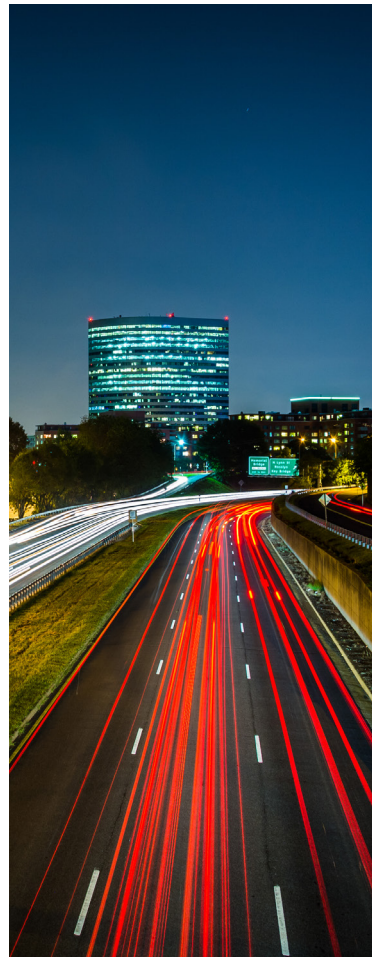


VIBRANT VIRGINIA

Engaging the Commonwealth to Expand Economic Vitality

Edited by Margaret Cowell and Sarah Lyon-Hill



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Chapter 11

Preserving Virginia's Scenic Beauty

Leighton Powell, Lynn M. Crump, Richard G. Gibbons, Lisa Dickinson Mountcastle, Patrick A. Miller, and Jisoo Sim

This chapter provides a history and overview of scenic resources in Virginia. The authors describe early scenic preservation efforts, the development of new programs to promote scenic beauty and engage the public, and the creation of a new scenic recognition tool that will allow rural and urban citizens to identify the scenic places that they consider most special. They conclude by highlighting the benefits of this new project, future goals, and watershed implications for both rural and urban settings.

Heaven and earth never agreed to frame a better place
for man's habitation than Virginia.

—Captain John Smith

When you hear the phrase “vibrant Virginia,” what comes to mind? Depending on where you live, you might envision pastoral landscapes, charming towns, and hamlets; rolling forests, mountains, and valleys; or coastal and Chesapeake Bay landscapes. These



Figure 11.1. Dogwood Lane

extraordinary scenic resources contribute so much to quality of life for all Virginians.

The urban-rural divide for scenic resources has a different history when compared to, say, economic or social factors. There is an interesting story to be told of rural-urban interaction over time. Starting in the early 1800s, poets in Europe began capturing the scenic experience of rural landscapes for urban residents living in industrializing cities. This later carried over to the US with the development of National Park lodges. In the 1900s, there was yet another shift with the advent of the environmental movement. Scenery was still in rural areas—often in the West and mostly on public lands—but often it was being managed to mitigate the impacts of resource extraction, not for beauty’s sake.

As a result, these scenic resources were available to urban residents who visited these lands, but most urban visitors did not know the status of the lands being managed to protect scenic value. Because of strong concerns for individual property rights, little attention was given at the time to urban scenic areas.

Today, new tools are being developed for preservation of scenic landscapes both rural and urban. The scenic viewshed register is envisioned as a way for all citizens to identify the local landscapes that are most significant and to encourage every Virginian to visit and enjoy these scenic vistas that contribute so much to Virginia’s physical, mental, and economic well-being.

This chapter provides an overview of scenic resources in Virginia in three parts: (1) early recognition and public concern; (2) the development of new programs to promote scenic beauty and engage the public; and (3) the creation of a new scenic recognition tool—the first of its kind in the US—that will allow rural and urban citizens to identify the scenic places that they consider most special. A concluding section notes the new project’s benefits, future goals, and viewshed implications for both rural and urban settings.

EARLY PROGRAMS FOR SCENIC RESOURCE RECOGNITION AND PRESERVATION IN VIRGINIA

Virginia’s sense of place is reflected in its extraordinary variety of landscapes throughout the Commonwealth. Its natural resources are a recognized value in the Constitution of Virginia, and the value of its scenery is identified in the Code of Virginia in Title 10.1—Conservation, General Provisions.

Scenic resources are identified in the Virginia Code in the Scenic Rivers Act Chapter 10.1-400, the Real Estate Section 58.1-3230 for special classifications, and the Transportation Section Title 33.2 for Virginia Byways and Scenic Highways. These code sections reflect the state’s longtime interest in the recognition, protection, and management of scenic resources for the use of Virginians and visitors to the state.

