

## THE NEED FOR A LINEAR RECREATION AND OPEN SPACE PLANNING MODEL IN PRINCE WILLIAM COUNTY, VIRGINIA (2006)

*Although state and local governments have developed a variety of location and goal specific programs, plans to conserve, protect, and manage natural resources, none, either alone or in combination, has successfully balanced the simultaneous need for well planned growth and wise resource use. As communities must address the negative impacts of development, so must they resolve the effects of here-to-fore unfocused conservation initiatives that are reactive, site-specific, narrow in scope, and/or disconnected. Development must be guided by the thoughtful evaluation of need within the community, anticipated economic benefit to its residents and the immediate, as well as long-term, impacts to its resource base. Similarly, conservation efforts must be managed in a comprehensive manner.*

Dr. Mark Benedict

Green Infrastructure: A Strategic Approach to Land Conservation

### Prince William County's Land Conservation Challenge

The loss of open space in urban and suburban areas is a growing quality of life concern, as well as a conservation issue. With a population of more than 7 million people recorded in the 2000 census, up 14.4% from the 1990 census, Virginia faces an increasing challenge in conserving and managing its open spaces while accommodating the need for residential and commercial development. Currently, rural land is being developed at a rate of about 70,000 acres per year. This is 2.5 times that of the population growth (Virginia Outdoors Plan, 2002). Northern Virginia and areas along Interstate 95 lead the state in population increase. As expected, conversion of land, from forests and agriculture-to residences and commercial developments, is greatest in these areas. In 2001, the Trust for Public Land found that:

- 96% of voters believe that Virginians owe it to future generations to "protect the land, water, and wildlife for their use to enjoy"
- 89% of Virginians rate "preserving and protecting open space is important"
- 82% believe that Virginia's natural areas will be lost unless we act now

Prince William County residents have identified a need for additional passive recreation and open space preservation, especially through a planned and connected system. The 2002 Prince William County Park Authority Needs Assessment, and the 2003 Citizen Survey, found that residents have a desire for more high quality passive open space parks, in addition to active parks (Prince William County Parks and Open Space Project, 2005).

### Land Use Planning and Open Space

As the demand upon open space increase and land management issues become more complex, it is increasingly important to identify and develop planning strategies that will preserve, protect, and enhance resources within a framework of well managed growth.

The 2002 *Virginia Outdoors Plan* concluded that:

- the identification, recognition, and conservation of significant open space and environmental resources are critical to the commonwealth and the jurisdictions where they are located
- links, such as greenways, between specific open space nodes should be identified, preserved, and, where needed, restored to provide connections from one open space to another
- identifying, protecting, preserving, and developing a green infrastructure as a first step in the land use planning process will encourage decision makers to recognize the value of natural systems, assure conservation of existing resources, establish links between significant resource nodes, and enhance overall environmental quality

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Consideration for the preservation and protection of natural resources is assured in the Commonwealth. The *Code of Virginia Title 15.1, Chapter 11, Article 4, Section 15.1-446.1* requires that every local government "prepare and recommend a comprehensive plan for the physical development of the territory within its jurisdiction", and "...in accordance with present and probable future needs and resources, which best promotes the health, safety, morals, order, convenience, prosperity, and general welfare of the inhabitants."

### What is Open Space?

A Comprehensive Land Use Plan should identify the elements contained in the Standards for Classification of Real Estate as devoted to open space use under the *Virginia Land Use Assessment Law*. The regulation identifies five "open space" categories:

- (1) Park and Recreation Use Lands - public or privately owned parks (non-profit)
- (2) Conservation and Other Natural Resources - lands protected for preservation
- (3) Floodways - lands subject to periodic flooding
- (4) Historic or Scenic Areas - protected areas, landmarks, and structures
- (5) Character Landscapes - valued in shaping the character of a region

### Planning Models

Although the requirement for a local comprehensive plan identifies the necessity for planning for a variety of natural resources, it does not describe the elements needed to identify, protect, or manage these resources. Such planning detail should be accommodated in a specific open space and recreation plan. As a part of a local comprehensive plan, the open space plan is critical to the identification, development, and management of community resources. It is also important to the overall quality of life for all residents. Planning models provide guidance for the development of comprehensive land use, open space, and recreation planning. Agencies at the regional and local level are encouraged to develop plans and recreation areas with citizen's guidance in a manner consistent with the objectives of local comprehensive plans (Virginia Outdoors Plan, 2002).

### Conclusion

Greenways, parks, and trails close to home are essential for the physical, social, and psychological well-being of all citizens (Virginia Outdoors Plan, 2002). By actively integrating a network of connecting greenways, corridors, and trails into the Prince William County Comprehensive Parks and Open Space Plan, the value of natural systems to the design and function of sustainable communities will be realized. This goal may be accomplished if a well-thought-out linear recreation and open space planning model is developed. There are many statewide and regional models that embody these guiding principles. The Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation has identified the following publications to assist local planning authorities.

#### Parks and Open Space Development Models:

- Better Models for Development for Virginia, Edward McMahon
- E-Way Planning Model, Phillip H. Lewis
- Green Infrastructure, Dr. Mark Benedict
- Virginia Greenways and Trails Toolbox

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