

Board of Conservation and Recreation
Thursday, October 2, 2025
Twin Lakes State Park

TIME AND PLACE

The meeting of the Board of Conservation and Recreation took place at 9:03 a.m. on Thursday, October 2, 2025, at Twin Lakes State Park.

BOARD OF CONSERVATION AND RECREATION MEMBERS PRESENT

Mr. Hunter H. Ihrman, Chair
Colonel Eric A. Hoggard, Vice Chair
Chief Walt "Red Hawk" Brown
The Honorable Douglas Domenech
Mr. John W. Inge, IV
The Honorable Kyle Kilgore
Ms. Gretchen Byrd
Mr. Ross Stewart
Mrs. Susan Allen
The Honorable Duane Adams

BOARD OF CONSERVATION AND RECREATION MEMBERS NOT PRESENT

Ms. Kat Maybury
The Honorable James Cheng

STAFF PRESENT

Matthew S. Wells, Director
Andrew Smith, Chief Deputy Director
Frank Stovall, Deputy Director for Operations
Whitten Cluff, Executive Assistant for Operations
Lisa McGee, Director for Policy and Planning
Kelly McClary, Division Director, Planning and Recreation Resources
David Neudeck, Public Communications and Marketing Director
Tim Shrader, Eastern Field Operation Manager
Dave Collett, Western Field Operation Manager
Josh Ellington, Chief of Resource Management
Katie Shepard, Chief of Education and Interpretation
Scott Vantrease, Chief of Law Enforcement
Brian Fuller, Real Property Manager
Charlie Connor, Deputy Chief of Law Enforcement
Breanne Lindsey, Board & Constituent Liaison
Paul Saunders, Senior Policy Analyst
Bryce Wilk, District Manager, Central District, Division of State Parks
Kevin Faubion, Park Manager – Twin Lakes
Joe Neville, Chief Ranger – Visitor Experience, Machicomoco State Park

ESTABLISHMENT OF A QUORUM

With ten (10) members of the Board present, a quorum was established.

CALL TO ORDER

Chair Ihrman called the meeting to order at 9:03 a.m. and called for introductions.

ELECTION OF A NEW CHAIR & VICE CHAIR – *Mr. Hunter Ihrman, Board Chair*

BOARD ACTION

Mr. Ihrman opened nominations for the position of Chair of the Board of Conservation and Recreation. Ms. Allen nominated Mr. Ihrman. Chief Brown seconded the nomination, and the motion was unanimously approved by: Adams, Allen, Byrd, Brown, Domenech, Hoggard, Ihrman, Inge, Kilgore, and Stewart.

Mr. Ihrman opened nominations for the position of Vice Chair of the Board of Conservation and Recreation. Mr. Stewart nominated Col. Hoggard. Ms. Allen seconded the nomination, and the motion was unanimously approved by: Adams, Allen, Byrd, Brown, Domenech, Hoggard, Ihrman, Inge, Kilgore, and Stewart.

APPROVAL OF THE APRIL 24, 2025, MINUTES

BOARD ACTION

Ms. Allen moved to approve the April 24, 2025, Board meeting minutes as presented. Ms. Byrd seconded the motion, which was approved by: Allen, Byrd, Brown, Domenech, Hoggard, Ihrman, Inge, Kilgore, and Stewart. Mr. Adams abstained from voting as he was not present during the last Board meeting.

REVIEW OF THE BOARD'S PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GUIDELINES – *Mr. Paul Saunders, Senior Policy Analyst*

Mr. Saunders informed the Board that the public participation guidelines underwent periodic review. The public participation guidelines were published in the Virginia Register on July 14, 2025, which began the public comment period. The public comment period closed on August 4, 2025. There was one comment submitted during public comment with the recommendation being to retain the guidelines as is.

BOARD ACTION

After considering the information provided, Chief Brown made the following motion:

I move that the Board of Conservation and Recreation retain the Public Participation Guidelines without modification and direct the Department to submit the decision to retain the regulation without change in accordance with the Administrative Process Act and all applicable policies and procedures.

