



Turning Questions Into Answers.

*Opinion Research &
Public Policy Analysis*

TO: Interested Parties

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RE: Results of Recent Statewide Survey of Virginia Voters on River and Bay Issues

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The bipartisan research team of Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin & Associates (FMM&A) and Public Opinion Strategies recently completed a survey of Virginia voters on issues related to the condition of local rivers and streams and the Chesapeake Bay.¹ The survey results show that Virginia voters place a high value on local rivers and the Bay, recognizing their economic and recreational benefits and labeling them “extremely important” to the local area’s quality of life. At the same time, voters are highly concerned about the condition of local rivers and the Bay, with majorities calling them “polluted” and nearly two-thirds rating their overall condition as no better than “only fair.” Accordingly, nearly two-thirds of Virginia voters are willing to support establishing an additional dedicated user fee on water bills that would average one dollar per week to fund efforts to clean up local rivers and the Bay.

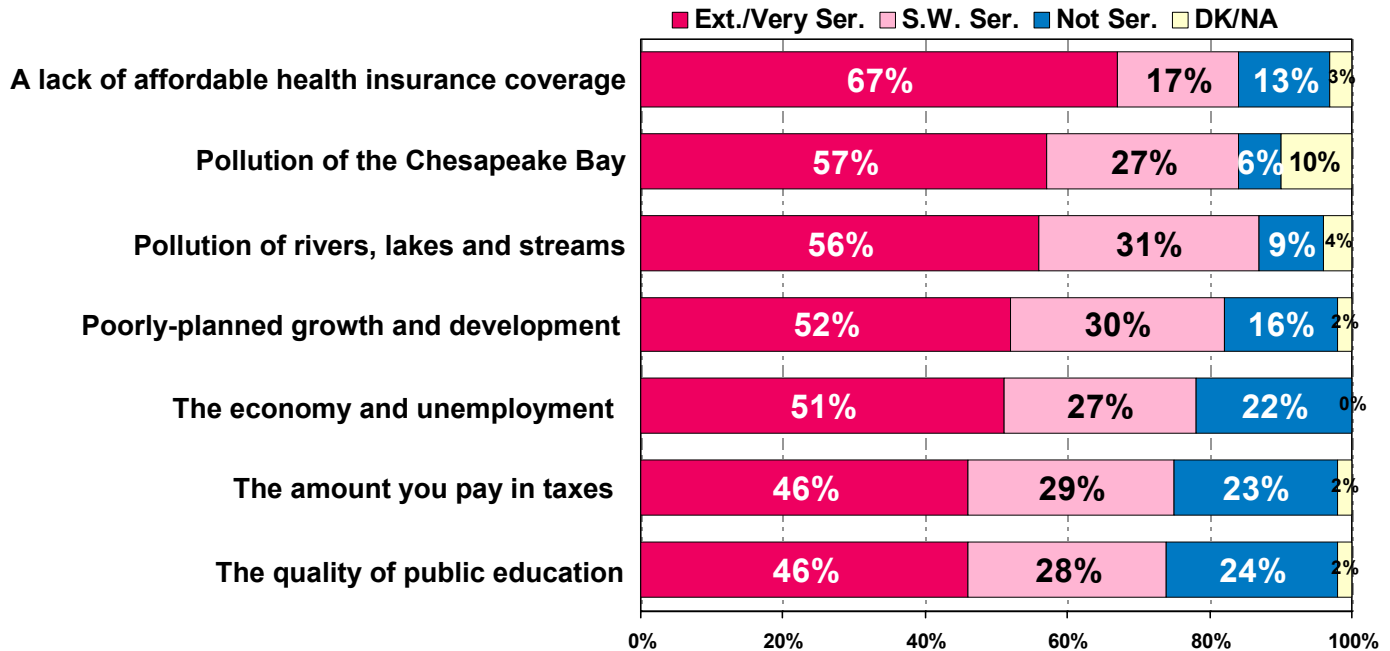
Among the key specific findings of the survey were the following:

- **Pollution of local rivers and the Bay is among Virginia voters’ top concerns.** Survey respondents were presented with a list of issues facing their area, and were asked to rate each one as either an “extremely serious problem,” “very serious problem,” “somewhat serious problem,” or “not a serious problem.” Overall, as illustrated in **Figure 1** on the following page, voters are most concerned about “a lack of affordable health insurance coverage,” with two-thirds of those polled rating it at least a “very serious” problem. But sizable majorities also rate “pollution of the Chesapeake Bay” (57 percent) and “pollution of rivers, lakes and streams” (56 percent) as being at least “very serious” problems. In fact, Virginia voters’

¹ **Methodology:** From July 28 through August 5, 2004, FMM&A and P.O.S. conducted a survey of 633 registered voters in the state of Virginia. The margin of sampling error for the survey is +/- 4.0%.

concern about water pollution in local rivers and the Bay exceeds their concern about a number of other prominent issues, including the economy, education, and taxes.