Decades ago, there was interest and concern at the federal level directed at studying the use of public lands for outdoor recreation. In 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt launched the Work Progress Administration (WPA), later renamed the Work Projects Administration, which led to the creation of national parks and parkways to provide jobs for workers and a respite for weary citizens. Four of these federal parkways are in Virginia, including the Blue Ridge and Colonial Parkway, both designed by landscape architect Stanley Abbott.

Two decades later, in 1957, Congress established the National Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission to examine outdoor recreation and other purposes on public lands and water areas of the US. The result of the study was a twenty-seven-volume report that outlined the supply, needs, and methods for advancing outdoor recreation programming.

From this effort came the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) in 1965, which led to the requirement of a State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, or SCORP, for each state to gain access to these funds. That same year, President Lyndon B. Johnson convened the first—and, to date, only—White House Conference on Natural Beauty. In his opening remarks to the delegates describing the conference’s purpose, President Johnson said, “This is why I have called for a new conservation: to restore as well as to protect, to bring beauty to the cities as well as to keep it in the countryside, to handle the waste products of technology as well as the waste of natural resources.” He added that he would be greatly disappointed if each state representative did not carry this message back to the governor and legislative body. Luckily for Virginia, State Senator FitzGerald Bemiss of Richmond attended the White House Conference and participated in the discussion of many good ideas. Returning home from Washington, DC, State Senator Bemiss established the Virginia Outdoor Recreation Study Commission.

The modern renaissance in Virginia’s outdoor planning and park development began in 1965 with the publication of the first Outdoor Recreation Plan, called Virginia’s Common Wealth, authored by landscape architect John Simonds.

The plan recommended the creation of numerous agencies and programs, including the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, the Virginia Byways Program, the Virginia Outdoors Foundation and its corresponding land-use tax credit program, and the Commission of Outdoor Recreation. The commission managed the development and implementation of the recommendations for Virginia’s great outdoors as well as the process for the acquisition of LWCF monies.

Virginia’s Common Wealth stated that “potential recreation and conservation areas, natural, cultural and landscape resources to Virginia scenery and scenic areas and aesthetic values are important” (Simonds 1965). It also directed the state to “identify areas of superior, distinctive, unusual, or unique scenery that [are] not protected or developed for public recreation use, including scenic streams or other water bodies” (ibid). This began a renewed focus on scenic resources that continues to this day.

VIRGINIA’S SCENIC PROGRAMS

The Commission on Outdoor Recreation recommended the establishment

of two state programs to identify and manage specific scenic resources for the benefit of the public: Virginia Byways and Virginia Scenic Rivers.

Virginia Byways

The Byways program began in Virginia in 1966 with the General Assembly's passage of enabling legislation. The program focuses on existing roads that have relatively high aesthetic or cultural values or that lead to or exist within areas of historical, natural, or recreational significance. Recommendations for Virginia Byway designation are initiated by citizens in the localities. Virginia Byways represent an exceptional example of regional landscapes that possess reasonable protection of their aesthetic and cultural values. Byways offer motorists the opportunity to bypass major roads and instead enjoy a leisurely motoring experience while accessing local historic, cultural, and recreational sites.

The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) and the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) co-manage the Byways program. Approximately 3,500 miles of roads are designated as Virginia Byways. Additional sections qualify but have not yet been designated at this time. Included within Virginia's program are five National Scenic Byways®, of which three are All-American Roads®, the highest designation of National Scenic Byway. A National Scenic Byway® is a road recognized by the US Department of Transportation for possessing one or more of the following six "intrinsic qualities": archeological, cultural, historic, natural, recreational, and scenic.

Virginia Scenic Rivers Program

In 1970 Governor Linwood Holton signed legislation creating the Virginia Scenic Rivers program—the only state program that specifically identifies and protects scenic resources. Scenic River designation is a bottom-up process that is initiated at the local level. Citizens can request Scenic River designation, but it is the local governing body that issues the request for a river evaluation study and, if the river qualifies, passes a required resolution of support for designation and identifies a local legislator to carry the legislation in the Virginia General Assembly.

The Virginia Scenic Rivers program identifies, recognizes, and provides a level of protection to rivers with significant scenic, historic,

recreational, and natural values. Designation allows for the continuation of all riparian uses while providing a stronger voice in the planning and implementation of federal and state projects that might affect the river.

