HOW THE BRIEFING BOOK GETS DRAFTED

Our Common Agenda is a year-long project that couldn’t happen without support, insight, and input from all of VCN’s Network Partners. With the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacting how business was conducted in 2020, many of VCN’s in-person processes had to be moved to a virtual setting. Here’s how we put this book together this year.

NETWORK PARTNERS PARTICIPATE IN REGIONAL LISTENING SESSIONS
Each spring, VCN hosts regional listening sessions to brief local and regional partners on what environmental policies passed and failed during the General Assembly session. This is the first opportunity for our network of more than 130 partners to highlight what local and regional conservation policy opportunities they would like prioritized.

ISSUE WORKGROUPS HOST ANNUAL MEETINGS
With the ideas generated from the regional listening sessions, VCN’s issue workgroups (Clean Water, Clean Energy & Climate, Land Conservation, and Land Use & Transportation) discuss the feasibility of policy recommendations and decide which issues should be covered in the Briefing Book. During this process, authors of each white paper are also selected.

AUTHORS PUT PEN TO PAPER
The collaborative process is truly on display while co-authors craft their white papers. Generally, anywhere from 2-4 authors work on each briefing paper and consult with VCN staff to ensure that each paper reflects policy recommendations that are both attainable and effective.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE REVIEW COMMITTEE WORKS TO ENSURE POLICIES ARE EQUITABLE
In order to avoid policy recommendations that may have an adverse impact on environmental justice communities - specifically low income communities, communities of color, and rural communities, a team of Network Partners serves on the Environmental Justice Review Committee. The committee reviews all briefing paper drafts to ensure that policies won’t have unintended consequences and looks for opportunities where policies can lift up historically marginalized communities. Recommendations offered by the EJ Review Team are considered by the co-authors and integrated to the best of their collective ability.

ISSUE WORKGROUPS CONDUCT EXTENSIVE REVIEWS
Once the briefing papers have been reviewed by the Environmental Justice Review Committee, VCN’s issue workgroups review all of the papers, incorporating feedback to make stronger arguments or more effective policy recommendations. By the time white papers have been fully reviewed and finalized, they are read by at least 5-10 experts in the topic’s field.

VCN LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE VOTES ON POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS
Our legislative committee is made up of partners from each of our workgroups who have experience working policies in Richmond. This is an opportunity to break down the silos between workgroups - energy experts review water papers, land conservation experts review transportation papers. This helps ensure policies don’t unintentionally adversely impact other workgroup issue areas as well as to ensure policies are bold yet attainable. Policy recommendations are voted on by the committee.

VCN BOARD VOTES ON THE ACCEPTANCE OF EACH PAPER
The final step in the journey from a policy idea to a place in Our Common Agenda is a vote by VCN’s Board of Directors. Each briefing paper is presented to the Board and a vote on its inclusion follows. This final step of the process ensures that topics and policy recommendations are in line with VCN’s mission and goals.

Photos (top to bottom): VCN Partners participate in the Shenandoah Valley regional listening session. Image credit: Victoria Higgins; VCN Network Partners discuss strategy, policy, and which issues to focus on at the annual Clean Water Workgroup meeting. Image credit: David Oglethorpe.