

Richmond, VA: From Dangerous Riverbanks to a 25-Mile Lifeline

BACKGROUND

Until recently, parents pushing strollers or residents using wheelchairs along the Appomattox River had only one option: walk in the travel lane of a 45-mph state highway. Community advocates filmed those journeys to play at public hearings—a visceral reminder that Petersburg and Hopewell rank among Virginia's lowest for health outcomes and car ownership.

The Richmond metropolitan area's unique governmental structure compounds these challenges. Unlike other states, Virginia cities operate independently rather than within counties, creating many different local governments across the area. Historic infrastructure designed primarily for automobiles left massive gaps in bicycle and pedestrian connectivity, particularly affecting the region's communities with greatest need.

GENESIS

In 2017, a cross-sector team from the Richmond region attended National Association of Chronic Disease Directors' (NACDD) Active People, Healthy NationSM Walkability Action Institute (WAI).

The Richmond team recognized the need for better regional coordination around active transportation.

The WAI experience provided both strategic direction and practical tools for promoting active transportation. Team members returned with an action plan focused on creating a 25-mile greenway system connecting six riverfront jurisdictions through Friends of the Lower Appomattox River (FOLAR), a regional nonprofit organization.

This represented a shift from individual jurisdiction planning to true regional collaboration, with FOLAR serving as the main organizing group to advance shared transportation and health goals.

The WAI brings together cross-disciplinary teams representing public health, planning, transportation, elected officials, and other disciplines to participate in an intensive, applied-learning course on improving walkability with a focus on community and transportation design.

IMPLEMENTATION

Strategic Land Acquisition: The most significant breakthrough came through acquiring a critical 8-acre parcel from CSX Railroad Company in Petersburg. When CSX initially demanded \$1 million for seven acres—land essential for trail continuity—regional partners leveraged relationships across state government.

Through strategic partnerships involving the governor's office and Virginia Department of Transportation, the acquisition was bundled with other state projects. Approved during the final days of the gubernatorial term, this creative financing eliminated what would have been an impossible gap in the regional trail system.

Data-Driven Advocacy: The Crater Health District invested in infrared counters to track trail usage, while FOLAR coordinated a volunteer monitoring program collecting usage data twice yearly. This systematic approach to data collection provided the evidence base for all subsequent grant applications and policy discussions.



Sports Backers, a regional nonprofit, offered a six-week "Bike Walk Academy," that equipped residents to speak at public hearings and documenting real experiences of people using wheelchairs in traffic.

Smart Scale Success: After learning from initial rejections, regional partners mastered Virginia's data-driven Smart Scale funding process. By breaking large projects into smaller, more competitive pieces and providing technical expertise to local governments, the collaboration secured **\$20 million across multiple trail projects scheduled for construction from 2027-2029.**

Regional Coordination Without Bureaucracy: Rather than creating formal structures, success came through project-based collaboration. FOLAR integrated trail planning into all six jurisdictions' comprehensive plans while maintaining relationships across changes in administration and staff turnover.

Community-Centered Approach: The effort prioritized serving communities with the greatest health challenges. Rather than focusing solely on areas with existing infrastructure, the partnership deliberately prioritized Petersburg and Hopewell — communities with the lowest health rankings and car ownership rates in the region.

| Result | Since 2017 |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Land secured for trail | 34 acres |
| <i>Trail segments built</i> | 0.66 mile |
| <i>Annual trail users</i> | ≈ 12,000 |
| <i>Smart Scale funding awarded</i> | \$20 million |
| <i>Additional funding leveraged</i> | \$200,000+ VDOT |

Systems Change: The work created lasting institutional changes: establishment of informal but effective regional coordination networks, integration of walking and biking planning into local comprehensive plans, and development of creative funding strategies that other regions can replicate.

Community Health Impact: The trail system serves communities with some of Virginia's lowest health

"Virginia's \$20 million vote of confidence tells us a connected river trail is no longer a dream."
— Regional Trails Director, Friends of the Lower Appomattox River

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Technical Competence Builds Institutional Credibility** – Success with challenging partners like railroad companies required deep technical knowledge and respect for others' operational needs. Understanding regulatory requirements allowed creative problem-solving rather than adversarial relationships.
- **Small Public Health Investments Leverage Major Infrastructure Funding** – Health department investments in trail counters and signage projects proved cross-sector capacity and demonstrated readiness for multimillion-dollar transportation awards.
- **Regional Coordination Requires Persistent Relationship-Building** – Maintaining partnerships across multiple gubernatorial administrations and changing local leadership proved essential for long-term success.
- **Data Plus Community Stories are Impactful** – Combining systematic usage data with compelling personal narratives created powerful tools that resonated with both technical reviewers and elected officials.

rankings. By providing safe recreation and transportation options in Petersburg and Hopewell, the network helps improve health for those with the greatest health challenges while building community economic development capacity.

Institutional Capacity Building: The collaboration strengthened regional planning capacity, with team members advancing to leadership positions throughout the region and creating an ongoing network of champions for walking and biking that transcends administration changes.

LOOKING AHEAD

Four additional Smart Scale projects will break ground by 2029, closing nearly 10 contiguous miles of greenway and adding safe river crossings at two state highways. Prince George County has already budgeted design funds for its missing seven-mile stretch, working through coordination with local military installations where the trail crosses federal property.

The partnership continues expanding, with applications submitted for federal Outdoor Recreation Legacy Program funding to upgrade park infrastructure in the region's communities with greatest need.



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