DCR administers the Scenic Rivers program and supports the Byways program. Another of DCR's duties—related to parks and outdoor recreation—is to include scenic areas in the system of outdoor recreation facilities. Virginia Code Section 10.1-201 authorizes the DCR department director to acquire properties of scenic beauty. Section 10.1-203 deals with the establishment, protection, and maintenance of the Appalachian Trail and permits agreements with landowners and others to acquire properties to preserve its natural scenic beauty.

This has resulted in the preservation of some viewsheds and park resources from incompatible commercial development. It allows for the purchase of buffer areas to protect important visual resources and the coordination of public projects such as roads, bridges, and power lines to minimize the visual impact on a park or scenic area.

Other DCR code-driven responsibilities for scenic assets include:

- the development of a statewide comprehensive recreation and land conservation plan that includes scenic areas;
- the establishment, maintenance, protection, and regulation of a statewide system of trails that includes those of “significant scenic . . . qualities”; and
- the protection of the scenic beauty of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail.

The comprehensive plan for state outdoor recreation and conservation, called the Virginia Outdoors Plan, is revised every five years and includes recommendations for state park planning. According to the Virginia State Code, each Virginia state park is required to have a master plan that is updated every ten years and documents the natural and physical attributes of the properties. Included in this, when appropriate, is information concerning viewsheds or scenic resources. The planning and siting of facilities, including trails, are executed to take advantage of the best viewshed. State park plans that include scenic attributes include Grayson Highlands, Wilderness Road, Natural Bridge, Sky Meadows, Seven Bends, and Chippokes, to name a few.



Figure 11.2. McAfee Knob Clouds

These programs represented significant progress in Virginia’s ability to preserve and protect its exquisite scenic resources, but more was needed. In 2000, Virginia’s Advisory Council on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR) issued a report titled “The Impacts of Aesthetics on the Economy and Quality of Life in Virginia” that stated the need for additional scenic preservation programs and tools. It noted that many rural and urban vistas or viewsheds are not part of the Scenic Byways or Scenic Rivers programs despite meriting consideration. The report, though, left unanswered two questions: Who would create these new tools and programs, and how would they benefit Virginia’s extraordinary scenic beauty to the greatest extent possible?

SCENIC VIRGINIA AND THE PROMOTION OF SCENIC PRESERVATION IN THE COMMONWEALTH

Scenic Virginia was founded in 1998 after the Virginia General Assembly granted the billboard industry the right to cut down trees in front of billboards along highways on state rights-of-way. (Never mind that most of these trees were fully mature and predated the billboards by many years.) Having successfully opposed the legislation the year before, Richmonder Hylah H. Boyd and a group of dedicated citizens—many affiliated with the Garden Club of Virginia—realized that the need existed for a full-time

voice to advocate for the Commonwealth's rural and urban scenic assets with elected officials and the public.

Boyd and her group undertook a two-year campaign of engagement focused on outreach and fundraising. In 2000, Scenic Virginia hired its first executive director, Leighton Powell, who is still with the organization as of the summer of 2021. Following the lead of parent organization Scenic America, Scenic Virginia's early efforts focused on opposition to unsightly billboards as a means of improving visual quality and community character. During a meeting of the board of trustees in 2002, Powell suggested that Scenic Virginia pivot its mission to focus on the promotion and preservation of scenic beauty. This new stance, she noted, would offer a positive message that should resonate with every Virginian. Who, she asked, is opposed to scenic beauty?

The board voted enthusiastically in support of this new outlook, and Scenic Virginia began looking for new ways to engage Virginians in the preservation, protection, and enhancement of the scenic beauty of the Commonwealth. Early advocacy included promoting the Virginia Byways and the Virginia Scenic Rivers programs as well as encouraging historic preservation colleagues to preserve the viewsheds of historic sites to maintain their sense of place.

In 2003, Scenic Virginia served as the statewide coordinator of the multiyear, multiagency effort to bring the National Scenic Byways® (NSB) program to the Commonwealth. The NSB program showcases special rural and urban roadways, marketing them to national and international tourists who enjoy "taking in the scenic view."

Scenic Virginia also began assisting citizens in urban and rural localities wanting to preserve significant vistas and views and did so by stressing the point that scenic resources are critical to the physical, mental, and economic health of Virginia. The organization's unofficial motto became "Beauty is good for business, and Beauty is essential for the soul" to stress that businesses that can locate anywhere seek rural and urban places with a high quality of life to attract the best workforce.