Mr. Inge seconded the motion, and the motion was unanimously approved by: Adams, Allen, Byrd, Brown, Domenech, Hoggard, Ihrman, Inge, Kilgore, and Stewart.

DIRECTOR'S REPORT – *Mr. Matthew S. Wells, DCR Director*

Director Wells began by recognizing the Fairy Stone State Park rangers for their diligence in conducting the rescue of an injured hiker at their park. He continued by providing the following highlights:

- DCR recently completed acquisitions of several properties, including Lake Caledon, which is a major addition to Caledon State Park. Additionally, DCR closed on Mayo Island, which was the last privately-owned major island in downtown Richmond. The department provided \$9 million dollars for the acquisition through the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation and the Community Flood Preparedness Fund.
- Park leadership attended a national conference and were recognized for the innovative work with onboarding processes and creation of a data dashboard for park managers to utilize. The Virginia Association for Parks are

recognized for their advocacy efforts to give VALORS to State Park Rangers and State Park Law Enforcement Rangers.

- Director Wells recently met with Governor Youngkin and others for a round table conversation to discuss recovery efforts for those affected by Hurricane Helene. DCR is participating in rehabilitation efforts by utilizing the Resilient Virginia Revolving Loan Fund.
- DCR signed a ten-year agreement with the US Forest Service to provide \$5 million dollars in funding to allow the Natural Heritage Division to conduct biological inventory across the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests. Additionally, there is discussion to have a Good Neighbor Agreement to support outdoor recreation in the forests as well, which may be determined at a later date.
- DCR partnered with KPMG to conduct a study of DCR's retail operations and additional information will be provided at a later meeting. In the meantime, Director Wells informed the Board that based on the study there is approximately \$3.3 to \$7 million dollars of additional profit DCR's retail operations could make if changes are implemented.
- The department requested \$180 million dollars in the biennial budget, which is being considered by the Governor. Some of the funds will be dedicated towards maintenance for cabins in Hungry Mother State Park and First Landing State Park. Additionally, maintenance repairs will be necessary for the swimming pool at Staunton River State Park. Director Wells informed the Board that there are additional items outlined within their agenda materials regarding what initiatives will be funded if the Governor approves the budget request as submitted.

Director Wells announced that his final day with the department will be October 31, 2025. Following his departure, Chief Deputy Director Smith will assume the role of Acting Director of DCR. Director Wells expressed his appreciation for the opportunity to work with the Board and the department over the past three and a half years. He also provided an overview of the department's progress during his tenure:

Enhance Outdoor Experiences for Virginians by Increasing Accessibility

- The department completed over thirty land acquisitions and acquired nearly 5,000 acres. Additionally, the 42nd and 43rd State Parks were opened during this time, which are Sweet Run State Park and Culpeper Battlefields State Park. An additional state park is currently in development and is expected to open in the near future. There are two natural area preserves that are currently in the planning or development stages. The Inn at Foster Falls has opened as the first inn or hotel located within a Virginia state park and marks the first public-private lodging partnership in the state park system.
- The department continues to enhance accessibility across Virginia State Parks. EnChroma-adapted viewfinders for colorblind visitors have been installed at all 43 parks, making Virginia the first state to implement this technology statewide. A track chair program, featuring motorized, all-terrain wheelchairs, is now available at six parks to assist visitors with mobility challenges. Additionally, Natural Bridge State Park has implemented the Right Hear system, providing audio trail narration for visitors who are visually impaired.

Enhance Outdoor Experiences for Virginians by Elevating Enjoyment

- State Parks interpretive programs have engaged approximately 900,000 participants. Over \$170 million has been allocated for maintenance, construction, and development projects, including major renovations to cabins, campgrounds, lodges, and bathhouses. Visitor satisfaction has consistently remained above 90%. Additionally, the department's support of communities surrounding state parks contributes to an estimated \$400 million in annual economic impact.

Enhance Outdoor Experiences for Virginians by Providing Support

- The department added 40 new positions within the State Parks and Natural Heritage programs, with additional staffing increases also occurring in the Planning, Recreation and Resources, and Property Management programs.
- Nearly \$20 million in new general fund support was received for operations, and self-generated revenue increased by \$7 million, allowing for the hiring of staff and purchase of equipment to enhance visitor experiences. The department also received 650,000 hours of volunteer support.