FIGURE 1:
Evaluation of the Seriousness of Problems Facing Your Area



These figures reflect a very high level of concern about local rivers and the Bay; there are few areas of the country in which our firms have seen water pollution be such a high-level public concern. In fact, in a national survey conducted jointly by our firms in April of this year, only 48 percent of voters nationally rated “pollution of rivers, lakes and streams” as a “very serious” problem – a full eight points lower than the proportion observed in our Virginia survey.

- Voters see local rivers and the Bay as extremely important for their quality of life.** Voters’ concern about water pollution likely stems from the fact that they perceive local rivers and the Chesapeake Bay to be highly important to their quality of life. Survey respondents were asked to rate the importance of various bodies of water to their quality of life using a five-point scale, where one represented “not at all important” and five represented “extremely important.” A sizable majority of 60 percent of those polled rated their “nearest local river” a five on the scale, and 59 percent offered the same rating for the Chesapeake Bay. The strength of feeling that Virginia voters express on this issue is striking; three out of five voters rate their nearest river and the Chesapeake Bay as “extremely important” to their quality of life.

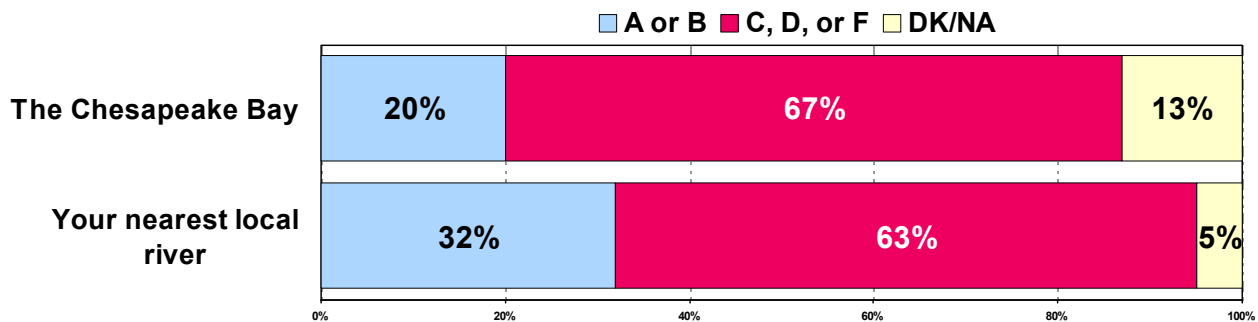
- **Virginia voters see numerous benefits to local rivers and the Bay.** Survey respondents were presented with a series of descriptions of the Chesapeake Bay, and were asked whether or not they thought each described the Bay well. The responses to this question – a few of which are detailed below – showed that Virginia voters view the Bay as a “national treasure,” which also offers important economic and recreational benefits:
 - 88 percent of Virginia voters see the Chesapeake Bay as a “national treasure”;
 - 85 percent believe that the Bay “offers a good location for recreation”;
 - 80 percent see the Bay as “critical to the local economy”; and
 - 73 percent say that the Bay is “appreciated” by residents of their area.

A similar survey question, which presented voters with a series of potential descriptions of their nearest local river, demonstrated that Virginia voters see many of the same benefits from local rivers that they see from the Bay. A total of 83 percent of those polled say that their nearest local river “is appreciated by residents of their area,” and fully 80 percent say it “offers a good location for recreation.”

At the same time, these questions also revealed that Virginia voters also have some negative perceptions of their local rivers and the Bay. Fully 71 percent say that the Chesapeake Bay is “polluted,” and 55 percent say the same of their nearest local river.

- **Virginia voters believe that their local rivers and the Bay are not in good condition.** Survey respondents were asked to grade the overall condition of these same bodies of water, using a grade of A for “excellent,” B for “pretty good,” C for “only fair,” D for “poor,” and F for “failing.” As shown in **Figure 2** below, only one voter in five gave the Chesapeake Bay a positive grade of A or B, and fewer than one in three gave positive marks to their nearest local river. A 67-percent majority of Virginia voters believe that the Chesapeake Bay is in no better than “only fair” condition, and a 63-percent majority say the same for their nearest local river. Given the importance of these bodies of water to Virginia voters’ quality of life, it is no surprise that they are highly concerned about their condition.