One pivotal period for Scenic Virginia was in 2007 when the nonprofit worked with supporters to advocate for the preservation of the historic panorama known as "the View That Named Richmond." The View, which overlooks the James River from the historic neighborhood of Church Hill in the city's East End, is a cherished vista with an international connection: It is identical to a view of the River Thames from Richmond Hill in



Figure 11.3. James River

Richmond-upon-Thames, where Richmond, Virginia, founder William Byrd II had spent time as a boy.

The British view has an unusual history. At the end of the nineteenth century, as development from London began encroaching on the more rural areas of the River Thames, the English found their beloved view, which was featured prominently in art and books, threatened. The resulting uproar became known as “the Great Indignation” and is considered



Figure 11.4. Thames River

the first successful environmental movement in the United Kingdom. Parliament responded in 1902 by enacting the Richmond, Petersham, and Ham Open Spaces Act, forever preserving the view.

Although physically similar to the English view, Richmond, Virginia's historic panorama is an urban viewshed. The James River flows through the center of the city, and views of the James are particularly cherished because so many have been lost to development, including, unbelievably, what was once the Commonwealth's most significant vista: the view from Thomas Jefferson's capitol down to the James River, sacrificed to inappropriate and ill-considered development that forever despoiled that special place.

Development threats to the View That Named Richmond began after a private company purchased the riverfront parcel that sits squarely in the viewshed. The group trumpeted the economic benefits of a proposed high-rise building and requested that the site be designated for development in the Downtown Plan. Local elected officials very often embrace proposed development and its potential economic benefits over conservation measures. In this case, citizens made it clear that they would not back down. They showed up en masse at countless meetings and public hearings to argue that the best use of the riverfront parcel would be a view-saving linear park. In the end, the Downtown Plan listed the primary preferred use as "Park with Development" included as a secondary option. The plan also urged the City of Richmond to acquire the site, an action not taken years earlier because city officials were not aware of the public's passion for the special scenic resource.

The planning process to reach that point took two years and untold hours of public hearings, citizen meetings, and coalition-building. In the end, the sheer amount of time and energy invested in preserving this significant, internationally important Virginia vista led Leighton Powell and the Scenic Virginia Board to realize three significant points:

- Virginians care about urban viewsheds as well as rural. In response, Scenic Virginia made a point of featuring a Cities and Towns category in its new Virginia Vistas Photo Contest and seeking out urban honorees for the annual Scenic Awards event.
- Existing programs did not go far enough, and new tools must be developed to guide the preservation of scenic resources.

- Scenic Virginia must share its experience of working to preserve the View as a cautionary tale for citizens in rural and urban localities so that they might be spared the years of time and effort needed to preserve much-loved local scenic vistas.

Around this same time, Scenic Virginia trustee Richard G. Gibbons attended the Blue Ridge Parkway's Seventy-fifth Anniversary Symposium. There, Gibbons and fellow landscape architects celebrated the beauty of the Parkway, bemoaned the absence of scenic preservation tools, and discussed the need to recognize and preserve Virginia's most significant scenic viewsheds.

The recognition of the need for new scenic tools marked a turning point in Scenic Virginia's evolution and a new maturity among Virginians in understanding the relationship between scenic resources and their environs.

It had taken thirty or forty years to arrive at this point—to realize that a state trail is not just a path for walking or hiking but is also what is seen and experienced while there. This new, thoughtful approach needed to be reflected in the Virginia Outdoors Plan to demonstrate that while scenic resources are critical to quality of life, they cannot be fully appreciated unless they are factored into what surrounds them.

In 2011 Scenic Virginia convened a panel of esteemed state and national viewshed experts and landscape professionals to ask, “Are additional tools needed? Would a new Virginia Viewshed Register serve a useful purpose?”

In response, Scenic Virginia tasked its in-house Viewshed Committee's board members, advisory board members, and staff with researching existing scenic preservation programs in the US to help Virginians identify the places they love best and take steps to ensure their preservation. Realizing that such a program did not exist in the US, the Viewshed Committee set about to create one.

A NEW TOOL FOR SCENIC PRESERVATION: THE VIRGINIA VIEWSHED PROJECT

In developing its first-of-its-kind program, Scenic Virginia's Viewshed Committee determined that its primary goals should be ambitious and three-fold:

- It should engage the public in a meaningful way and assist citizens in conveying to local elected officials, planners, and others that these local scenic places are valued by the citizenry.
- It should increase “scenic” as a primary goal of land preservation and contribute toward developing a Scenic GIS layer for Virginia’s land conservation map.
- It must prove that the characteristics of a scenic landscape can be quantified in a manner that will produce consistent results (i.e., are not subjective).