- DCR Law Enforcement staff are now included in the VALORS program, and internal process improvements have led to the development of clearer career pathways for park rangers, supporting professional growth and retention.

At the conclusion of Director Wells’ report, the Board engaged in discussions on several topics, including the Virginia Land Conservation Fund projects, visitation numbers for Machicomoco State Park, retail sales across state parks, and ongoing efforts to address the maintenance backlog within the state park system.

FINANCIAL REPORT – Mr. Frank Stovall, Deputy Director for Operations

Mr. Stovall reported on the financial conditions of DCR:

Financial Report – October 2, 2025

General Fund Appropriation & Expenditures

- Fiscal Year 2026 Total Legislative Appropriation: \$107,947,574
- Total transfers and adjustments: (\$19,926,882)
- Fiscal Year 2025 Total Legislative Appropriation Available for Agency Operations: \$88,020,692

Figure 1: Appropriation Transfers & Adjustments:

Governor’s Veto	(500,000)
WQIF Reserve	(2,583,531)
Dam Safety/Flood Prevention & Protection	(732,147)
Land Conservation Fund Transfers	(16,000,000)
SWCD Dam Repair	(1,500,000)
Mandatory Carryforward	1,388,796

(19,926,882)

Figure 2: General Fund Division Budgets and Expenditures August 31, 2025

Division	Division Targets	YTD Actual (August 31, 2025)	Target vs Actual %
Natural Heritage	\$ 6,258,843.00	\$ 1,363,897	21.8%
State Parks	\$ 36,922,219.00	\$ 17,470,732	47.3%
PRR (Incl Design & Construction)	\$ 3,794,354.00	\$ 817,940	21.6%
Director’s Office – Admin-Finance	\$ 12,789,072.00	\$ 3,374,216	26.4%
Grand Total	\$ 88,020,692.00	\$ 36,366,024	41.3%

*Notes: State Parks reflects only General Fund appropriations and expenditures, approximately 50% of the total parks budget. PRR appropriations includes significant capital project pass throughs for specific locality projects, including locality owned boat ramps (\$6M), swimming facilities (\$9M), and other similar items.

Figure 3: State Park Operating Revenues July 1, 2025, through August 31, 2025

	FY26 Estimate	YTD Actual (Through August 31, 2025)	YTD Actual /Estimate	Prior Year YTD Actual (Through August 31, 2025)	YOY Change
Grand Total	\$ 29,939,754	\$ 8,653,940	29%	\$ 8,468,804	2%

FALKLAND STATE CONSERVATION AREA – Mr. Frank Stovall, Deputy Director for Operations

Overview of Falkland State Conservation Area

Mr. Stovall provided an overview of the Falkland State Conservation Area Short Term Action and Management Plan 2025-2028, developed by department staff. The Falkland State Conservation Area encompasses 7,400 acres and is located adjacent to Difficult Creek Natural Area Preserve and Staunton River State Park. It forms part of a larger 40,000-acre contiguous conservation landscape in Southside Virginia.

The management plan emphasizes preparing the area for public access, managing natural resources, and providing outdoor recreation opportunities. The Falkland State Conservation Area will be jointly managed by State Parks and Natural Heritage divisions on both administrative and financial levels. Department staff will develop resource management plans focusing on forest management, invasive species control, and prescribed fire application.

Additionally, the plan includes designing, constructing, and maintaining a multi-use trail system to facilitate public access while minimizing increases in maintenance and management costs. Communication efforts will include the development of signage, maps, and informational materials to keep the public and stakeholders informed about the conservation area's status and resources.

Administration & Operations

This site will provide expanded opportunities for outdoor recreation, which is atypical for Natural Area Preserves. The primary purpose of the Natural Area Preserve system is to protect biodiversity, critical habitats, and endangered species, which imposes significant restrictions on permissible recreational activities. However, this site possesses unique ecological value that allows for certain recreational uses without meeting the full criteria of a traditional state park.

