the geographic breadth of the State, STAC supports DCR in developing the State’s recreation economies.

Of course, benefits of Outdoor Recreation are not limited to urban areas. Similar successes are underway in Southwest Virginia where Outdoor Recreation is transforming towns like St. Paul and Clifton Forge. The Clinch River State Park is expected to contribute an additional $2.5 million dollars to local economies.

Public lands are also increasingly important as part of a robust public health support system and provide benefits to a wide variety of income levels and physical abilities. The National Recreation and Parks Association reported in a 2010 summary of the scientifically proven benefits of recreation and public land “Government park and recreation services provide close-to-home, no or low-cost, readily available areas, facilities, programs, and instruction, which provide pleasurable physical activity opportunities. These services are used by the vast majority of the public and would be used to an even greater extent if additional investments were made in them.”

CONCLUSION
Every dollar spent building and maintaining trails, making bike lanes safer, and making parks of any kind more accessible to the public is an investment with significant return. Coordinating the vast outdoor recreation assets of the Commonwealth, marketing them effectively and ensuring access for all takes resources. The Department of Conservation and Recreation must be provided with these resources to effectively empower and support local communities.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS
• Improve funding for DCR to support, empower, and coordinate conservation efforts and outdoor recreation.
• Reauthorize the State Trails Advisory Committee which is set to expire January 1, 2021.
• Convene an advisory group of environmental justice organizations that can compile information on existing state funding sources, disseminate that information, and identify funding gaps in the State’s support of outdoor recreation and access in coordination with the Governor’s Environmental Justice Council.
• Support legislation that makes it illegal to use a handheld electronic device while operating a motor vehicle in Virginia.
• Support legislation requiring that vehicles stop for pedestrians in a crosswalk rather than merely yielding to them as required by existing Virginia law.

A HIKER ADMIRE THE VIEW AT THE SUMMIT OF MCAFEE KNOB ON THE APPALACHIAN NATIONAL SCENIC TRAIL NEAR ROANOKE, VA
Image credit: David Oglethorpe