Scenic Virginia envisioned the resulting Virginia Viewshed Project as a multipronged effort to identify, evaluate, and provide public designation to the Commonwealth’s most beloved rural and urban vistas and scenic lands. The Viewshed Committee felt confident that it could develop a statewide program to engage the public, and several conservation colleagues across Virginia had begun compiling scenic preservation data that could easily be incorporated into a statewide Scenic GIS layer.

The most daunting problem was determining how a small statewide conservation nonprofit could prove—in a scientific manner—that the characteristics of a scenic viewshed are not subjective. This goal was also clearly the most significant of the three and must be accomplished. And as it happened, an incredible opportunity arose that would transform the entire project. In January 2018 Dr. Patrick A. Miller, professor and former head of Virginia Tech’s Landscape Architecture Department, contacted Scenic Virginia to express Tech’s interest in participating in the statewide Viewshed Project. Scenic Virginia enthusiastically accepted the offer. Discussions ensued about what form that help might take.

During one conversation, Leighton Powell lamented the longtime absence of a Scenic category in state land preservation programs, referencing the statement from Virginia officials that scenic beauty is subjective. A light went off, and Miller immediately recognized the potential for groundbreaking work: Virginia Tech would refute the misguided notion that beauty is subjective by demonstrating that the characteristics of a scenic viewshed can be quantified scientifically—something that had never been done.

Miller and Jisoo Sim, then a PhD candidate in architecture, undertook an exhaustive, year-long review of existing research and literature related to scenic resources. Two databases were employed for the literature review. The Virginia Tech team created the first one from keyword searches for the following terms: scenic value, scenic beauty, scenic quality, visual quality, visual resource management, visual assessment, landscape preference, and landscape quality. The search produced 853 articles published in journals and books between 1969 and 2018. The Tech team also included abstracts for the articles contained in the database.

Next, using the same keywords, the Virginia Tech team mined the database created by Dr. Andrew Lothian of Scenic Solutions, which contains 1,854 publications published between 1936 and 2014. While more extensive—it includes articles and more diverse types of publications published over a longer period—it does not include abstracts. Lothian’s database is available on his Scenic Solutions website at <https://scenicsolutions.world/>.

Miller and Sim used both databases to compile a literature review that would become the groundwork for the Viewshed Register framework and protocols. This document represented a major step forward in the recognition of scenic resources, as the existing scenic resource data had never been searched and sorted in this manner. Scenic Virginia’s Viewshed Committee studied the literature review and immediately recognized the important implications of the work. For the first time, it would be possible to develop a defensible decision framework for identifying and assessing the characteristics of a scenic viewshed, and they asked Virginia Tech to create one.

The Virginia Tech team agreed and determined that the framework must possess the following three characteristics:

- be understandable (i.e., make sense);
- produce consistent, reproducible, and measurable results; and
- provide a means of engaging the public in the scenic designation process.

First, though, the Virginia Tech team needed to agree on a definition of “viewshed.” They determined that it is the 360-degree area that is seen

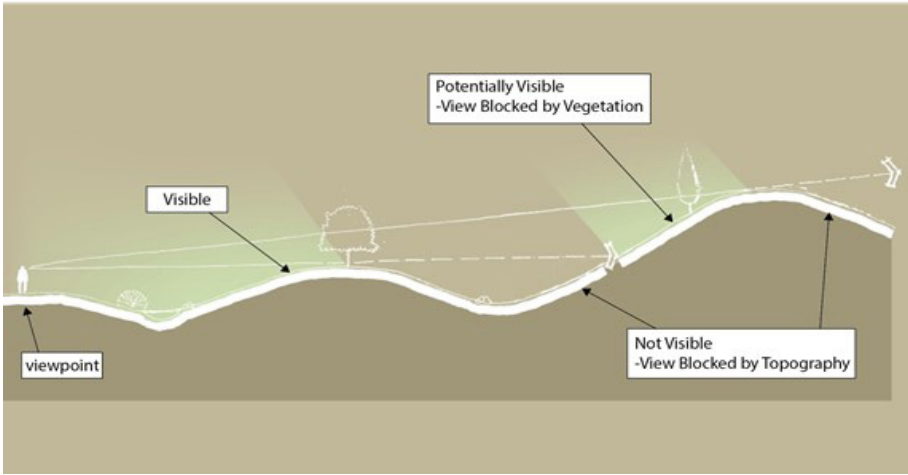


Figure 11.5. Viewshed schematic

from a specific spot, called a viewpoint; and they noted that portions of the area might not be visible from the viewpoint due to being blocked by vegetation, topography, or other objects. Miller and Sim also established that a “defined viewshed” is the specified portion that can be seen from a particular viewpoint and that is identified by its view direction, view width, and view distance.

