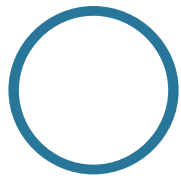


Open Space and Parks

IT'S NOT EASY BEING GREEN: OPEN SPACE AND PARKS IN HAMPTON ROADS



Over the four centuries since the founding of Jamestown in 1607, open spaces, green spaces and parks have helped define our regional identity. In some respects, we are plentifully endowed with open space. For example, the somewhat unknown and even a bit mysterious Great Dismal Swamp in southern Hampton Roads spans more than 111,000 acres of forested wetlands, providing refuge to over 200 species of birds and 87 species of reptiles and amphibians. This is among the reasons why the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation has singled out Hampton Roads for its “wealth of biodiversity.” Indeed, according to the Virginia Outdoors Plan (2002), one-third of all rare, threatened and endangered plants in the Commonwealth are to be found in our region.

Add to this our beaches, an array of attractive city parks plus national parkland, and it seems as if Hampton Roads has its share and more of open space. Reality is a bit different. While some areas of the region boast adequate, even excellent open space and parkland, others (Norfolk, for example) have comparatively little and even threaten to build upon the scarce open space that is available.

Pressures upon strained city, state and national budgets often have made it difficult for governmental units to satisfy the commitments they have made to open space and parks. **Still, of all the factors that currently challenge the availability of open space and parks in Hampton Roads, it is the progressive and almost relentless conversion of these areas to residential and commercial use that is most ominous, for once unsettled land has been urbanized with residents and structures, it seldom reverts to open space or park status. At the end of the day, it is societal growth that is most likely to compromise our lofty goals and eliminate our future options.**

If another 50 years pass that devour open space at the same rate as the last 50 years, then we will have eliminated a huge swath of land that could have been turned into parks or preserved as open space for all to enjoy. We will have made an almost irrevocable decision that parks and open space are not going to play significant roles in our urban future.

THE REGIONAL COMMITMENT AND THE BALANCING ACT

The citizens of Hampton Roads consistently state they place a high priority on the preservation of open space in their communities. In 2001, 80 percent of James City County residents who were surveyed agreed that “there should be restrictions on the amount of land sold for residential and commercial development.” In Chesapeake in 2003, 89 percent of survey respondents either “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with the statement that “farmland, natural areas and historic sites in Chesapeake are part of our heritage, and we owe it to our children and grandchildren to protect them.” These results echo the findings of statewide surveys conducted by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation and other organizations in 2000 and 2001.

Virtually all of the comprehensive plans adopted by the cities and counties of Hampton Roads express a commitment toward “smart” development and the preservation of open space. **Even so, the long-term patterns of settlement and consumption in Hampton Roads tell a different story. Our desire for ever-larger homes in new suburban developments, our dependence on the automobile and our preference for shopping at malls and big box stores have taken a toll on our natural environment and reduced the amount of undeveloped space around us. Throughout Hampton Roads, the conversion of farmland and open space to developments typically has outstripped the pace of population growth. The result has been sprawl.**

The city of Newport News' most recent comprehensive plan provides an instructive example. In the 1960s, development within Newport News expanded at an average rate of more than 400 acres per year, and the city's population increased by 24,515 people – resulting in a population density of 5.7 people per developed acre. However, between 1970 and 1992, development increased by more than 500 acres per year, while population grew by 37,709 – resulting in the lower population density of 3.3 people per developed acre. This is a mathematical demonstration of what many would label “sprawl.” Since 1992, development within Newport News has declined significantly. According to Newport News Framework for the Future, the city's 2000 population density had risen to 4.8 people per developed acre. This is a story that has been replicated in virtually every other jurisdiction in the region.

Today, all of the communities in Hampton Roads face the challenge of balancing the sometimes contradictory demands of development and conservation, each important in different ways to the health of the region. This is particularly true in communities such as Chesapeake, Suffolk and Isle of Wight County, which are among the fastest-growing in the region, but which still possess large tracts of rural, agricultural and other undeveloped land. These communities desire additional development and have the open space to accommodate it. Yet, they also want to increase their parklands and open space. Therein lies the conflict.

How well are we protecting the open space in our region? Let's examine two important indicators: public parks and other conservation lands.



