

WASHINGTON SMART GROWTH ALLIANCE



Regional Conservation Priorities List

2006





Land preservation is more than just an amenity. It is also a strategy to shape growth over time, ensure clean drinking water and an adequate water supply, provide increased recreational opportunities, and improve the region's overall quality of life. We believe that smart growth is as much about deciding on *where not* to grow as it is about building better places. The Washington Smart Growth Alliance (SGA) believes that targeted investments and strategies to protect our natural heritage and working lands is a critical element of the smart growth agenda.



The goal of the SGA's annual Regional Conservation Priorities List is to provide our unique Alliance's strong support for regional conservation initiatives in the fast-growing Washington region. We believe the following initiatives will provide significant benefits to communities and the entire region. Most are the result of diverse local partnerships made up of public agencies, local businesses, and diligent local advocates. But even the best ideas can falter in the current climate of tighter public conservation budgets. We hope that by providing the support and leadership of the business and environmental community, the SGA can encourage area governments and their constituents to view these conservation priorities as critical investments for improving the region's quality of life.

Many of these initiatives are intended to encourage public access to conserved land. As local governments, landowners, and private land trusts plan for conservation investments in the future, we strongly encourage them to consider opportunities to allow for public access. While our region has a wealth of beautiful natural areas, such as the marsh-fringed coves of the Chesapeake Bay and rich, rolling farmland of Virginia's Piedmont, these areas have limited opportunities for the general public to enjoy these special and unique places. Obviously access to some places must be restricted for ecological, cultural, or private ownership reasons. We believe far more can be done to encourage access, however. We also believe that providing places for families to hike, fish, picnic, and play is critical to developing a long-term constituency for conservation.

CONSERVATION IN THE GREATER WASHINGTON REGION:

The Past as Prologue



Fortunately, the Washington region has made significant investments in land conservation in the past. Seeing growth on the horizon and the need to protect water quality and reduce flooding, the federal government passed legislation and appropriated funds in the 1930's to purchase park corridors along streams that flowed into the District. These stream valley corridors were protected well before land development had made it impossible to do so. Washington, D.C.'s McMillan Plan at the turn of the century created the National Mall and Rock Creek Park, in addition to promoting "an emerald necklace" of green spaces throughout the District. The Potomac River Gorge and C&O Canal and trail are two other protected areas cherished by area residents and visitors.

CROW'S NEST



Located 40 miles south of Washington, D.C. in Stafford County—Virginia’s second fastest growing county—the Crow’s Nest peninsula is rich in historic resources and natural value. It contains some of the best remaining wetlands on the Potomac River, and the tract supports mature stands of hardwoods. In addition to providing high quality bird and wildlife habitat, the upland and wetland vegetation maintains local water quality by reducing run-off, filtering sediments, trapping pollutants, and slowing flood waters.

In response to a proposed subdivision, concerned residents and a bi-partisan group of legislators have been working to conserve 1,800 acres on the tip of Crow’s Nest. Additionally a public/private partnership between the Northern Virginia Conservation Trust, the Nature Conservancy, and the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) has raised considerable resources for the peninsula’s conservation. DCR has agreed to manage the property as a dedicated State Natural Area Preserve, the highest legal protection for land available in Virginia. What is needed now is for the landowner and the County to agree on an acceptable compensation package so this invaluable piece of land can be preserved for generations to come.



PRINCE WILLIAM COUNTY GREENWAY



The Prince William County government, state and federal agencies, real estate development companies, and volunteer organizations are completing the first phase of a project to establish a multi-use trail and “greenway” parallel to the Potomac River between the Occoquan River to the north and Quantico National Cemetery to the south.

This proposed trail will accomplish the following:

- Conserve significant ecological and historical resources
- Create physical connections for non-motorized travel and outdoor recreation, between the historic Town of Occoquan; the planned Belmont Bay Science Center; Occoquan National Wildlife Refuge; Leesylvania State Park, several creeks and Prince William Forest Park—among many other ‘day-to-day’ needs such as commuter rail stations and local schools.

- Establish a critical segment of the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail, a partnership to create and maintain a network of locally managed trails between the Chesapeake Bay and the Allegheny Highlands.

Planning and construction for Phase I (between Belmont Bay and Leesylvania State Park) is partially funded. The planning and design of two additional phases more phases still need to be completed.



THE JOURNEY THROUGH HALLOWED GROUND



The Journey Through Hallowed Ground (JTHG) is a unique corridor, one that experts agree holds more American history than any other region in the United States. This corridor follows Route 15 from Gettysburg to Monticello. The JTHG traverses four states, specifically: the Virginia counties of Albemarle, Orange, Madison, Culpeper, Fauquier, Prince William and Loudoun; Frederick Country in Maryland; Jefferson County/Harpers Ferry in West Virginia; and Adams County in Pennsylvania. This public/private partnership has worked closely with the departments of historic preservation and heritage tourism from each state to increase educational programs, summer camps, and visitor interpretation initiatives. The Partnership has also brought together the 15 Main Street and Historic Downtown communities along the JTHG to create dynamic business development programs. Currently, the Partnership is seeking U.S. Congressional designation of the JTHG as a National

Heritage Area. It is also seeking National Scenic Byway–All American Road–designation from the Federal Highway Administration. These designations will greatly assist local efforts to encourage economic development opportunities through heritage tourism promotion, which provide economic opportunity while conserving the area’s distinctive and exceptional cultural landscape.