The Virginia Tech team outlined two desired outcomes for its project: (1) to engage urban and rural citizens in identifying treasured local vistas, and (2) to develop protocols for assessing scenic viewsheds to determine if they merit placement on a Scenic Register.

The Tech team soon discovered that the scenic quality of a viewshed goes beyond its physical characteristics and content. They reviewed thousands of photos submitted to Scenic Virginia’s annual photo contest and realized that these possessed certain scenic qualities not found in other areas of the US. In response, the team expanded the existing definition of Scenic Quality to include cultural, ephemeral, and urban content. Equally important, they realized that a viewshed contributes to a broader sense of place that could be measured by its public concern. The Tech team’s final achievement was the development of draft protocols measuring Scenic Quality and Public Concern for the nomination, evaluation, and designation of scenic landscapes for inclusion in a new statewide Virginia Viewshed Register. At last, the report was ready for critical analysis.

As Virginia Tech began conducting its research in 2018, two other statewide efforts unfolded that would have an impact on the Viewshed Project. First, DCR, in preparation for the next edition of the Virginia Outdoors Plan, conducted a statewide Scenic Survey to gauge the importance of Scenic to Virginia citizens. The results revealed that 89% of Virginians surveyed considered Scenery and Scenic Views as either Very Important or Somewhat Important. The 2018 edition of the VOP included those survey results, establishing that Virginia's citizens care deeply about Virginia's scenic resources.

Second, that spring, newly elected Virginia governor Ralph Northam announced the launch of a land conservation initiative called ConserveVirginia. Employing a new data-driven approach to prioritizing land conservation, his new program compiled nearly twenty sets of information to identify the top 10% of lands that should be protected and preserved.

As with past programs, the first iteration of ConserveVirginia did not include a Scenic category. Given that Virginia Tech's research was moving forward with great success, Scenic Virginia updated the administration that a new report was forthcoming that demonstrated that Scenic is defensible as a category. Land trusts and other conservation partners from across the state also asked that Scenic be included.

The governor's team listened and agreed to add a Scenic Preservation category to ConserveVirginia. This represented a hard-won victory for scenic preservationists and acknowledged for the first time that scenic assets are significant and identifiable.

Scenic preservation organizations have committed to helping Virginia broaden and expand the new Scenic Preservation category. In return, the Natural Resources Secretariat has confirmed that scenic views and areas designated to the new Virginia Viewshed Register will be added to the ConserveVirginia Scenic Preservation data layer.

NEXT STOP: LOCAL ENGAGEMENT

Armed with Virginia Tech's results and viewshed experts' certification of the process, Scenic Virginia has begun developing a public outreach plan to Virginia's counties, cities, and towns. To engage rural and urban citizens at the local level, the most pressing question will be, "What views, vistas, and scenic places do you care about most, and what would you be devastated to lose?"

