“We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.”

— Aldo Leopold
Outdoor recreation is beneficial to overall well-being – the mind, body, and spirit. Having fun is key for the health of both children and adults. By providing a safe, attractive environment for physical activity, parks and open spaces play an essential role in advancing an active and healthy lifestyle. Recreation and parks bring together diverse groups of people and organizations to create healthy, vibrant communities. Access to parks, playgrounds, and green space increases the likelihood of Virginians being physically fit and lowering chronic diseases like asthma, diabetes, and heart disease. Partnerships and funding for parks and green spaces are critical to optimizing health and wellness.

**Recommendations**

The Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation should represent outdoor recreation resource planning interests at the Virginia Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion Collaborative and provide recreation links and research to the group through the Virginia Chronic Disease Collaborative Network.

**Obesity crisis**

It’s estimated that up to 18 percent of the U.S. gross domestic product was attributed to health costs. Nationally, medical costs for obese Americans are $1,500 per year higher than normal-weight Americans, or $147 billion annually. Almost half of Americans get below the recommended physical activity and 36 percent do not participate in any leisure-time physical activity. Being active in outdoor recreation could lessen the prevalence of obesity and help reduce health care costs.¹

**Figure 3.1 Adult obesity**

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>36% adults</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>26% adults</td>
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</tbody>
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*Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.*

In Virginia, obesity costs each taxpayer $146 per year. If one in 10 adults started a walking program, the state could save $85 million each year in health care costs.²

**Calories expended by participating in outdoor recreation**

Healthy-living assessments consider physical health contributions of different outdoor recreation activities, along with lifestyle. Public health and exercise specialists use metabolic intensity research to categorize the level of intensity for exercise and sports activities. The basis for creating an outdoor recreation ranking system is found in the Ainsworth, et al. article “Compendium of Physical Activities: an update of activity codes and MET intensities.”

More than 38,000 runners participated in the 2013 Monument Avenue 10K. Photo by Sports Backers, courtesy of Virginia Tourism Corp.
The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American College of Sports Medicine categorize physical activities. The relative metabolic intensity, or MET, is a ranking that calculates the amount of calories burned during exercise. An online tool calculates fitness advantages for many outdoor recreation activities.

The National Football League and the American Heart Association have teamed up to create the NFL PLAY 60 Challenge, a program that encourages kids to get the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity a day in school and at home.

Parks promoting health

• Virginia State Parks promotes health through a variety of opportunities in the parks.

• The National Recreation and Park Association works with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to promote healthy lifestyles. NRPA’s 2013 “Parks Build Healthy Communities: Success Stories” highlights strategies for building healthy communities through parks and recreation.

• The Trust for Public Land studied the relationship between parks and health. In a 2011 publication, “From Fitness Zones to the Medical Mile: How Urban Park Systems Can Best Promote Health and Wellness,” writers Peter Harnik and Ben Welle detail features and programs that promote physical activity and improve mental health.

“The National Park Service has a long-standing tradition of addressing conservation needs and environmental concerns. Yet we are just now, as a society, beginning to renew our understanding that open space and the natural world are critical to our health as a species.”

—The National Park Service, October 2011
“Healthy Parks Healthy People” U.S. Strategic Action Plan

Case study: Luray-Hawksbill Greenway

The Luray-Hawksbill Greenway is a popular two-mile walking and biking trail bordering Hawksbill Creek. The trail links neighborhoods and parking areas with the downtown shopping district in the town of Luray. To help walkers determine distance walked, yellow dots were placed on the trail in one-tenth-mile intervals. With supporters such as Valley Health/Page Memorial Hospital and the Page County Health Department, this greenway not only promotes public health, but it also has been the catalyst for many improvements and activities in Luray.
Resources for promoting health

• Virginia’s Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion Collaborative, supported through the CDC and initiated by the Virginia Department of Health in 2011, aligns the goals and activities of internal and external stakeholders in order to achieve better health outcomes. Ongoing conversation about health is encouraged through an online community, the Virginia Chronic Disease Prevention Collaborative Network.

• The Virginia Atlas of Community Health is an online source of community health indicators for Virginia.

• The CDC’s links for planning include information about nutrition, physical activity and maintaining a healthy weight, and diabetes data and trends.