JTHG lies within one of the fastest growing regions in the United States. Because of this, the National Trust for Historic Preservation selected JTHG as one of the 11 Most Endangered Historic Places in America. The JTHG Partnership, made up of over 150 public and private entities, is working collaboratively with local governments, businesses, developers, preservationists, and destination-marketing organizations to create an economically driven solution that celebrates and promotes the region.

RAPPAHANNOCK RIVER WATER TRAIL



The Commonwealth of Virginia is blessed with many historic and beautiful rivers, and the Rappahannock is known statewide for its natural beauty and its meandering path through important historical areas. Providing public access to these natural resources helps both to ensure their conservation and to grow a constituency for river protection in the future. This proposal involves placing a conservation easement on over 4,000 acres of land running up the Rappahannock and Rappahannock Rivers for 20+ miles

from the City of Fredericksburg through five Virginia Counties. The goal is to provide a water trail with public access points located throughout the alignment.

The City of Fredericksburg will hold the easement. The Nature Conservancy, Virginia Outdoors Foundation and Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries will all be co-easement holders. The local grassroots organization Friends of the Rappahannock, the manager of the Rappahannock River Water Trail, has two grants from the National Park Service Bay Gateways network to develop interpretive resources for the trail, including a 32 page atlas and an orientation center, which are both underway. The first phase of the Water Trail, about 30 miles, largely coincides with the City of Fredericksburg's 4,232 acres of riverfront easement. This impressive initiative has just begun and its eventual success will depend on a strong regional partnership with the adjoining local governments.

LOUDOUN COUNTY STREAM VALLEY PARKS



Loudoun County, Virginia is developing a corridor of park lands, trails, and related resources between the border with Fairfax County and “Goose Creek Keep Loudoun Beautiful Park.” This “linear park”—almost 15 miles long—is a priority in the Loudoun County General Plan and in the County’s Long-Range Transportation Plan. It is intended for hiking, transportation, education, and other recreational pursuits. In addition to county and regional parklands, the corridor embraces regenerating forests, fields, suburban streetscapes, a stream valley, and golf courses, as well as Civil War fortifications, American Indian pathways, and other places of varied historic and cultural importance.

On June 3, 2006 Loudoun County, with the support of the Loudoun County Parks Advisory Board, Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority, private landowners, and the Loudoun Convention & Visitors Association, received designation from the National Park Service of a 15-mile linear park as a segment of the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail. Loudoun County Department of Parks, Recreation and Community Services is working on the next segment of the scenic trail to the west of White’s Ferry.



ANACOSTIA WATERSHED FORESTS PROTECTION



The Anacostia River, one of the most polluted in the country, is often thought of as a Washington, D.C. river, but over 80% of the Anacostia Watershed's 176 square miles is in Maryland within Montgomery and Prince George's Counties. With over 800,000 residents in the Watershed—over 4,900 residents per square mile compared to 250 per square mile for the Chesapeake Bay Watershed—current and projected development is a major threat to the remaining forest parcels that are critically important for watershed health. The SGA believes that the information and resources to protect those forests is currently available and should be a top regional priority.



Following 19 years of cooperative action for the river, a reorganization of restoration efforts is currently in progress. A comprehensive plan to restore the river will not be completed for several years. One critical conservation priority that cannot, and need not, wait for completion of the cleanup plan is the protection from development of the remaining forests along the River's upstream headwaters and floodplains.

In 2005, a working group of agencies coordinated by the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) produced the Anacostia Watershed Forest Management and Protection Strategy (FMPS). The FMPS accurately and comprehensively identifies the priority forest parcels for conservation, including 6,900 acres of privately owned mature hardwood forests that occupied just 6 percent of the watershed in 2001 when the data was collected. (Since then, these areas have been reduced by hundreds of acres or more.)

With the recent availability of significant funding for land conservation from Maryland's Program Open Space, the counties and state should make acquisition and protection of these areas a top priority.

In September 2006, the Chesapeake Bay Executive Council, including the governors of Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, and the Mayor of the District of Columbia, formally called for "innovative actions and initiatives for the retention, expansion and stewardship of forestlands of critical importance to water quality" in the Bay region. This initiative should now begin with the conservation of the watershed forests of the Anacostia.

The goal of the Washington Smart Growth Alliance is to enhance regional collaboration; encourage mixed-use, pedestrian- and transit-oriented development projects; promote housing and transportation choices for a range of incomes throughout the region, particularly infill situations; and respect and conserve significant environmental, cultural, and recreational resources. To download this report and learn more about the Alliance, please visit our website, www.sgalliance.org.

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The Alliance is a partnership among
the following organizations:

Chesapeake Bay Foundation

Coalition for Smarter Growth

Enterprise Community Partners

Greater Washington Board of Trade

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