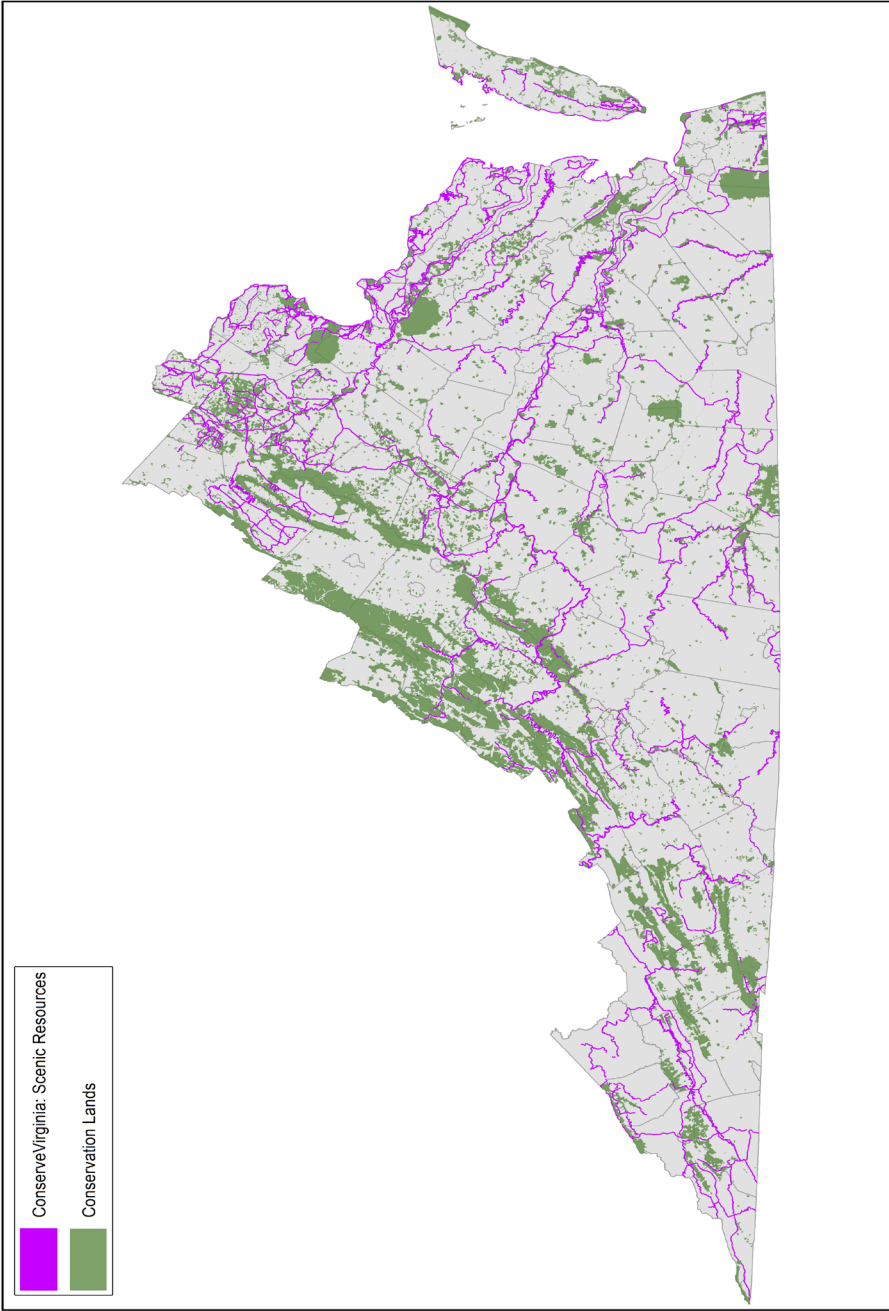


Figure 11.6. The Conserve Virginia Scenic Preservation Map

Scenic Virginia and its partners will assist citizens in each locality with developing their list as well as identifying ways to ensure that important scenic places are not lost. As citizens identify their most cherished resources, they can encourage their inclusion in the local Comprehensive Plan.

This public recognition will allow Virginians across the state to head off future development conflicts, benefiting citizens, local elected officials, planning staff, businesses, and developers. Scenic preservation solutions might include acquiring land in the viewshed, creating a new overlay district, or crafting new local ordinances that allow for development while maintaining recognized viewsheds.

Scenic Virginia and its partners look forward to announcing the first group of scenic views and lands designated to the new Virginia Viewshed Register. Scenic Viewshed designation will bestow statewide public recognition on the Commonwealth's views and vistas that score highest in Scenic Quality and Public Perception and Concern. The hope is that the project will inspire Virginians to speak up about their most treasured scenic places, potentially ensuring that the Commonwealth's most significant scenic beauty is preserved for the generations that follow. Other important outcomes include the following:

- **Scenic Inventory/GIS Layer:** The Viewshed Project will result in a Statewide Scenic Inventory, which can then be used—at last—to create a robust scenic GIS layer for guiding future land preservation priorities beyond the tenure of Governor Ralph Northam.
- **Assistance to Land Trusts:** Virginia's land trust community has been overwhelmingly positive about the creation of a scenic resources database that could serve as the "rigorous process" identified in IRS Tax Code Section 170h. These organizations will be able to use the new Scenic Inventory and GIS layer to assist citizens wanting to receive tax benefits for the donation of scenic conservation easements.
- **Outreach to a Younger Audience:** The goal of the Virginia ViewFinders website is to increase participation by Millennials and Gen Z, who represent the next generations of scenic preservationists. On the project website, outdoor enthusiasts can submit the shots of scenic beauty

captured as they paddle, ride, hike, and participate in other activities. The images display in a photo gallery, and the public can vote on whether the image is scenic or not. The locations appear on a separate webpage as points on a Google Map, allowing Scenic Virginia—and others—to track and explore Virginia’s most popular scenic places.