THE REGION'S PARKS

The origin of public city parks in the United States stretches back to the second half of the 19th century, when landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead took the lead in transforming 843 acres of Manhattan real estate into New York City's Central Park. Olmstead's creation was an immediate success, and municipal authorities throughout the U.S. began to emphasize the importance of public open space. The city park movement reached its height between 1890 and 1940, when "great efforts were made to plan for parkland, to understand the relationship between parks and surrounding neighborhoods, and to measure the impact of parks," according to Peter Harnik in his 2003 report, "The Excellent City Park System: What Makes It Great, and How to Get There." Hampton Roads' oldest parks date from this era; Norfolk's City Park (later renamed Lafayette Park) was established in 1892.

Today, all of Hampton Roads' communities possess a city or county department responsible for parks and recreation and the preservation of open space is considered to be a critical public goal. As stated succinctly by the Trust for Public Land in its October 2000 report, *Benefits of Open Space*, "Urban green space provides a range of tangible benefits, such as mitigating air and water pollution, combating suburban sprawl, providing opportunities for recreation, reducing crime and fostering cohesive neighborhoods, attracting businesses, and stabilizing property values. As part of a broader urban agenda, investing in open space can serve as an anchor for revitalizing neighborhoods and building healthy communities."

The communities of Hampton Roads have set aside more than 22,000 acres of land as city and county parks, ranging in size from small neighborhood playgrounds to the 8,139-acre Newport News Park, one of the largest municipal parks in the country. These facilities offer a wide array of both passive and active recreational opportunities to Hampton Roads residents. Beyond playgrounds, picnic shelters and athletic fields, our local departments of parks and recreation maintain public beaches, boat ramps, fishing piers, skate parks, nature trails, greenways and even a working farm.

Table 1 reports the amount of park space that exists in the cities and counties of Hampton Roads (not counting state and national parkland). **The region's "all-star team" consists of Isle of Wight County, James City County, Suffolk and Newport News, if available park space per citizen is the criterion. However, if we look at dollars spent per citizen on parks, then Virginia Beach, Williamsburg, Newport News and Hampton lead the way. The laggards in terms of available acreage per citizen are Norfolk, Portsmouth and Poquoson, each of which provides fewer than five acres of parkland per 1,000 citizens. The more rural jurisdictions within the region typically spend the least per citizen on parks – Isle of Wight County, York County and Chesapeake.** Ultimately, however, York County and Newport News devote the largest proportions of their total areas to parks – 10.3 percent in York County and 8.2 percent in Newport News.

Hampton Roads is home to national and state parks of both natural and historical significance. The Colonial National Historical Park spans more than 9,000 scenic acres, encompassing Historic Jamestown, the Yorktown Battlefield, the Colonial Parkway, Green Spring Plantation and the Cape Henry Memorial in Virginia Beach. The Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation oversees the False Cape and First Landing State Parks in Virginia Beach, as well as the Chippokes Plantation and York River State Parks to the west and north. These parks are supplemented by a network of national and state wildlife refuges, many of which are accessible to the public for hunting, fishing, hiking and wildlife observation. Figure 1 illustrates where the local, state and national parklands and wildlife refuges are located within our region.

TABLE 1

PARK SPACE AND PARK BUDGETS IN THE CITIES AND COUNTIES OF HAMPTON ROADS, 2004-2005

	2004 Estimated Population	2005-06 Parks/Rec Budget	Acreage in City/County Parks	Parks/Rec Per Capita Spending	City/County Park Acreage Per 1,000 People	City/County Park Acreage as a % of Total Acreage
Chesapeake	214,725	\$6,851,914	2,042.83	\$31.91	9.51	0.94
Hampton	145,951	\$12,607,328	1,470.42	\$86.38	10.07	4.42
Newport News	181,913	\$19,905,953	3,578.74	\$109.43	49.91	8.22
Norfolk	237,835	\$15,887,200	858.00	\$66.80	3.61	2.48
Poquoson	11,700	\$683,630	49.50	\$58.43	4.23	0.48
Portsmouth	100,169	\$6,000,000	184.37	\$59.90	1.84	0.87
Suffolk	78,994	\$3,300,000	1,433.00	\$41.78	18.14	0.56
Virginia Beach	438,415	\$71,450,096	3,734.30	\$162.97	8.52	2.35
Williamsburg	11,465	\$1,250,000	56.00	\$109.03	79.02	0.97
Isle of Wight County	33,417	\$718,661	559.50	\$21.51	16.74	0.28
James City County	57,525	\$2,500,000	1,391.40	\$43.46	24.19	1.52
York County	61,758	\$1,683,931	6,998.00	\$27.27	10.49	10.32
Hampton Roads	1,573,867	\$142,838,713	22,356.06	\$90.8 avg.	8.24 avg.	3.08 avg.

