

**Board of Conservation and Recreation
Thursday, October 3, 2024
Microsoft Teams**

TIME AND PLACE

The meeting of the Board of Conservation and Recreation took place at 9:00 a.m. on Thursday, October 3, 2024, via Microsoft Teams.

BOARD OF CONSERVATION AND RECREATION MEMBERS PRESENT

Danielle Heisler, Chair	Kat Maybury
Esther M. Nizer, Vice Chair	The Honorable James Cheng
Chief Walk “Red Hawk” Brown	John W. Inge, IV
Colonel Eric A. Hoggard	The Honorable Kyle Kilgore
Susan Allen	Camilla Simon
Hunter H. Ihrman	Ross Stewart

DCR STAFF PRESENT

Matthew S. Wells, Director
Laura Ellis, Deputy Director for Administration and Finance
Frank Stovall, Deputy Director for Operations
Dr. Melissa Baker, Director, Virginia State Parks
Derrick Bolen, Special Assistant for Policy
Jason Bulluck, Director, Division of Natural Heritage
Whitten Cluff, Executive Assistant for Operations
Lisa McGee, Director for Policy and Planning
Kelly McClary, Director, Division of Planning and Recreation Resources
David Neudeck, Public Communications and Marketing Director
Paul Saunders, Senior Policy Analyst
Timothy Shrader, Eastern Field Operations Director
Samantha Wangsgard, Chief Environmental Planner

ESTABLISHMENT OF A QUORUM

With twelve (12) members of the Board present, a quorum was established.

WELCOME AND CALL TO ORDER

Chairwoman Heisler called the meeting to order at 9:02 a.m. and called for introductions.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES FROM APRIL 18, 2024

Mr. Ihrman moved that the minutes of the April 18, 2024, meeting of the Board of Conservation and Recreation be approved as submitted. Mr. Brown seconded, and the motion carried.

DIRECTOR’S REPORT – *Matthew S. Wells, DCR Director*

Hurricane Helene

Director Wells highlighted the impacts to State Parks located in Southwestern Virginia, which were in the path of Hurricane Helene.

- Impacted parks included Bear Creek Lake, Claytor Lake, Clinch River, Grayson Highlands, Hungry Mother, James River, Natural Bridge, Natural Tunnel, New River Trail, Seven Bends, Southwest Virginia Museum, Smith Mountain Lake, and Staunton River.
- Impacted Natural Area Preserves (NAPs) included Buffalo Mountain NAP, Channels NAP, Cleveland Barrens NAP, and Pinnacles NAP.
- Impacts ranged from closed trails and boat ramps due to down trees to substantial damage to structures and facilities.
- The agency is responding through damage assessment, sending response teams from unimpacted parks and preserves, and through managing administrative functions.
- The agency is also partnering with local law enforcement, localities, and the Virginia Department of Emergency Management.
- Director Wells detailed the status of the parks and NAPS as of October 2, 2024:
 - Claytor Lake – all boat ramps inside the marina and public boat ramps are closed. Swimming and other small watercraft are not allowed. The park is also being used as the forward operations base for DCR recovery efforts.
 - Grayson Highlands – the park remains closed with no power. VDOT continues work and repair on HWY58.
 - Hungry Mother – the park remains closed with no power. Cellular service is inconsistent. Crews have all park roads open and are removing debris in use areas. Septic services have been called to pump the lift stations. Contractors have been procured to remove several trees that have landed on cabins and yurts.
 - New River Trail – the park remains closed with no power – including the Inn at Foster Falls. Crews are within 3.6 miles of cutting the trail open (but not fully cleaned up). Assessment of the trail continues, with significant erosion discovered near Fries Junction. Staff have not been able to assess damage (if any) to the trestles along the trail.
 - Seven Bends – park closed with both bridges flooded and river levels continuing to rise.
 - The Channels NAP – significant tree damage; crews from the Department of Forestry and DCR are working to clear the trail.
 - Pinnacle NAP – significant number of trees down across the trails – no restoration timeline.
 - Cleveland Barrens NAP – trail closed beyond Tank Hollow Falls.
- Director Wells reported on the fiscal impact:
 - While damage has not yet been fully assessed, the agency will likely have to absorb a significant amount of the restoration costs. Estimates for New River Trail repairs alone are estimated to be in the millions.
 - Additionally, closures to these parks and their facilities will cause revenue loss.
- Director Wells reported on the operational impact:
 - The number one priority of the agency is to bring facilities back online safely.