Scenic Virginia and its partners are exploring additional projects to enhance the public’s understanding of the value of scenic resources—both in the Commonwealth and beyond. These include the following:

- **Economic Impact of Scenic Resources:** There has never been a report produced that defines the economic value of the Commonwealth’s scenic beauty in rural and urban areas. Citizens instinctively understand that scenic beauty benefits business development, tourism, civic pride, and quality of life. Having that scenic beauty economically quantified would help citizens expand the case for increased scenic preservation in their localities.
- **Virginia Scenic Resources Advisory Board:** The Virginia Scenic Rivers Advisory Board was disbanded in 2009 and folded into the Virginia Board of Conservation and Recreation (BCR). There, a Scenic Resources subcommittee was created, but it does not have full authority. Scenic Virginia and its partners hope that the Viewshed Project will refocus attention on the physical, communal, emotional, and economic value of scenic beauty and that the administration and General Assembly will create a new state body to oversee Virginia’s three scenic resource programs: Rivers, Byways, and Viewsheds.
- **Planning and Design Standards for Renewables:** The passage of the Virginia Clean Economy Act during the 2020 General Assembly session made clear that the Commonwealth will see an increase in the development of alternative energy sources such as solar and wind. Scenic preservation groups will advocate for the development of statewide standards for planning and mitigation to reduce visual impacts—and potentially increase economic

benefits—to those visual resources considered most special by citizens.

- National Scenic Viewshed Register: Scenic Virginia’s parent organization, Scenic America, has embraced the Virginia Viewshed Register project and recognizes its national implications. Scenic America’s goal will be to help US citizens across the country identify and recognize their most beloved urban and rural scenic places.

CONCLUSION

The year 2020 was an unprecedented time for public appreciation of scenic beauty. As the COVID-19 pandemic limited social interaction and gatherings, Scenic Virginia heard time and again that the Commonwealth’s incredible scenic resources were providing a much-needed tonic for the mind, body, and spirit of those seeking solace in an uncertain world. While not the optimal way to remind Virginians about the economic, physical, and emotional benefits of scenic beauty, the COVID-19 pandemic nevertheless opened people’s eyes to the importance of scenic beauty in their lives.

The year 2020 also exposed inequities regarding public access to scenic beauty and its benefits. Although every Virginian should have the opportunity to experience nature on a daily basis, the fact remains that many do not. There are ways to address this. While working to save the View in Richmond, Scenic Virginia recognized that developing a linear park on the riverfront parcel in the viewshed would preserve the treasured historic panorama while providing desperately needed access to nature for lower-income families in Richmond’s East End. Moving forward, Scenic Virginia will continue to seek out win-win solutions of this type that address inequity while preserving scenic beauty.

In April 2021 years of work on this project culminated in the thrilling announcement that the Capital Region Land Conservancy, a Richmond land trust and Scenic Virginia colleague, would acquire the riverfront parcel in the viewshed of the View. CRLC plans are to place the land under a View-saving conservation easement to prevent high-rise development and eventually offer the parcel to the City of Richmond for inclusion in its magnificent James River Park System to increase recreation opportunities for all Richmonders.

Scenic Virginia and its supporters hope that, post-pandemic, this renewed recognition of the value of a Scenic designation will continue, resulting in enhanced citizen participation as the Viewshed Project rolls out to Virginia's rural and urban localities. Recent advances in technology—both in identifying and capturing scenic beauty where it happens, as well as the ability to host citizen meetings virtually—greatly increase the potential for engagement.

Despite the many challenges that lie ahead, conservation groups in the Commonwealth remain enthusiastically optimistic about the future. There is broad support for the Viewshed Project as well as a recognition that it represents a giant step forward in identifying and preserving special places. It is time. Noted architect Frank Lloyd Wright once remarked, “If you foolishly ignore beauty, you will soon find yourself without it. . . . But if you invest in beauty, it will remain with you all the days of your life.” The Virginia Viewshed Project is such an investment and will benefit the rural and urban citizens of the Commonwealth for years to come.