*Note: Parks acreage does not include golf courses, school grounds, recreation centers, museums or other specialty sites.

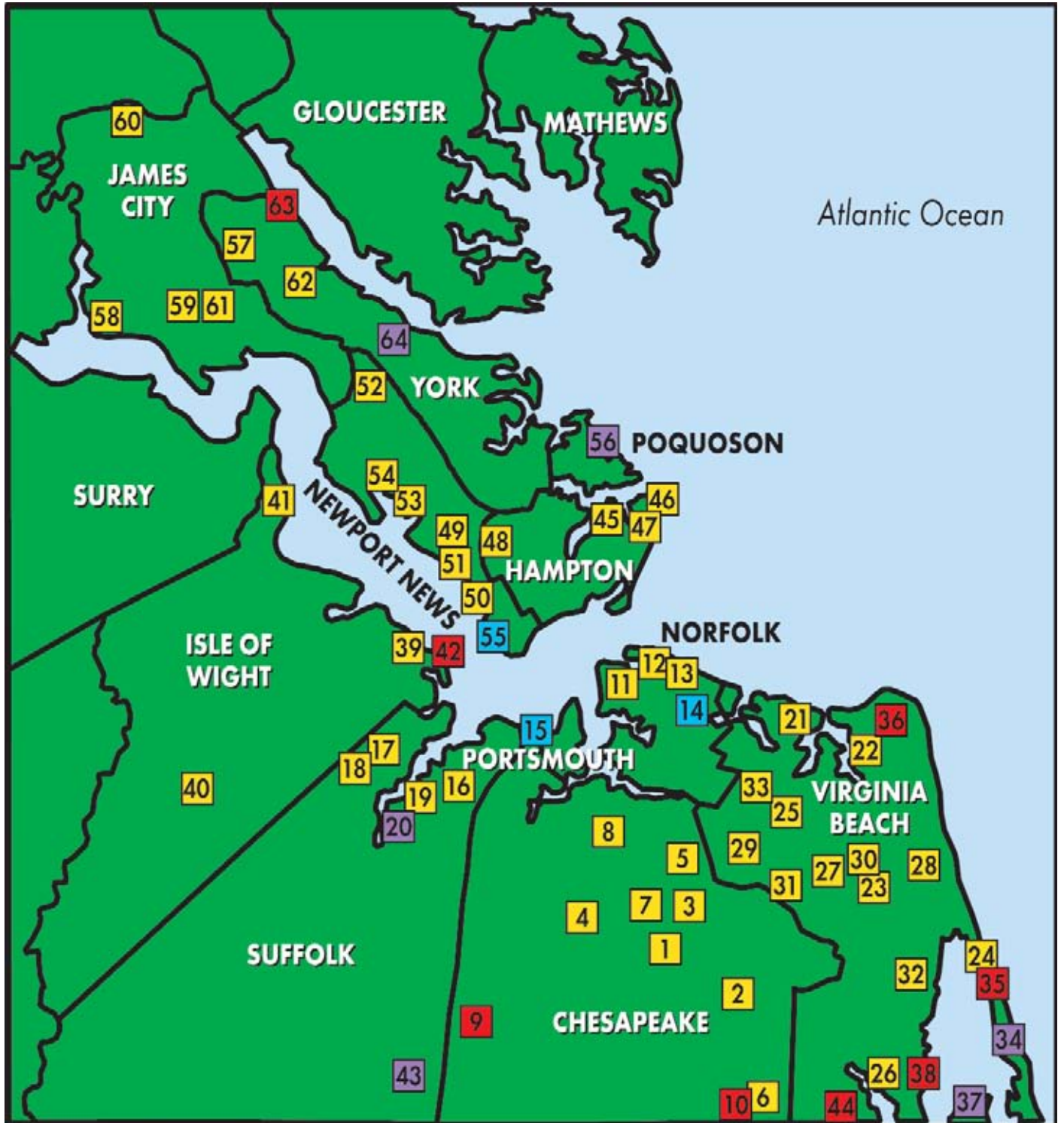
National parks and state parks are not included.

