

MEMORANDUM

TO: THE NATURE CONSERVANCY ACTION FUND

FROM: THE TARRANCE GROUP, INC.

RE: SUMMARY OF THE KEY FINDINGS FROM A STATEWIDE SURVEY OF VIRGINIA VOTERS

DATE: OCTOBER 10, 2003

The Tarrance Group, Inc., is pleased to present The Nature Conservancy Action Fund with the results of our most recent survey of Virginia voters. The telephone survey interviewed N=600 registered “likely” voters across the state and was conducted July 27-29, 2003. The margin of error associated with a study of this type is $\pm 4.1\%$.

SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS

Sixty-one percent of Virginia voters are willing to pay a little more each month in order to protect water quality, open space, fisheries and wildlife and recreational areas. This is a remarkable figure, which shows Virginians are serious about protecting their natural areas. And, support for this measure is above fifty percent in every region of the state.

This research also shows that the overall, best message for the campaign happens to be a Virginia pride-based message. Voters respond very well to the message that “Virginia has always been known for its beautiful mountains, open fields, and clean rivers and streams, and we must protect and preserve our natural heritage today, so we can leave behind a legacy for future generations.”

The key findings from the survey are described below.

KEY FINDINGS

Direction of the state and budget priorities

Fifty-one percent of voters feel the state is headed in the right direction, while thirty-six percent feel it is headed on the wrong track. This is a slight increase from the August 2002 study when the results were forty-seven percent right direction to forty percent wrong track. Voters in the Richmond-Central region are the most optimistic, while voters in the Tidewater region are the most skeptical of the direction of the state.

When asked to name the highest state budget priority for next year, a plurality of voters name public education with forty-five percent. The second highest response is twenty-six points lower, with building and maintaining roads at nineteen percent.

	<u>First Highest Priority</u>	<u>Second Highest Priority</u>
Public education	45%	24%
Building and maintaining roads	19%	21%
Public health programs	15%	14%
Higher education programs	9%	19%
Natural resource programs	6%	14%
Mental health programs	4%	8%

Twenty percent of voters choose natural resource programs either their first or second highest budget priority. Women at home tend to choose natural resource programs as their second highest priority.

Current and potential environmental problems

Forty-four percent of Virginia voters say losing open space to development is a serious problem, and forty-two percent of voters feel pollution of our rivers and streams is a serious problem. Also, thirty-two percent of voters feel the destruction of natural areas and wildlife habitat is a serious problem.

While a majority of voters do not view the concept of lack of access to areas for hunting and fishing as a problem in Virginia, those who hunt do view some concerns down the road. Twenty-two percent of hunters say lack of access to areas for hunting and fishing is a serious problem, and another twenty-three percent say it is somewhat of a problem.

Ballot section – Voters are open to paying a little extra

When asked the first general ballot question of whether they are “willing to pay a little extra each month to protect water quality, open space, fisheries and wildlife, and recreational areas,” sixty-one percent of voters say yes, they would be willing (34% “strongly”). This is a remarkable figure, and it shows Virginians are serious about protecting their natural environment. In fact, support for the general ballot is over fifty percent in every region of the state! Furthermore, support remains above the fifty percent mark among partisan voters, showing bipartisan support for the measure.

When asked the same, general ballot question at the end of the survey, sixty-two percent say they would be willing to pay a little extra each month and thirty-four percent say they would not be willing.

Interestingly, when the respondents who say they would be willing to pay a little more are asked how much, thirty-one percent say they would pay 2 dollars or less. Another twenty-one percent of the voters who say they would be willing to pay more say they would pay between 3 to 4 dollars extra per month.

Sixteen percent of voters who say they would be willing to pay more are willing to pay between 5 and 6 dollars more per month, and three percent of these voters say they would pay between 7 and 8 dollars more, and thirteen percent say they would pay between 9 and 10 dollars. Only nine percent of these voters say they would not be willing to pay anything extra.

The water bill

When asked if they would be willing to pay a little extra on their water bills to fund natural resource programs that protect water quality, open space, fisheries and wildlife, and recreational areas, forty-seven percent say yes, willing and thirty-seven percent say no.