- Operationally, the recovery efforts will require wage employees to work longer hours. This will cause them to hit their annual maximum of 1500 hours before the agency had projected.
- Staff resources diverted from unimpacted Parks and NAs will have impacts on home operations.

Director Wells ended this portion of the Director's Report by highlighting the Commonwealth of Virginia Campaign (CVC) and DCR's selection of the United Way of Southwest Virginia as the agency's charity of choice. The CVC is an annual fundraiser that runs from October 2 through December 31 of each year. While the CVC has many charities vetted and enrolled, The United Way of Southwest Virginia is focusing its funds on Hurricane Helene recovery and assisting those in the communities that were heavily affected.

Director Wells provided an update from the 2024 Convening of the Virginia General Assembly. Highlights include:

- Virginia State Parks were granted funding to pilot an all-terrain wheelchair program sponsored by Delegate Tran. DCR received six (6) of these chairs that are located regionally and can be "checked out" for free by park visitors.
- VaLORS – Legislation to include DCR Law Enforcement in the Virginia Law Officer's Retirement System (VaLORS) was passed during the 2024 session with a re-enactment clause. In order to become effective, the legislation will need to be reintroduced and passed again in the 2025 legislative session.
- Virginia Resilience Transformation Act – includes several initiatives for flood preparedness and prevention and codifies transparency measures for the Community Flood Preparedness and Resilient Virginia Revolving Funds.
- DCR received funding for 31 new positions, including positions to operate Culpeper Battlefields State Park, Hayfields State Park, and new Law Enforcement positions.
- DCR received funding for various capital projects, including funding to address underground storage tanks, address backlogged maintenance, repair and reopen the pool at Natural Tunnel, and do a feasibility study for the potential of purchasing and running Oak Hill as a state park.
- All full-time employees state-wide received a 3% raise.

Director Wells finished his remarks with a summary of DCR's 2025 General Assembly requests:

- Operating requests to reenact VALORs and fund positions for Mayo River State Park.
- Capital Projects (one-time costs) totaling \$220 million.
- These requests can be viewed on the Department of Budget and Planning's website, and the Governor's proposed budget is expected to be released in December 2024.

Col. Eric Hoggard asked if the 3% raise would be given to wage employees in addition to full-time employees.

Director Wells answered that the raise would be granted to wage employees. However, the raises for wage employees are funded by the Department rather than through dedicated funding from the state level.

FINANCIAL REPORT – *Laura Ellis, DCR Deputy Director for Administration and Finance*

Mrs. Ellis reported on the financial conditions of DCR as of August 31, 2024.

Mrs. Ellis first reported on the legislative appropriation and transfers for FY2025.

- DCR received \$377,268,801 in legislative appropriation.
- After mandatory transfers, the agency is left with \$92,090,037 in appropriations for operations.

Mrs. Ellis covered spending trends for the divisions that fall under the purview of the board (Natural Heritage, State Parks, Planning & Recreation Resources, Director's Office/Administration Finance):

- Year to date all divisions are trending slightly above target for their allocation of funds, aside from Natural Heritage.
- State Parks, which has spent 39.5% of their allocated (general) funds, is not 100% funded by general funds. They rely heavily on non-general funds (revenue) to operate.

Mrs. Ellis stated that the projected spending is not alarming, as several factors impact overall spending – which can ebb and flow throughout the fiscal year. Additionally, DCR has never over-spent on general funds.