As a result, this represents a new operational model, reflected in its designation as a State Conservation Area. Management responsibilities will be shared between the Division of Natural Heritage and the Division of State Parks. Funding for the site will come from three sources: revenue generated on-site through timber harvesting during landscape restoration, and operating funds from both the Division of Natural Heritage and the Division of State Parks. These funds will support daily maintenance and management, primarily conducted by Natural Heritage staff with support from Staunton River State Park personnel.

Key management decisions will be overseen by a Management Committee, a cross-divisional team led by the Deputy Director for Operations and supported by staff from both State Parks and Natural Heritage. Additionally, the department has received approval to fill two positions at the Falkland State Conservation Area: an Operations Steward and a Law Enforcement Officer.

Natural Resource Management and Outdoor Recreation Planning

The department will focus on four key areas of Natural Resource Management: deer management, forest management, prescribed fire, and invasive species control. Managed hunts, conducted in coordination with the Department of Wildlife Resources, will continue to be offered to control the deer population. Forest management activities will include timber thinning and harvesting in partnership with the Department of Forestry. Prescribed burns are planned for implementation in Fall 2026, following the development of a burn plan by DCR staff. Additionally, an invasive species control plan will be developed and executed at the site from Spring 2026 through 2028. The end goal is restoring the property back to a savanna, an open forest habitat, which is what the site was in the past.

The department will also focus efforts on outdoor recreation planning, beginning over the next few months with the development of a trail system. The goal is to have multi-use trails for equestrians, biking, and hiking. DCR anticipates that the public will have a desire to camp and access the water in the future, however, at this time there is not an immediate plan in place for these activities, but they may be explored at a later date. For now, the expectation will be to encourage visitors to utilize the facilities at Staunton River State Park.

Final Thoughts and Board Member Discussion

Mr. Stovall concluded by informing the Board that the Falkland State Conservation Area represents a landmark conservation and recreation initiative, combining the strengths of both State Parks and Natural Heritage programs. The joint management approach aims to maintain ecological integrity while providing public access. However, adequate funding and staffing are essential to the project's success. To support long-term planning and ensure sustainable funding beyond 2028, the current operating budget includes a \$350,000 allocation dedicated to post-2028 planning efforts.

At the conclusion of Mr. Stovall's overview of the Falkland State Conservation Area, the Board discussed several topics, including the types of trees present and the composition of the original landscape, the joint management approach as a new operational model, the designation of the site as Virginia's first state conservation area, management responsibilities, and the distinction between managed deer hunting and open hunting.

VIRGINIA'S SCENIC RIVERS – Ms. Kelly McClary, Director, Division of Planning and Recreation Resources

Scenic Rivers Background and Current Protocol

Ms. McClary provided the Board with an overview of the Scenic Rivers Program, which has been active in Virginia since 1970. The Falls of the James was designated as historic in 1972 and was fully incorporated into the Scenic Rivers Program in 1984. Currently, Virginia has approximately 1,100 miles of designated Scenic Rivers. A Scenic River is defined as a river, or a section thereof, designated by an act of the General Assembly due to its outstanding natural and scenic beauty, as well as its fish and wildlife resources, historic significance, recreational opportunities, geological features, cultural values, and other notable attributes. The Board is responsible for recommending Scenic River designations, which are then submitted to the General Assembly for review and approval.

The department does not proactively identify areas for designation as Scenic Rivers. Instead, such requests must be initiated by the locality through a formal letter from the locality's Board of Supervisors addressed to the Director of DCR. To qualify, the river section must be a minimum of five miles in length and accessible to the public.

Upon meeting these prerequisites, DCR staff commence the development of a comprehensive evaluation report. The assessment process involves thirteen specific criteria and includes an on-site evaluation conducted jointly by DCR personnel and local officials. Due to the thorough nature of the evaluation, the report typically requires up to one year to complete.