Newport News numbers do not include portions of Newport News Park located in York County.

Williamsburg numbers do not include Waller Mill Park.

York County numbers include portions of Newport News Park located in York County.

**FIGURE 1
PARK LOCATIONS IN HAMPTON ROADS**



SOUTHSIDE

PARK ACREAGE

CHESAPEAKE

1	Bells Mill Park	114
2	Centerville Park	90
3	Chesapeake City Park	76
4	Deep Creek Park	225
5	Indian River Park	91
6	Northwest River Park	763
7	Oakgrove Lake Park	130
8	South Chesapeake Park	153
9	Great Dismal Swamp WMA	758
10	Northwest River Natural Area Preserve	2,788

NORFOLK

11	Lafayette Park	60
12	Northside Park	51
13	Tarralton Park	70
14	*Norfolk Botanical Garden	155

PORTSMOUTH

15	Hoffler Creek Wildlife Preserve	142
----	---------------------------------	-----

SUFFOLK

16	Bennetts Creek Park	50
17	Lone Star Lakes	1,063
18	Crump's Mill Pond	70
19	Sleepy Hole Park	86
20	Nansemond National Wildlife Refuge	411

VIRGINIA BEACH

21	Bayville Park	68
22	Great Neck Park	70
23	Holland Pines Park	60
24	Little Island Park	123
25	Mount Trashmore Park	165
26	Munden Point Park	100
27	Princess Anne Park	302
28	Red Wing Park	97
29	River Oaks Park	71
30	Rolling Woods Park	59
31	Stumpy Lake Park	1,120
32	West Neck Creek Park	175
33	Williams Farm Park	58
34	Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge	7,732
35	False Cape State Park	4,321
36	First Landing State Park	2,888
37	Mackay Island National Wildlife Refuge	8219
38	Princess Anne Wildlife Management Area	1,546

ISLE OF WIGHT COUNTY

39	Carrollton Nike Park	150
40	Heritage Park and Fairgrounds	262
41	Hardy District Park	50
42	Ragged Island Wildlife Management Area	1,537
43	Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge	111,000
44	North Landing River Natural Area Preserve	3,441

PENINSULA

PARK ACREAGE

HAMPTON

45	Gosnold's Hope Park	103
46	Grandview Nature Preserve	578
47	Grundland Creek Park	75
48	Sandy Bottom Nature Park	456

NEWPORT NEWS

49	Deer Park	50
50	Huntington Park	60
51	Lake Maury Natural Area	127
52	Newport News Park	8,139
53	Riverview Farm Park	279
54	Stoney Run Park	228
55	Mariners' Museum Park	550

POQUOSON

56	Plum Tree Island National Wildlife Refuge	3,501
----	---	-------

WILLIAMSBURG

57	Waller Mill Park	2,700
----	------------------	-------

JAMES CITY COUNTY

58	Chickahominy Riverfront Park	141
59	Freedom Park	689
60	Upper County Park	79
61	Warhill Sports Complex	406

YORK COUNTY

62	New Quarter Park	540
63	York River State Park	2,550
64	*Colonial National Historical Park	9,000

PARK DESIGNATIONS

	Local		National
	State		Private

*Fee charged for admission

PARKS AND RECREATION IN VIRGINIA BEACH: A PROPITIOUS EXAMPLE

In the 2003 study authored by Peter Harnick of the Trust for Public Land (TPL), and published under the title “The Excellent City Park System,” the TPL identified seven factors that contribute to an excellent city park system:

1. A clear expression of purpose
2. An ongoing planning and community involvement process
3. Sufficient assets in land, staffing and equipment to meet the system’s goals
4. Equitable access
5. User satisfaction
6. Safety from crime and physical hazards
7. Benefits for the city beyond the boundaries of the parks

Virginia Beach (one of the largest American cities) is the only community in Hampton Roads whose parks are regularly assessed by the TPL. It is clear from the TPL’s data – and on-site visits confirm – that the city’s park system performs rather well on all seven counts. Compared to other low population-density cities studied by the TPL, Virginia Beach measures up well in total acres of parkland, in the percentage of city land devoted to parks, in park-related expenditures per resident and the number of employees per park unit. Additionally, the TPL has singled out Virginia Beach for its achievements in providing equitable park access to the disabled.