Finally, Mrs. Ellis reported on State Parks revenue:

- As of August 31, 2024, State Parks' revenue is \$8,468,804, which is 26% of their annual estimate of \$32,318,211.
- The revenue for State Parks is trending approximately \$1 million below their revenue through the same month last year.
- Impacts to revenue can be due to facility closures (due to renovations), repairs, weather patterns, and other factors.
- The impacts from Hurricane Helene will likely impact revenue at the affected parks.

Ms. Heisler asked if there was a formula to calculate the financial impact for each day of closure at the impacted parks.

Mr. Stovall answered that while they do not have a formula, it is estimated that if all the impacted parks were closed for one month, it would result in a little over half a million in lost revenue. For example, Hungry Mother State Park is estimated to lose approximately 150 thousand dollars in revenue due to their facility closures from the storm impacts. Additionally, the Department will be incurring other financial losses to repair the damaged infrastructure at the impacted parks.

Mrs. Ellis added that due to the response effort needed at the impacted parks, wage staff will likely be utilizing their annual allotment of hours earlier in the year than expected. This will affect future

recruitment and turnover rates. Additionally, the potential loss of wage personnel and lack of staffing will impact a park's ability to generate revenue.

SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA HISTORICAL MUSEUM MASTER PLAN – *Kelly McClary, DCR Director for Planning & Recreation Resources*

Mrs. McClary presented the Southwest Virginia Museum Historical State Park (SWVA Museum) Master Plan for the Board's consideration. The entire master plan can be viewed by referring to Attachment A.

The master plan was due for its 10-year refresh, and the master plan process was completed in-house.

Mrs. McClary provided a brief overview of the SWVA Museum:

- The park sits on 2.5 acres in the town of Big Stone Gap.
- It is fully integrated in the town and consists of several buildings.
- The museum itself is housed in a building that dates back to the 1800s and was placed on the National Historic Register in 2002.
- The land and buildings were purchased by DCR in 2006 for 25,000.
- There are several thousand artifacts on display in the museum and stored in some of the old buildings on site.

Mrs. McClary then provided an overview of the Master Plan Process:

- There were two public meetings with over 50 attendees each in April 2023 and February 2024.
- After each public comment meeting, feedback was received through printed surveys and public comment periods.
- There was an online public survey in Spring 2023.
- There were interviews with the local economic development and tourism office as well as other museums.

Mrs. McClary reviewed the outcomes of the public feedback. Highlights include:

- The public generally appreciates the events and programming at this park.
- The feedback stated that guests' least favorite part of their park visits includes a lack of maintenance, parking, and lighting.
- They believe that programming could be improved by increasing the staffing level and providing more diversity in topics and a rotation of exhibits.

Next, Mrs. McClary went over the purpose statement for the SWVA Museum, the park's goals, and their desired visitor experience.

Mrs. McClary reviewed the park's existing amenities, which include the historic building that houses the gift shop and exhibits, the carriage house, which houses the collection of artifacts not on display, a railcar and railcar lot, a cottage, a manager's residence, and storage buildings.

Mrs. McClary then provided an overview of the proposed amenities, which include ADA upgrades, parking and lighting upgrades, an adequate storage facility for the artifacts, renovations and updates to the existing facilities, and administrative office and maintenance facilities. This will be completed through a 3-Phase development plan.

Chief Brown asked to review the purpose statement and specifically asked how indigenous voices and stories will be incorporated into the SVWA Museum Master Plan. Chief Brown stated that there is historical evidence of the Cherokee Nation being present in the Southwestern portion of Virginia.

Mr. Stovall referred to the Master Plan, stating that on page 22, objective 1.6, there is clear direction for the park to “Showcase the present and historic melting pot of Big Stone Gap by relaying the diverse stories of local European settlers, African Americans, indigenous, Melungeon, and other communities through exhibits and programming.”

Chief Brown expressed his desire for the language to be more targeted toward the specific indigenous nations that were in the area.

Mrs. Allen asked how the park provides interpretive programs – is it through staff, volunteers, or both?

Mr. Stovall answered that there is a mixture of full-time staff, wage personnel, and their friend’s group (volunteers) that provide interpretation for the museum.