• The Let’s Move program supported by the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion is an interagency plan to decrease the childhood obesity rate to 5 percent by 2030. The Partnership for a Healthier America also works with the private sector to solve the childhood obesity crisis.

• America on the Move promotes healthful eating and active living. This organization encourages multidisciplinary collaboration, translating cutting-edge science into accessible information to positively affect health behavior. Public and private partnerships at national, state and local levels are encouraged to build programs supporting behavioral change in individuals and at the community level.

This National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion article summarizes some of the obesity-reducing benefits of parks across local, state and national park systems and highlights specific examples of the commitment by park agencies to improve public health and play a role in obesity and chronic-disease prevention.

• In the spring of 2013, Weight of the State, a statewide conference on childhood obesity, was held in Richmond. An overview of the conference sessions is available online at http://weightofthestateva.com/sessions/.

• The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation advocates for regular physical activity to increase longevity and well-being and to help maintain a healthy weight and reduce the risk for obesity. In doing so, the organization supports parks and playgrounds that provide opportunities for active lifestyles.

• Active Living Research is a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation that informs advocates, practitioners and policymakers. The program focuses on communities, active transportation, schools and parks and recreation supporting and sharing research on environmental and policy strategies to promote daily physical activity for children and families. The organization emphasizes research related to children of color and lower income homes who are at risk for obesity.

• Active Living By Design is another initiative of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation that works to create community-led change by working with local and national partners to build a culture of active living and healthy eating.

Examples of programs of public health and active living:

• Live Healthy Lynchburg
• Healthy Appalachia Institute’s Blueprint for Health Improvement and Health-Enabled Prosperity
• Healthy Portsmouth Community Action Plan
Website directory

Virginia Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion Collaborative

Virginia Chronic Disease Collaborative Network
http://www.phconnect.org/group/virginia-chronic-disease-collaborative-network

Compendium of Physical Activities: an update of activity codes and MET intensities
http://juststand.org/portals/3/literature/compendium-of-physical-activities.pdf

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and American College of Sports Medicine - General Physical Activities Defined by Level of Intensity
http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/physical/pdf/PA_Intensity_table_2_1.pdf

Shapesense.com Activity-Based Calorie Burn Calculator

NFL Play 60 Challenge
http://www.nflrush.com/play60

Virginia State Parks – Part of a Healthy Lifestyle
http://www.dcr.virginia.gov/state_parks/health.shtml

National Recreation and Park Association – Resources for Recreation and Health
http://www.nrpa.org/Grants-and-Partners/Recreation-and-Health/Healthy-Communities/

National Recreation and Park Association – Parks Build Healthy Communities: Success Stories
http://www.nrpa.org/uploadedFiles/nrpaorg/Grants_and_Partners/Recreation_and_Health/Resources/Case_Studies/Healthy-Communities-Success-Stories.pdf

The Trust for Public Land – Economic and Health Benefits of Parks
http://www.tpl.org/research/parks/economic-health-benefits.html

The Trust for Public Land – From Fitness Zones to the Medical Mile: How Urban Park Systems Can Best Promote Health and Wellness

Luray-Hawksbill Greenway
http://www.hawksbillgreenway.org/

Virginia Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion Collaborative

Virginia Chronic Disease Collaborative Network
http://www.phconnect.org/group/virginia-chronic-disease-collaborative-network

Virginia Atlas of Community Health
http://www.atlasva.com/

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – Diabetes Data and Trends
http://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/statistics

Let’s Move
http://www.letsmove.gov/programs

Partnership for a Healthier America
http://ahealthieramerica.org/about/about-the-partnership/

America on the Move
https://aom3.americaonthemove.org/

National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion – Let’s Go to the Park Today: The Role of Parks in Obesity Prevention and Improving the Public’s Health

Weight of the State – 2013 conference sessions
http://weightofthestateva.com/sessions/

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
http://www.rwjf.org/

Active Living Research
http://www.activelivingresearch.org/

Active Living By Design
http://www.activelivingbydesign.org/

Living Healthy Lynchburg
http://www.livehealthylynchburg.com/play-healthy/

Healthy Appalachia Institute’s Blueprint for Health Improvement and Health-Enabled Prosperity
http://www.healthyappalachia.org/our-health-blueprint
Website directory continued

Healthy Portsmouth Community Action Plan
http://www.achievecommunities.org/resources/upload/ACHIEVE1pagerB.pdf

Works cited