Virginia Beach has been blessed with favorable “start-up” conditions for an excellent park system – a strong tax base and a generous supply of attractive waterfront property. Further, open space has been augmented by Virginia Beach’s two state parks, portions of the North Landing River Natural Area Preserve and the Back Bay and Mackay Island National Wildlife Refuges. These are large conservation lands managed by state or federal authorities. Moreover, the Virginia Beach Department of Parks and Recreation still has the potential to draw upon substantial tracts of undeveloped land that are now scarce in neighboring cities like Norfolk, Portsmouth and Newport News.

Even so, the city of Virginia Beach has made the most of these favorable conditions. The Department of Parks and Recreation is assisted by an active Parks and Recreation Commission, a volunteer advisory group whose members are appointed by the City Council. The commission’s Open Space Subcommittee is responsible for “identifying and prioritizing potential open space sites throughout the city to serve future outdoor recreational purposes.” Between August 2000 and May 2006, the Open Space Acquisition Program acquired 1,706 acres on 14 different sites throughout Virginia Beach, including Stumpy Lake. The programs and accomplishments of the Parks and Recreation Department are detailed exhaustively in its 2004-05 annual report, and the department’s goals for the future are laid out clearly in the 2000 Update of Virginia Beach Outdoors Plan. Both documents are accessible online for all city residents (www.vbgov.com/dept/parks).

PARK SPACE IN THE REGION’S DEVELOPED CORE

If Virginia Beach has made acquiring and preserving open space a high priority, then its counterparts in the highly developed communities of Hampton, Newport News, Norfolk and Portsmouth recently have not done so to the same degree. The parks and recreation resources of these cities typically are allocated to other tasks, such as maintaining and enhancing existing park space, and providing a variety of recreational opportunities for a denser population.

There are few undeveloped stretches of land in these four cities that have not already been set aside for conservation purposes. Moreover, much of the development that defines these cities' present-day character occurred in the three decades following World War II. Park creation declined throughout the United States in this era, as planners sought to address their communities' open space needs through low-density development and the construction of private homes with backyards.

Still, it is noteworthy that Hampton and Newport News are home to several large and distinctive parcels of public green space. Newport News Park spreads over 8,139 acres in Newport News and York County. Its amenities include more than 30 miles of trails for hiking and biking, a 188-site campground, canoe and paddleboat rental, freshwater fishing and Civil War-era fortifications and earthworks. In the northeast corner of Hampton, the Grandview Nature Preserve covers more than 475 acres of salt marsh, tidal creeks and Chesapeake Bay beachfront. Hampton's Sandy Bottom Nature Park comprises 456 acres of forest and wetlands wedged between Interstate 64 and the Hampton Roads Center Parkway. A generation ago, Sandy Bottom was pocked by garbage dumps and borrow pits. Since its transformation into a wildlife preserve and environmental education center in 1989, Sandy Bottom Nature Park has become one of the most popular parks in the state, with approximately 600,000 visitors in 2005.

By contrast, neither Norfolk nor Portsmouth administers a city park of more than 70 acres. Portsmouth's largest two parks, Churchland Park and City Park, each comprise fewer than 40 acres. Nonetheless, the city of Portsmouth has demonstrated a commitment to the acquisition of new parkland, despite limited resources. According to parks director Mike Morris, four neighborhood-size (five acres or fewer) park projects are currently under development, each of which is being funded through private donations or federal grants.

