Virginia DCR
Planning & Recreation Resources
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A GUIDE TO CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT IN THE SCENIC RIVER DESIGNATION PROCESS

In 1970 legislation authorizing the establishment of a Virginia Scenic Rivers System was enacted by the General Assembly. The legislation set up a framework whereby the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) was charged with conducting studies and presenting reports and recommendations to the legislature concerning potential additions to the System.

Political reality dictated a need for development of a strong local citizen base for support of the candidate river. DCR staff began working with local advisory groups on the Scenic River designation process. Between the program's inception in 1970 and the current date (December 2015), two Historic Rivers and 33 Scenic River segments totaling approximately 815 river miles have been designated.

This paper is not intended to be all-inclusive, but rather to give interested individuals and groups some idea of the amount and type of work involved in obtaining Scenic River designation.

An initial step is to contact the DCR Division of Planning and Recreation Resources. After preliminary conversations, a meeting among all interested parties to discuss the designation process is a good second step. The purpose of this meeting is actually fourfold:

1. To discuss the Virginia Scenic Rivers Program and the designation process.
2. To organize a local advisory committee.
3. To formalize a working relationship between the advisory committee and the DCR program staff.
4. To outline a preliminary work plan.

If properly structured, the local advisory committee should represent a variety of interests and perspectives. Some suggestions for membership include local officials, civic leaders, riparian landowners, representatives of formal conservation organizations, local government staff (such as economic development or tourism officials), business people, and interested citizens. A broad representation on the committee can increase the base of support and provide vital liaison with as many local groups as possible. Before an evaluation of a potential Scenic River candidate, DCR needs, in hand, a letter from the Board of Supervisors or County Administrator requesting that a study be conducted.

Once the request is sent to DCR and the local advisory committee is formed, the committee will have two primary functions:

1. Preparation for the evaluation and field study -- The first of these responsibilities is the easiest and least time consuming. It basically involves gathering and documenting information on the natural, historical, and recreational features of the river that make it worthy of inclusion in the system. This will be incorporated into the final study report, and it needs to be provided to DCR staff in advance of the field evaluation visit(s). The actual field visit(s) by DCR staff must be organized in advance, including arranging for boats, shuttles, and local guides. Additionally, advisory committee representatives need to be ready to participate in the actual field study.

2. Development of community-wide support – Throughout the entire process, including the preparation of river history, gathering of information, and organization of the field study described in Number 1 above, community support always must be encouraged. It is crucial to the success of the designation effort. Although the advisory committee is responsible for facilitation of and participation in the field visit, development of the necessary base of support for a designation is probably more critical and certainly more involved. Support from four sectors of the community is imperative for the successful designation of a river. These four sectors or groups are:

1. Riparian landowners
2. Civic and environmental groups
3. Local Boards of Supervisors, City Councils, and other affected local government entities
4. Local members of the General Assembly

Since the support of riparian landowners is essential for success, identifying those landowners should be one of the advisory committee's top priorities. Copies of tax maps and the names and mailing addresses of property owners are usually easily obtainable at the office of the County Commissioner of Revenue. Once riparian landowners are identified, meeting with each one is the best way to ensure that the Scenic River concept and its relationship to owners is understood. If personal contact with all landowners is not possible, each should receive a letter, drafted by the committee, discussing the program and inviting questions. Included in the letter could be an invitation to a community meeting where questions can be answered within the format of a public forum. At the very least, those riparian landowners thought to have the greatest degree of local influence should be individually contacted and asked to lend assistance and support to the advisory committee.

Although it may prove to be a formidable task, keeping landowners well informed throughout the evaluation period and designation process is necessary. It may be useful to set up periodic informational meetings to ensure that landowners and other local citizens have ample opportunity to express their concerns and/or support.

Other important sources for contacts that can be of significant assistance in developing a broad base of support are local civic groups and organizations. These groups can serve as an effective means of disseminating information about the scenic river proposal. The opportunity to have presentations on the program by DCR staff should not be overlooked. Groups such as Ruritans,

garden clubs, historical societies, sportsmen's groups, Chambers of Commerce, and conservation groups can become enthusiastic supporters of the designation process. Presentations not only raise the level of public awareness but also help prevent misinformation. And, additional proactive supporters may be gained who can be counted on for meetings or hearings with local governing bodies.

In addition to informing and educating the riparian landowners and local civic groups, local governing bodies must be kept fully informed and up-to-date on critical issues involved in the designation attempt. It is beneficial to schedule an informal meeting to let them know a designation is being considered, to set up a means of communication, and then to continue keeping them informed on study progress. Also, they should be made aware of potential points of contention as soon as possible. Thus, when their support is formally requested, they will be aware of the issues. The unqualified support of local government is one of the most critical factors associated with passage of scenic river designation.

When and if opposition to Scenic River designation surfaces, whether from individuals or organizations, every effort should be made to personally address all complaints. This is necessary for two reasons. First, misconceptions and misinformation need to be straightened out before they become widespread. Second, complaints give proponents information on the primary concerns of opponents and, therefore, ideas on how to prepare an effective response.

Once the study has been completed, and DCR has finalized a report and designation recommendations, resolutions and letters of support should be solicited from as many governmental and civic groups and individuals as possible. These letters and resolutions will become part of the official record when and if a public hearing on the designation recommendation is held.

There is one other group of individuals whom you will want to alert to your efforts and whose support is essential to your cause. They are the local members of the General Assembly. Their participation is needed to introduce the designation legislation and to provide support throughout the legislative process. You should find that when there is strong local support for Scenic Rivers, local legislators are usually pleased to introduce the necessary bills when requested to do so by the local governing body. Sample "boilerplate" legislation can be obtained from DCR staff.

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