The following criteria are considered in the evaluation of a potential Scenic River:

	Criteria	Description
1	Stream corridor vegetation	% of natural vegetation disturbed by human activity (grazing, cropland, timber harvesting, turf, etc.)
2	Streambed/stream flow modification	% of the river segment (length) impounded/channelized by dams
3	Human development	Urban: % of the river corridor containing urban development Rural: Average number of structures or building clusters per mile of river
4	Historic features	Presence of historic sites or cultural resources within 1,000 feet of river
5	Natural features	Occurrences of a natural resource/ feature of statewide or greater significance within 1,000 feet of river.
6	Parallel roads	Ratio of parallel (within 300 ft.) road length to river segment length

		Length of visible parallel roads within 300 feet
7	Road, railroad, and utility crossings	Ratio of number of bridge and culvert crossings to river length
8	Public recreational access	Presence and character of access points to river segment
9	Significant permanent protection	% of river corridor area protected (conserved) as public land or by conservation easement
10	Water quality	Frequency of turbidity during May-October
11	Fishery quality	Presence and population of game fish species
12	Landscape quality	Quality of the scenery of the surrounding landscape through which a river flows based on diversity of scenery and range of views (distance)
13*	Overall aesthetic appeal	Special features that enhance visual interest and scenic beauty affecting aesthetics and overall ranking

Upon completion of the evaluation and drafting of the report, DCR will notify the locality and collaborate with relevant agencies and partners to build support for the Scenic River designation. The report will then be posted on the DCR website, and DCR will provide the locality with the necessary legislative language.

Subsequently, the draft report will be presented to the Board for review. The Board will decide whether to recommend the area for Scenic River designation. If the Board approves the recommendation, the locality must work with legislators to introduce the appropriate legislation to the General Assembly.

DCR staff will provide support throughout the legislative process until the designation is formally approved by the General Assembly.

Path Forward for Scenic River Designations

Ms. McClary informed the Board that in 2022, DCR partnered with Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) to conduct a study focused on refining the evaluation criteria for Scenic Rivers. This collaboration involved VCU students, subject matter experts, and DCR staff working together to develop a standardized and consistent methodology for river assessments.

As part of this effort, a training video and hands-on instructional materials were created through group consensus in evaluating Scenic River criteria. Additionally, a Geographic Information System (GIS) tool was developed to support pre-field assessments and enable remote evaluations.

The primary objective was to enhance the scientific rigor of the evaluation process and reduce subjectivity. DCR subsequently conducted a comprehensive review of the study by examining its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges. The key findings from this review are summarized below:

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Challenges
Collaboration with experts	Limited field testing	Expansion of the protocol	Resistance to new methodology
Comprehensive training materials	Proficiency in software tools	Further refinement of tools	Technology challenges
Innovative approach	Complexity of protocol	Training program development	Funding, resources, access constraints

Pre-field assessment tool	Time constraints	Collaboration with other stakeholders	External regulatory changes
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Enhancements to the process related to pre-planning include the development of a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) to guide policies and procedures, an update to the Guide to Citizen Involvement, and enabling interested parties to utilize a public-facing GIS web application for preliminary or partial evaluations of rivers based on the established criteria.

Regarding the evaluation request phase, the goal is for interested parties to incorporate the results of their preliminary or partial GIS assessments to support their formal requests for river evaluation. Enhancements to the evaluation process itself focus on improving GIS capabilities and refining metrics and methodologies to more accurately assess a river’s eligibility for Scenic River designation.

In terms of reporting and documentation, the GIS tool will be used to generate and present maps, supporting materials, and conclusions within the Scenic River Report.

Finally, the re-evaluation component aims to establish policies and procedures to facilitate streamlined re-assessments of existing designated river segments.

The eligibility criteria and evaluation methods have been updated to enable a scientific review of eleven out of the thirteen criteria, moving away from a predominantly subjective approach. The eleven criteria assessed scientifically include stream corridor vegetation; streambed and stream flow modifications; human development; historic features; natural features; parallel roads; road, railroad, and utility crossings; public recreational access; and significant permanent protection.

Two criteria—water quality and fishery quality—will be evaluated using a hybrid approach, combining both scientific analysis and subjective assessment. Finally, the remaining two criteria, landscape quality and overall aesthetic appeal, will continue to be evaluated subjectively.