In Norfolk, park creation has been the subject of considerable public contention, as local residents and the City Council have sparred over the future of "one of only a few remaining tracts of maritime forest in the city," as noted in a February 2005 report published by the Trust for Public Land Center for City Park Excellence, titled "The Park System of Norfolk, Virginia: An Analysis of Its Strengths and Weaknesses." A citizens' group called the Bay Oaks Parks Committee gathered more than 5,300 signatures in a petition drive seeking to demonstrate public interest in turning the vacant Ocean View property into a 21-acre public park. In February 2006, a Circuit Court judge rendered the petitions invalid on a legal technicality. The ruling awaits appeal and this land's future is uncertain, though recent city elections in Norfolk have been interpreted by some observers as chastening several elected officials perceived to be opponents of this park. A recent *Virginian-Pilot* editorial (Jan. 17, 2006) asserted that, "The city's parks need more attentive stewards," an assessment that echoes the conclusions of a recent TPL study of the Norfolk park system (which was commissioned by the Bay Oaks committee in 2004).

DEALING WITH SPRAWL: PARKS IN THE REGION'S GROWING COMMUNITIES

Chesapeake, Suffolk, Isle of Wight County, James City County and York County are among the fastest-growing communities in Hampton Roads. According to U.S. Census Bureau estimates, between 2000 and 2004, their populations increased annually at a rate of 2.3 percent (James City County) and 4.6 percent (Isle of Wight County). Generous tracts of open space contribute to these communities' appeal, but rapid growth simultaneously threatens to diminish their open-space resources and the very attractiveness that spurred this growth. Proposals to address this land-use dilemma figure prominently in these localities' comprehensive plans.

In all five communities, local parks comprise only a small fraction of total conservation lands. The Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge alone spans tens of thousands of protected acres in Chesapeake and Suffolk. Other large sources of conservation lands include Colonial National Historical Park and the U.S. Naval Weapons Station on the northern peninsula. Such federal protection notwithstanding, these communities have expressed a commitment to local park creation, seeking to ensure that their city/county park space keeps pace with population growth and new development.

Chesapeake and Suffolk each support a healthy mixture of neighborhood, community and district parks. In addition to the generous green space and recreational facilities of large properties like Chesapeake's Northwest River Park and Suffolk's Lone Star Lakes Park, both cities can boast several recently completed and future park projects. In Chesapeake, an Open Space

Ordinance mandates the charging of fees to developers who do not provide and develop neighborhood parks. If developers do not provide a park site within a new subdivision, then their fees rise from \$500 to \$1,000 per recorded lot. However, it should be noted that this can be accomplished only when the land in question requires rezoning. State statutes forbid charging such fees to developers who utilize undeveloped, but already properly zoned, land. This means, for example, that the city of Chesapeake cannot assess such fees on many new developments in that city.

The growing counties of Hampton Roads have likewise demonstrated initiative to expand and improve their public park systems. In the last two years, Isle of Wight County has allocated \$1.5 million in funds through its Capital Improvements Plan for the purchase and conservation of public open space. In James City County, voters approved a \$15 million parks and recreation bond referendum in November 2005. The bonds will pay for improvements at Warhill Sports Complex, Freedom Park, Chickahominy Riverfront Park and for the continued development of greenways and trails. In York County, plans to complete a new 186-acre athletic field complex are under way.

OTHER CONSERVATION LAND

Public parks are the most visible and readily accessible form of open space in our region, but they are only part of a larger network of conservation lands. The Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) maintains a comprehensive, continually updated database of the many different kinds of conservation lands found within the state. This resource includes not only parks and wildlife refuges, but also other federal, state and local protected lands. Private conservation easements and preserves managed by nonprofit organizations like The Nature Conservancy are also tracked by the DCR's database.

As Table 2 indicates, 172,992 acres in Hampton Roads have been set aside by federal, state, local and private authorities for conservation purposes. This is roughly equivalent to 15 percent of all land in our region, or 110 acres of conserved land for every 1,000 residents. The preponderance of this land is in federal hands, including five national wildlife refuges (98,023 acres), numerous military installations (59,725 acres) and Colonial National Historical Park (6,707 acres). It is widely acknowledged that the federal government, and particularly the U.S. military, plays a defining role in the Hampton Roads economy. The DCR's statistics reveal that federal institutions are similarly critical to the protection of our environment.

Data contained in Table 2 demonstrate that Hampton Roads rates favorably compared to the other two major urban areas in the Commonwealth of Virginia with respect to conservation lands. The comparative lack of federally protected lands in the Greater Richmond area is particularly evident.

