



Groups aim to protect environment

*By Shannon Brennan, Lynchburg News & Advance
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An unusual alliance of conservation and business representatives have formed a coalition to lobby the General Assembly for more money for natural resource protection.

Members of The Nature Conservancy, the Homebuilders Association of Virginia, Dominion Power and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation - groups often at odds with one another - are among the groups represented on the Virginia Forever Committee.

"Our coalition represents an unprecedented array of interests joining together to support natural resources programs across the commonwealth," said Michael Lipford, Virginia executive director of The Nature Conservancy.

Virginia ranks 50th in the nation on the amount it spends to protect natural resources - less than 1 percent of the state budget. The natural resources secretariat is the only one in state government that has suffered a loss since 2000, with cuts of about \$22 million.

A recent poll shows that 61 percent of Virginians say they would be willing to pay a little more each month to protect those resources

Eva Hardy, senior vice president for external affairs for Dominion Power, said a well-funded Department of Environmental Quality and a well-thought-out program for land conservation and water quality are important to business and industry.

"They're not at all in conflict," she said.

Hardy says the members of Virginia Forever don't always see eye to eye, but they agree on the long-range goal, and know it will take time.

"We just want to make sure that natural resources funding doesn't get left behind," she said.

Kim Tingley, former president of the Homebuilders Association of Virginia, said protecting natural resources is important for economic development.

"First of all, when a company decides to relocate to Virginia," he said, "one of the things they take into consideration is, is this a good place to raise a family."

Tingley said he makes his living building houses, but he also enjoys hiking in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Protecting the state's resources is crucial, he said.

"The environmental community can't do it alone," he said. "The business community has to participate."

But word of the statewide coalition had not filtered down to the local Homebuilders Association. James Rapp said he was surprised to hear that the Virginia Homebuilders would help a group of "Greenpeace-type" organizations that never want any development or any progress.

He said if a developer has 100 acres, he shouldn't be told to leave half of it open and green. He said the government already "extorts" too many fees from developers for no good reason.

While Tingley said his industry is highly regulated, he said the regulation is not unwelcome as long as it is fair, accurate

and timely.

Other members of Virginia Forever are from the American Lung Association of Virginia, Smithfield Foods, the Virginia Conservation Network, the Virginia League of Conservation Voters, the Garden Club of Virginia, the Virginia Association for Parks, DuPont Corp., and Williams Mullen, a law firm in Richmond.

A telephone poll conducted in July by the Tarrance Group, a national survey research firm based in Alexandria, asked 600 registered voters about a number of issues. The poll showed that public education was by far the highest budget priority at 45 percent, followed by building and maintaining roads at 19 percent.

Natural resource protection only ranked as the top priority among 6 percent of the voters, but when asked separately about environmental issues, 44 percent said losing open space to development was a serious problem, followed by 42 percent concerned with pollution of rivers and streams.

When asked if they would be willing to pay a little extra each month to protect water quality, open space, fisheries and wildlife, and recreational areas, 61 percent said yes, while only 36 percent said no.

When asked how much they would spend each month, 31 percent said they would spend \$2 or less, 21 percent said they would spend \$3 to \$4, and another 16 percent would spend \$5 to \$6.

Forty percent of respondents identified themselves as Republican or Republican-leaning, while 35 percent identified themselves as Democrat or Democrat-leaning. Another 18 percent said they were independent.

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