When examining the voters who say they would pay more, seven percent say they would pay less than 1 dollar a month more, and only eight percent say they would not be willing to pay anything extra. Yet, forty-two percent of these voters say they would pay between 1 and 2 dollars more a month, and fifteen percent of these voters say they would pay between 3 to 4 dollars more per month. Another twenty-one percent of the voters who say they are willing to pay more say they would pay five dollars more, and five percent are willing to pay more than five dollars.

The tipping fee and the waste/trash bill

When voters are asked their opinions of establishing a “tipping fee,” there is tremendous support, with seventy-seven percent favoring the measure to only eighteen percent opposing it. This support is in all regions of the state, with Richmond-Central voters supporting the concept the most.

The support level for a fee on waste disposal to both state residents and out-of-state companies is above the fifty percent mark with fifty-seven percent saying yes, they would be willing to pay more and thirty-nine percent saying no.

Recordation fee

Seventy percent of Virginia voters support the continuation of the recordation fee, with forty-two percent saying they “strongly” support it. Voters seem fairly positive about continuing the fee, and the support crosses party lines as at least sixty-four percent of partisan voters support the recordation fee.

Virginia Conservation Trust Fund

Voters were asked to give their opinion on the establishment of a Virginia Conservation Trust Fund that would be funded by a portion of the state budget to dedicate money towards the protection of water quality, open space, fisheries and wildlife and recreational areas. Sixty-nine percent of voters say they would support this trust fund. And, only twenty-six percent say they would oppose it. There is potential for broad support of the conservation trust fund as partisan voters support the fund with a minimum of sixty-four percent support.

Perceptions about natural resources in Virginia

A full sixty-eight percent (68%) of Virginia voters indicate that they are more likely to support a proposal that would require they pay a little extra in order to ensure environmental protection when they are told that lack of funding as the sole reason for not cleaning up polluted rivers. Another twenty-eight percent (28%) say this statement would make them less likely to support paying more.

Fully sixty-five percent (65%) of voters indicate that they are more likely to support spending a little extra per month in order to protect water quality, open space, and other environmental areas when introduced to the idea that less than one penny of every dollar in the state budget goes toward protecting Virginia’s natural resources. Only twenty-seven percent (27%) say it makes them less likely to pay more.

Approximately two-thirds (67%) of the Virginia electorate indicate hearing that their home state ranks last for spending on natural resources causes them to be more likely to support paying more to protect the state's environment. Only twenty-eight percent (28%) say it would make them less likely to support paying more.

Another statement that is persuasive to the electorate is the fact that there is currently no dedication of funds in the state budget to protect open space, natural areas and wildlife habitat. Sixty-two percent (62%) of voters indicate positive movement in response to this information, compared to thirty-one percent (31%) saying less likely.

The most effective statement tested in support of paying "a little extra each month to protect water quality, open space, fisheries and wildlife, and recreational areas" highlights the aim to preserve Virginia's rich natural heritage. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of voters are more likely to support paying more to protect the environment when they hear this message. Only twenty-two percent (22%) say this message would make them less likely to pay more.

Sixty-nine percent (69%) of voters say the statement that "tens of thousands of acres of open space and farmland are lost to development each year" is one that would make them more likely to support paying a little extra each month to protect water quality, open space, fisheries and wildlife, and recreational areas, while only twenty-eight percent (28%) say it would make them less likely.

Sixty-five percent (65%) of voters indicate that the idea of Virginia's environment being on the decline, and that the state has invested too little in protecting our air and water and that the General Assembly needs to spend more money to keep Virginia clean, is one that would make them more likely to support paying a little extra. Thirty-one percent respond less likely.

Fifty-two percent (52%) of voters respond positively to a statement about polluted waters encroaching upon fishing and hunting. Another forty-two percent (42%) say this information would make them less likely to support paying a little extra to protect water quality, open space, fisheries and wildlife, and recreational areas.

A full seventy-three percent (73%) of voters say a message that states lack of funding as the cause for nearly half of our rivers being polluted is a convincing message to make them more likely to support paying a little extra each month. The other twenty-three percent (23%) say it makes them less likely.