TABLE 2

TOTAL CONSERVED ACREAGE: HAMPTON ROADS, NORTHERN VIRGINIA, RICHMOND

Region	Total Acreage in Region	2004 Population	Federal Conserved Acreage	Local Conserved Acreage	Private Conserved Acreage	State Conserved Acreage	VOF Conserved Acreage	Total Conserved Acreage	Percent of Acres Conserved	Conserved Acres Per 1,000 People
Hampton Roads	1,143,040	1,573,867	109,782	23,800	11,729	27,247	434	172,992	15.13	109.92
Northern Virginia	1,244,160	1,957,194	63,157	37,012	12,644	15,748	76,167	204,729	16.46	104.60
Greater Richmond	766,080	850,187	3,081	8,211	144	7,808	1,025	20,268	2.65	23.84

Hampton Roads = Chesapeake, Hampton, Newport News, Norfolk, Poquoson, Portsmouth, Suffolk, Virginia Beach, Williamsburg, Isle of Wight County, James City County and York County

Northern Virginia = Arlington County, Alexandria, Fairfax County, Fauquier County, Loudoun County and Prince William County

Greater Richmond = Richmond, Chesterfield County, Hanover County and Henrico County

In Northern Virginia, the conservation lands under private ownership are most striking, comprising 43 percent of protected lands in the region (compared to 7 percent in Hampton Roads and 6 percent in Greater Richmond). Most of these properties are conservation easements. That is, their landowners have agreed to donate or sell their rights of development, allowing a public or private conservation organization like the Virginia Outdoors Foundation to enforce the development restrictions. Since the Virginia Conservation Easement Act was passed by the General Assembly in 1988, easements have become an increasingly favored method of conservation. Easements are able to selectively target “only those rights necessary to protect specific conservation values, such as water quality or migration routes.” The other rights of landowners remain intact and “an easement property continues to provide economic benefits for the area in the form of jobs, economic activity and property taxes” (The Nature Conservancy, “How We Work,” www.nature.org). Significantly, several communities in Hampton Roads have recently developed or expanded Purchase of Development Rights programs in order to facilitate conservation easements in their jurisdictions.

Let’s look more closely at a few more of our region’s most noteworthy recent conservation initiatives:

INTERNATIONAL PAPER’S LAND SALES

In July 2005, International Paper Co. announced that it would sell some or all of the 6.8 million forested acres it owns across the United States. Since then, Hampton Roads has been a chief beneficiary of the multinational corporation’s decision.

“Tired of Sprawl?” asked the front-page headline in *The Virginian-Pilot* on Jan. 31, 2006, which added, “In Chesapeake, it ends here.” On that date, the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) announced it was acquiring 3,800 acres of International Paper’s holdings in southern Chesapeake. With support from the city of Chesapeake and The Nature Conservancy, VDGIF purchased the so-called Cavalier property for approximately \$3.9 million. The Cavalier tract harbors “a wide range of wildlife, including black bears, neotropical migratory songbirds, canebrake rattlesnakes, white-tailed deer and eastern wild turkeys” (VDGIF, Jan. 31, 2006). A Nature Conservancy representative called the purchase “critical protection for one of the largest blocks of land in its watershed.” VDGIF plans to open the property as a Wildlife Management Area in the spring.

Two months later, International Paper continued to make news in our region, as it announced “the single largest private land conservation sale in the history of the South” (VDGIF, March 28, 2006). For \$300 million, The Nature Conservancy and The Conservation Fund agreed to purchase 218,000 acres of woodlands spread throughout the southeastern United States. Of that total, 23,800 acres lie in Isle of Wight, Southampton, Surry and Sussex counties, and will be integrated into The Nature Conservancy’s Southern Forests Project. This project seeks to protect the Nottoway, Meherrin and Blackwater river systems, which together support “an exceptional breadth of biological diversity with over 100 rare plants, animals and natural communities” (The Nature Conservancy, Southern Forests Project, www.nature.org). Private investors will be allowed to acquire some of these acres, with The Nature Conservancy retaining the right of first negotiation.