Board Member Discussion

At the conclusion of Ms. McClary’s overview of the Scenic Rivers Program, the Board engaged in discussion on several topics. These included the evaluation criteria and rating system for the Scenic Rivers Program, landowner perspectives regarding Scenic Rivers within their communities, and the benefits motivating localities to seek Scenic River designation.

The Board also discussed the process for removing a Scenic River designation—acknowledging that this has never occurred—along with the program’s lack of enforcement authority to require actions within localities. Additionally, it was noted that information about the Scenic Rivers Program, including a list of designated rivers, is available on the DCR website. Lastly, the Board discussed DCR staff participation in Board of Supervisors meetings to support education and outreach efforts for both boards and landowners regarding the program.

RECESS

The Board recessed from 10:54 a.m. to 11:09 a.m.

TELLING HARD STORIES – Ms. Katie Shepard, Chief of Education and Interpretation; Mr. Joshua Ellington, Chief of Resource Management; Mr. Joe Neville, Chief Ranger – Visitor Experience, Machicomoco State Park

Ms. Shepard opened the discussion by emphasizing that Virginia is a state rich in diversity, reflected in the varied stories associated with its State Parks. To effectively convey these narratives, the State Parks offer interpretive programs designed to be both engaging and educational, highlighting the natural and cultural resources of the parks. She acknowledged that some stories can be challenging to tell, as visitors may interpret them differently based on their

individual beliefs and backgrounds. Ms. Shepard explained that the purpose of this presentation was to outline the techniques employed by the interpretive staff in sharing these diverse stories.

Ms. Shepard emphasized that interpretation extends beyond education; it is fundamentally about inspiring action through knowledge. She referenced a quote by Freeman Tilden, a pioneer in the field of interpretation: "Through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation; through appreciation, protection." The State Park interpretive staff focus not only on exploring the past but also on understanding the parks in their current state to ensure their preservation for future generations. Interpretive staff play a crucial role in helping visitors see themselves as active participants in this ongoing process.

Ms. Shepard outlined four key strategies employed to effectively convey challenging stories: staff training, research and creating connections, interpretive opportunities and techniques, and building relationships and trust. She provided an overview of the staff training process, highlighting the annual Spring Interpretive Workshop. Ms. Shepard shared examples related to the history of various State Parks, including the history of some State Parks dating back to the 1930s. The interpretive staff actively engage visitors by meeting them where they are, offering opportunities such as living history demonstrations, background information on the establishment of parks, and educational signage along hiking trails to enhance visitor understanding.

Mr. Ellington provided an overview of the cultural resources available for State Park staff to utilize when developing interpretive programs, which touched on how relationships are built with tribal communities. Mr. Ellington informed the Board that the Cultural Resource Manager position was developed in 2023, and the role was filled by Dr. Lauren McMillan. Dr. McMillan is a liaison for Virginia tribes as she is responsible for tribal engagement activities that take place. To best engage with Virginia tribes, it is important to involve Tribal Nations early in the development of a project where there are stories told in the parks that require their communication. Maintaining regular and thorough communication is key to ensuring the relationship between park staff and Tribal Nations is ongoing. It is essential to respect Tribal Nations as sovereign governments and to seek solutions that benefit all parties involved in the projects.

Mr. Ellington provided an overview of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) and described the ongoing efforts by State Parks to consult with federally recognized Tribal Nations. He noted that in 2024, legislation was enacted requiring the Secretary of the Commonwealth to designate an Ombudsman for Tribal Consultation. The current Ombudsman, Kara Canaday, frequently collaborates with the Cultural Resource office to provide guidance and support on various projects, including those involving State Parks.

The Board discussed communication by DCR staff with federally recognized Tribal Nations compared to those who are solely state recognized Tribal Nations and the importance of working with all Tribal Nations.

Mr. Neville provided an overview of the ongoing efforts at Machicomoco State Park to engage with Tribal Nations and share their stories through a variety of interpretive programs. He emphasized the park's commitment to supporting and conveying the history, perspectives, and cultures of Virginia Tribal Nations. Mr. Neville noted that he and the Park Manager plan to visit museums and cultural centers across the region to deepen their understanding of Indigenous history and to better guide visitors seeking further educational opportunities beyond the park. He also informed the Board of recent events hosted at the park, including an Earth Day celebration and the Chickahominy Tribe Summer Culture Camp.