Mr. Kilgore stated that he has visited the park several times for events, and he appreciates the park and looks forward to its future development.

Director Wells shared that he believes the development, coupled with the strong friends’ group, is a project that has been discussed several times with this administration, as it fits well with the Accelerate Southwest Virginia initiative.

Ms. Heisler added that she has visited the park and participated in the museum tour. She found that the staff were knowledgeable, and she hopes that they will have more staffing in the future. Ms. Heisler also states that she hopes the park will be able to provide programming and interpretation that allows for better representation of indigenous voices.

Chief Brown stated that he is happy to send a copy of a historic map that shows where all the indigenous tribes were located throughout the state in the 1600s.

Ms. Heisler thanked Chief Brown for his input and asked for a motion to approve the Southwest Virginia Historical Museum State Park Master Plan.

Mrs. Allen motioned that the Board approve the Master Plan as presented; Mr. Stewart seconded. The motion carried.

RESOLUTION HONORING MICHAEL FLETCHER UPON HIS RETIREMENT– *Lisa McGee, DCR Director for Policy, Planning, and Legislative Affairs*

Ms. McGee presented the following resolution for the board's consideration:

WHEREAS, Michael Fletcher has dedicated 30 years of service to the Commonwealth of Virginia, with 27 years specifically at the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR); and

WHEREAS, Michael Fletcher began his career with the Commonwealth of Virginia in 1994 during the Administration of Governor George Allen; and

WHEREAS, in 1997, he began his tenure at DCR as the Director of Development, showcasing his leadership and dedication to the Department; and

WHEREAS, Michael Fletcher has served as the Freedom of Information Officer for DCR, ensuring transparency and accountability within the Department; and

WHEREAS, since 1998, he has been the DCR Board Liaison, overseeing various Boards and Special Committees, including the Virginia Board of Conservation and Recreation, Virginia Cave Board, Virginia Land Conservation Foundation, Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board, and numerous ad hoc committees; and

WHEREAS, on September 1, 2024, Michael Fletcher retired as the Board and Constituent Services Liaison, as well as the FOIA Officer for the Department of Conservation and Recreation, leaving behind a legacy of dedication and service to the Commonwealth of Virginia.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that we, the chairs of each Board, and the Director of the Department of Conservation and Recreation, commend Michael Fletcher for his outstanding service, leadership, and commitment to the Commonwealth of Virginia and the Department of Conservation and Recreation.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this resolution be presented to Michael Fletcher in recognition of his contributions and achievements during his esteemed career with the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Ms. Heisler called for a motion to approve the resolution.

Mrs. Allen motioned to approve the resolution as presented; Ms. Maybury seconded. The motion carried.

NEXT MEETING DATES – Ms. Danielle Heisler, Chair, Board of Conservation and Recreation

Ms. Heisler reviewed the dates and locations of the 2025 board meetings:

- January 3, 2025: Pocahontas State Park
- April 23-25, 2025: Claytor Lake State Park
- October 1-3, 2025: Twin Lakes State Park

PUBLIC COMMENT – Ms. Danielle Heisler, Chair, Board of Conservation and Recreation

Ms. Heisler opened the floor for public comment.

Chief Brown invited the board and staff to attend his 34th Nottoway School Day and Corn Harvest Powwow, which will be held on November 1-3, 2024, in South Hampton County.

Additionally, Chief Brown would like to thank former Governor George Allen for his assistance in bringing about a bill to federally recognize the Cheroenhaka Nottoway tribe. Congresswoman Jenkins introduced the bill (HB 6630), and Chief Brown hopes that there will be public support for this bill.

Mrs. Allen added that she had attended the Powwow in the past, and it was amazing.

Director Wells stated that if Chief Brown would like to send information on the Powwow, he is welcome to send it to DCR for distribution to the members of the Board.

Director Wells also expressed his gratitude for the Board members who are currently serving on expired terms and invited them to attend the January meeting at Pocahontas State Park for a celebration of their service.

ADJOURNMENT

With no further business, the meeting adjourned at 10:10 am.