THE HOFFLER CREEK WILDLIFE FOUNDATION

Land conservation is not only the work of large institutions like VDGIF and The Nature Conservancy. Hampton Roads’ forests and wetlands have also been protected by concerned citizens acting at a grass-roots level. In the early 1990s, Portsmouth resident Randi Strutton and five of her Churchland-area neighbors set out to rescue the last substantial parcel of wilderness in the Hoffler Creek watershed from the hands of developers. Their efforts bore fruit; in 1997 the city of Portsmouth arranged to purchase this 142-acre property for \$1 from the Virginia Department of Transportation. Strutton and her neighbors established the Hoffler Creek Wildlife Foundation to manage the new wildlife preserve, successfully raising \$117,000 in its first year of existence.

Today, Strutton serves as executive director of the foundation, which boasts more than 500 members and 200 active volunteers. The preserve is open to the public for bird watching and nature walks every Saturday; school and group programs can be arranged by appointment. The city of Portsmouth gave \$45,000 to the foundation for the 2005-06 fiscal year, but the majority

of the preserve's operating costs must be covered by grants, donations and volunteer support. "Every year you have to wonder where the money will come from," Strutton told the Portsmouth Currents community newspaper last year (Oct. 23, 2005).

THE WILLIAMSBURG LAND CONSERVANCY

The Williamsburg Land Conservancy touches several different communities in Hampton Roads by working to preserve the lands of the Historic Triangle that link Williamsburg, James City County and Upper York County. The conservancy currently protects 2,449 acres of land in the Historic Triangle, primarily in the form of conservation easements with private landowners like the Jamestown Building Corp. and the Williamsburg Winery. Beyond its direct influence over this land, the organization serves as a conservation advocate by working with governmental agencies and encouraging public-private partnerships throughout the region. Recent initiatives include the Jamestown Road Corridor Enhancement Program and the Church on the Main Beautification Project.

WHERE DO WE STAND?

Our region has much to be proud of in its preservation and maintenance of open space. Even so, the 2002 Virginia Outdoors Plan, a key planning document of the state's Department of Conservation and Recreation, contains a warning pertaining to open space initiatives that seems particularly relevant to our region:

Although national, state and local governments have developed a variety of location and goal-specific programs, policies and 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 management. As communities must address the negative impacts of haphazard development, so must they resolve the effects of heretofore unfocused conservation initiatives that are reactive, site-specific, narrow in scope, and/or disconnected.

The political diversity and geographical breadth of Hampton Roads (a euphemistic way to explain an absence of regional unity) have tended to exacerbate this tendency toward narrowly defined, disconnected initiatives. No single body serves as an open-space advocate for the entire region, although groups like the Williamsburg Conservancy, the Elizabeth River Project and the Chesapeake Bay Program have successfully addressed environmental issues that transcend state and local boundaries. Hampton Roads would surely benefit if these relatively young organizations – all founded in the 1980s or 1990s – could serve as an inspiration for more comprehensive regional cooperation in the future. The Hampton Roads Planning District Commission, which has completed detailed studies on transportation and water resource management, would provide an ideal forum for examining regional land use and open space in greater depth.

Likewise, a greater exchange of information and resources could profit the local parks systems of Hampton Roads, which operate largely in isolation of one another, despite their close geographic proximity and overlapping constituencies. The outstanding parks, beaches and natural areas in our region are utilized by residents from more than one locality. Cooperative initiatives would constitute a creative means of stretching tight parks and recreation budgets further, while providing the residents of Hampton Roads with access to more and different kinds of public open space. A walking/running trail currently under development that, when completed, will lead from downtown Suffolk to Chesapeake and Portsmouth, is a positive example. In general, greater publicity and public outreach would heighten awareness of the fine work achieved by many of our region's parks systems. Heightened awareness can lead not only to more park visitors, but also to more volunteer hours and a greater commitment of public funds.

The quality of life and the ultimate sustainability of a growing region like Hampton Roads depend on managing conservation as well as development in a thoughtful and comprehensive manner. As emphasized in the Virginia Outdoors Plan, successful green infrastructure planning can integrate these two processes in a way that addresses both natural and human needs, and provides a broad, unifying vision for the future. By all odds, this should be a priority of Hampton Roads in the years to come.

