

VLCF Listening Session Notes

March 10, 2021

Code Specific Comments:

- Leigh Mitchell, Natural Resource and Environmental Protection Coordinator of Upper Mattaponi Indian Tribe
 - What is being done to incorporate Virginia Tribes into VLCF's programs? She would like to see **Virginia's Tribes have representation on the board, the task force, and be eligible to apply for grants.**
 - She suggested this is probably best done in direct contact with tribes.
- Matt Gerhart, Northern Virginia Conservation Trust
 - He appreciates how helpful DCR staff are to work with. He has noticed that the Open Space and Parks category tends to be over prescribed. It is a popular category, but is also where projects end up that don't fit in other categories. **Are there restrictive categories that should be changed? Should funding allocations be changed?**
- Andrea Reese, NOVA Parks/Land Trust Accreditation Commission
 - There is a challenge of being in the **role of a nonprofit land trust and having to find a local or state partner to co-hold an easement**, as currently required by the Code of Virginia. Local easement programs come and go, but nonprofits (particularly accredited land trusts) have proven their staying power.
 - She would like the VLCF Board to consider allowing accredited nonprofits to be eligible to apply for grants without a government partner. She would like the program to allow accredited land trusts to hold easements without the required public body co-holder. This would be in line with what other states do. She recognizes this would involve a change in the Code.
- Kerry Hutcherson, Rudy, Coyner & Associates, PLLC
 - He seconds what Andrea said: **the co-holder requirement** can slow down land conservation. In some areas it can be very hard to find a public body co-holder or a trust may face issues with co-holding. He supports removing that requirement.

Non Code Specific Comments:

General Comments:

- Peter Hujik, Piedmont Environmental Council
 - The current **application process** is pretty lengthy and requests a lot of information. He **suggests it would be helpful if the process was streamlined or was a two-step process.**

- We could use the pre-application rounds for the two-step process, if applicants were asked to submit less information for that round. If they make the cut, applicants would then be asked to do a full application for the next round.
- To the extent possible, **it would be helpful to coordinate the timing and sequencing of grant rounds** with other state and federal grant programs (with VOF, LWCF and NRCS, etc.). Ideally some of the funding sources could be used as match for others.
- Matt Gerhart NVCT second's Peter's approach to applications. **It would be helpful to have a lighter lift for the first application**, and require more detail for the second. This would also allow for more back and forth with staff.
- Matt Gerhart, NVCT. He would like to make sure **meeting materials are shared sooner with the public** in advance of VLCF Board meetings so that people know what is coming.
- Parker Agelasto, Capital Region Land Conservancy
 - He agrees that **getting materials out in advance of meetings** is critical. Thank you for agreeing to do that. The earliest we can give notice the better. Having a portal for all of the documents, not just the agenda, would be the most helpful.
 - He asks that we reconsider **when we hold public comment during the VLCF** Board meetings. When held at the end of the meeting, all of the business is done. It would be nice if there was a public comment period before votes were taken on the manual and the grant awards. If we require people to register ahead of time to give public comment, it would be helpful to know in advance, otherwise people might just show up expecting to speak and be left out.
- Denise Nelson, representing Middle Peninsula Planning District Commission
 - Thanked DCR for the support in developing applications and noted while we love that the manual points to the use of certain data sets for awarding points, these don't always accurately represent rural areas. She **suggests allowing other models and data to be used, where our models are not accurate.**
- Alison Teetor wrote a comment: "I agree with current speaker- Denise Nelson - **data sets are not up to date or accurate** - I don't have a mike so can't speak but that is my comment."
- Nikki Rovner, Nature Conservancy
 - 2019 House Bill 2009 was intended to reorder the process of VLCF grant rounds. She knows that staff have developed the pre-application round and report as a way to address this requirement, but she would **like the subcommittee to look at this and determine the best way of handling the legislation.**
 - The **Board should keep a running list of ideas presented for future legislative action.**

Category Scoring Comments:

- Mike Nardolilli, Executive Director of the Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin
 - He wants the **VLCF manual to include drinking water source water protection** as a separate scoring category for the grants. As he reads the manual now, there is no differentiation between properties above and below a drinking water intake. He believes there should be some recognition of the value of the property that is above the intake and could be used to protect drinking water.
 - 75% of the drinking water in the DC area comes from the Potomac River. Land Prioritization Project to classify properties by how valuable they are for drinking water.
 - Suggests the scoring criteria be changed to award points for drinking water protections, based on tools such as the Land Prioritization Project that the Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin has developed.
- Matt Gerhart, NVCT. How can **urban areas compete successfully for open space and natural areas categories**? Finding ways to better incentivize local or regional natural areas programs could help.
- Parker Aelasto CRLC. On the issue of scoring, **population should factor into the scoring (per capita)**. A park that serves a lot of people should be prioritized over one that serves only a few.
- Parker Aelasto CRLC. In the **Parks and Open Space category, points are awarded** for being adjacent to other conserved lands. New stand-alone parks should be prioritized. This is an equity issue. Wealthy communities have about three times the number of park acres than those less fortunate. No points should be awarded for being adjacent to other conserved lands. A scoring system like this reinforces that disparity. Additionally, the Protected Landscapes Resilience layer already prioritizes adjacent lands in ConserveVirginia.
- Parker Aelasto CRLC. It seems that in the **Historic category there is an unequal scoring system** that favors landscape-scale projects rather than small, specific projects. He asks that BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) projects in the Historic category receive further attention. The history of the BIPOC community is largely undocumented. But the Historic category is based on documented historic sites. If a BIPOC project does have documentation that means it is extremely important. If it has risen to that level it should be prioritized and get more points in the Historic category.

ConserveVirginia Comments:

- Kevin Tate, Shenandoah Valley Conservation Collaborative
 - **He is concerned with the use of ConserveVirginia as a tool to prioritize VLCF projects and funding.** Some of the layers and some of the resources identified

do not accurately reflect the Valley. As he understands it, the Agriculture and Forestry layers of ConserveVirginia are likely to change in the future, as DCR has shown a willingness to update it with partner input. Those in the Valley would like to contribute.

- Stefanie Taillon, Virginia Farm Bureau
 - **ConserveVirginia** can be a valuable tool, especially as updated and evolves. She would like to treat ConserveVirginia as tool, not strict criteria.
- Kerry Hutcherson
 - He thinks **ConserveVirginia** is a great tool. He appreciates its availability as a tool, but is concerned about it being something that mandates provisions in an easement, or what type of easement can be taken by an easement holder.
- Matt Gerhart, NVCT. He uses **ConserveVirginia** internally and finds it as a useful tool, but doesn't want it rigidly tied to funding.
- Parker Agelasto CRLC. He sees value in the **ConserveVirginia model**, but feels that the VLCF Historic scoring criteria overweighs the value of ConserveVirginia. This could be addressed either through changes to ConserveVirginia or to VLCF scoring criteria to elevate historic BIPOC sites. It is a step in the right direction to add the Colored Troops battlefield layers to the Historic layer of ConserveVirginia, but we need to recognize and prioritize other BIPOC history, including sites that have less documentation.