FIGURE 2:
Grades Voters Assign the Overall Condition of Local Bodies of Water

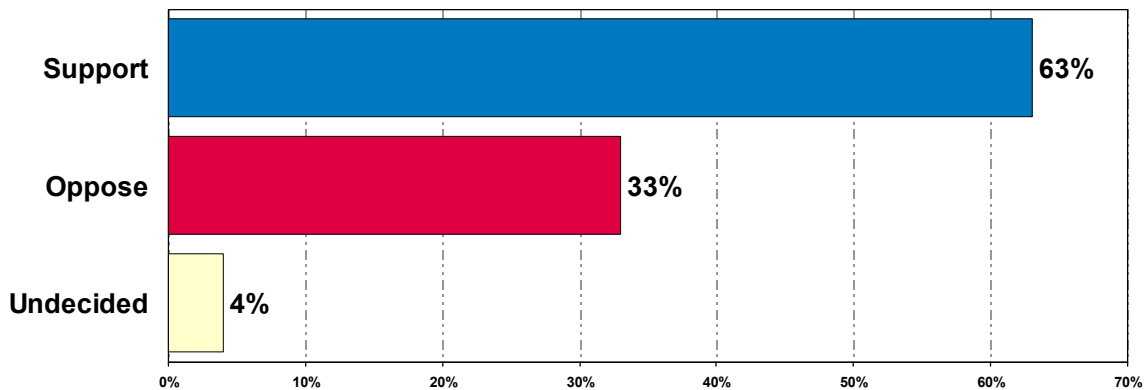


- **Virginia voters strongly support requiring government agencies to implement the Chesapeake 2000 Agreement.** When asked whether they would support “requiring state, local and federal agencies to meet the commitments they made in the Chesapeake 2000 Agreement to clean up the Bay and local rivers,” Virginia voters offered enthusiastic and nearly unanimous backing for the idea. Fully 95 percent said that they supported the proposal, with more than three-quarters (76 percent) saying that they supported it “strongly.”
- **Nearly two-thirds of Virginia voters support an additional \$50 annual dedicated user fee on water bills to fund programs to improve local rivers and the Bay.** Virginia voters not only value local rivers and the Bay and express concern about their condition; they are also willing to put their money where their mouths are. Survey respondents were presented with the following description of a proposed statewide dedicated user fee:

“Some people have proposed establishing a user fee on water bills to improve water quality and reduce the pollution of lakes, rivers, and streams in Virginia. Money would be used to upgrade sewage treatment plants to reduce the amount of pollution in Virginia rivers, lakes and streams, and to fund programs to reduce the amount of animal waste that flows from Virginia farms into rivers, streams, and the Bay. This fee would cost most homeowners about one dollar per week. Does this sound like something you would support or oppose?”

Given this description, as shown in **Figure 3** below, Virginia voters said that they would support the fee by a margin of nearly two to one (with 63 percent in favor and just 33 percent opposed).

FIGURE 3:
Support for an Additional Dedicated User Fee on Virginia Water Bills



Support for the additional dedicated user fee is not only broad among Virginia voters overall, but it also cuts across key demographic subgroups within the electorate. Specifically, the fee is supported by:

- 65 percent of women and 60 percent of men;
 - 64 percent of voters under age 50 and 60 percent of voters age 50 and over;
 - 70 percent of Democrats, 63 percent of independents, and 52 percent of Republicans;
 - 66 percent of college-educated voters, and 60 percent of voters without a college education; and
 - 62 percent of white voters and 62 percent of African-Americans.
- **Voters are more likely to support a candidate for the Legislature who works to improve water quality by supporting an additional dedicated user fee.** To assess the impact of the dedicated user fee on support for legislative candidates, survey respondents were randomly divided into two groups; half were asked whether they would be more or less likely to vote for a candidate who supported the fee, and the other half were asked whether they would be more or less likely to vote for a candidate who opposed the fee. As shown in **Figure 4** below, a 58-percent majority of voters said they would be more likely to back a candidate who supported the fee, and a 45-percent plurality said that they would be less likely to vote for a candidate who opposed it. Clearly, to the extent that a dedicated user fee to protect and clean up local rivers and the Bay has any political impact on legislative candidates, it is likely to make voters *more* supportive of candidates who back it.

FIGURE 4:
Impact of Support or Opposition to a Dedicated User Fee on Likelihood to
Vote for a State Legislative Candidate
(Split Sample)

Impact on Likelihood to Vote for That Candidate	A Candidate Who Supported the Fee	A Candidate Who Opposed the Fee
More likely	58%	21%
Less likely	14%	45%
Makes no difference/DK	28%	34%

Overall, the findings of the survey indicate that Virginia voters place a high priority on preserving and improving water quality in local lakes, rivers, streams, and the Bay, which they view as critical to their quality of life. Voters are not satisfied with the current condition of their local rivers and the Bay, and perceive them to be polluted. As a result, voters are willing to support an additional dedicated user fee averaging one dollar per week in order to improve water quality and reduce pollution in local rivers and the Chesapeake Bay.