



State is latecomer to Shore's protection

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If it weren't for the Nature Conservancy, the Eastern Shore could easily look like Shore Drive. The non-profit now protects roughly 40,000 acres up and down the peninsula, and for three decades has stood squarely between developers and the shore's farms, marshes and wilderness areas.

To the shame of Richmond and Washington, the group and others like it have done so largely alone.

This year, the General Assembly decided to devote \$10 million to protecting important and threatened properties in the commonwealth. That comes at the end of a long period in which the state's stated commitment to conservation was almost never backed up with actual money.

The state gave the Nature Conservancy \$900,000 this month to help buy two Chesapeake Bay islands, and to protect 222 acres of farmland near Cape Charles. The nonprofit will have to come up with at least the same amount to match the state money.

The commonwealth's bequest came shortly after the Conservancy all by itself negotiated a deal to buy 82 bayfront acres near the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel and the Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge, and a couple months after it purchased 490 nearby acres.

In other words, Richmond's new financial largesse is nice, but it's nowhere near enough to actually get the job done. Take a look around the Chesapeake.

Our neighbor to the north spends far more government money than Virginia on preserving open space and protecting vulnerable lands. Despite enormous cuts for 2004 and 2005, Maryland will spend many millions more than Virginia over the same period. So will Pennsylvania. Even the city of Virginia Beach has spent more on open space than the commonwealth.

Conservation isn't a competition, but Virginia should still be embarrassed it is losing so badly. Especially since protecting riparian lands are a crucial first step in safeguarding the Chesapeake Bay's beleaguered watershed.

Richmond's reliance on others has allowed some politicians to crow about holding down spending, even as they shirk their duties as stewards of the environment. Like too many expedient budget decisions over the past decade, all that cynical game did was delay the inevitable, and raise the price tag Virginians will pay on the day of reckoning.

As the condition of our rivers and our bay show, that day is no longer in some indefinite future. It'll be here soon, if it isn't already, and the scope of the necessary solution will almost certainly dwarf the resources of any private entity.

The problem is that while it has depended on the kindness of others, the state has done little to prepare for the time when that charity won't be enough. That day is almost here, and Virginia has almost nothing in the bank to pay the bill, never mind the will to write the check.