The Board engaged in a discussion regarding Machicomoco State Park's initiatives, the number of State Parks and Natural Area Preserves with historical ties to Indigenous peoples, and additional hard stories to tell, including those related to hunting and environmental concerns.

ENSURING SAFETY IN OUT PARKS & PRESERVES – *Mr. Scott Vantrease, Chief of Law Enforcement and Mr. Charlie Connor, Deputy Chief of Law Enforcement*

Mr. Stovall introduced Mr. Vantrease and Mr. Connor to provide an overview of ensuring safety in State Parks and Natural Heritage Area.

Mr. Vantrease provided an overview of his background in law enforcement, as well as that of Mr. Connor. He then detailed the primary responsibilities of Law Enforcement Rangers, emphasizing their duty to protect Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) properties and ensure the safety of visitors.

Currently, approximately 100 sworn law enforcement officers are assigned to DCR's State Parks and Natural Heritage Areas. These officers are tasked with safeguarding infrastructure valued at \$1.2 billion and managing the safety of millions of guests annually.

DCR Law Enforcement holds accreditation from the Virginia Law Enforcement Professional Standards Commission, which mandates a renewal process every four years. This accreditation requires compliance with over 190 established standards.

Under § 10.1-115.E of the Code of Virginia, DCR Law Enforcement Rangers possess the same authority and powers as county sheriffs across the Commonwealth. In their operations, they frequently collaborate with local law enforcement agencies, providing mutual assistance as necessary.

The range of incidents requiring DCR Law Enforcement intervention is broad and includes burglaries, suicides, mental health crises, sexual assaults, weapons violations, large public disturbances, homelessness and public support issues, narcotics violations, fugitives, sex trafficking, gang-related activities, hate group incidents, and homicides.

The process to become a Law Enforcement Ranger begins with obtaining certification from the Department of Criminal Justice Services and successfully passing the state exam. The initial training program lasts approximately 23 to 24 weeks and is offered by 36 Member Agencies, collectively training over 3,000 students annually.

Following academy training, candidates complete a post-academy orientation designed to familiarize them with operational procedures specific to State Parks through classroom instruction. The subsequent phase requires completion of 240 hours of law enforcement activities, including ride-alongs with a certified training officer.

The final stage involves acquiring three to seven years of practical law enforcement experience. After certification, Rangers are required to complete 20 hours of continuing education annually to maintain their credentials.

The Law Enforcement Ranger career specialization is a key component in fostering continuous professional growth within the department. The primary objectives are to enhance recruitment and retention for these highly competitive roles, ensure the availability of well-trained public safety and law enforcement rangers, and strengthen proactive measures to protect DCR employees, visitors, and resources.

A modernized approach to career pathing has been implemented to increase accessibility to park leadership positions for all qualified staff. The established career advancement pathway within law enforcement is as follows:

- Park Ranger – Public Safety & Law Enforcement
- Chief Park Ranger – Public Safety & Law Enforcement
- District Ranger – Public Safety & Law Enforcement
- Chief District Ranger – Public Safety & Law Enforcement
- Deputy Chief
- Chief

This structured progression supports professional development and leadership opportunities within the agency.

The Board engaged in a discussion regarding several aspects of DCR Law Enforcement operations, including current staffing levels and the starting salary for Law Enforcement Rangers. The Board was also informed that there have been no officer-involved shootings involving DCR Law Enforcement Rangers. Additionally, it was acknowledged that the only line-

of-duty death within the Ranger program occurred in 1975. The discussion also included an overview of the training scenarios and methods utilized by law enforcement training staff to prepare officers for field operations.

After the meeting adjourned, Mr. Connor provided a tour of law enforcement equipment.

PUBLIC COMMENT

There was no public comment.

ANNOUNCEMENTS AND ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Ihrman announced that the next meeting is scheduled for January 9, 2026, at Pocahontas State Park.

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 12:37 p.m.