



Executive Summary

How RVA757 Connects Can Advance the BoAT Trail

September 1, 2022

Document Purpose:

One of RVA757 Connects' Board-Megaregional Institutional Council (MIC) approved 2022 priority focus areas is accelerating the planning and construction of the Birthplace of America Trail, commonly called the "BoAT Trail."

The BoAT Trail will for all practical purposes extend the Virginia Capital Trail that now runs from Richmond to Williamsburg along Route 5 all the way to the Virginia Beach ocean front (from Williamsburg to Fort Monroe on the Peninsula and from Williamsburg across the Surry Ferry to the ocean front), creating another important physical transportation connection between the RVA and 757 regions.

This document informs an upcoming board-level discussion on this topic as part of the September 20 (10 a.m. to noon) RVA757 Connects Board/MIC meeting. This includes:

- Background on Walking / Biking Trails
- Success of the Virginia Capital Trail to Date
- Plans for the BoAT Trail Construction
- Possible Ways RVA757 Connects Can Help

Greater detail about advancing the BoAT Trail and related issues for RVA757 Connects' consideration can be found in the full briefing deck: [📄 Va Capital Trail Plan 09-02-22.pptx](#)

Board directors/MIC members are encouraged to review either this Executive Summary document, or the full briefing PowerPoint deck, prior to the September 20 meeting.

Background on Walking / Biking Trails:

Bicycling in America – as well as in Virginia – has become a popular leisure activity that has seen increasing interest and use during the last five years. COVID pandemic has accelerate this trend.

Biking is not only a more popular sport, but cycling has become a great alternative for transportation. That interest has boosted the use and the number of bike trail networks. Localities have been investing in bike-walk trails in recent years to support the increase demand.

And for good reason. Bike trails help attract and retain young professionals. Biking and walking activities have universal appeal. Bike-walk trail access can directly improve local social equity. Trails increase access and mobility for local communities, provide healthcare savings, and enhances employer and employee attraction. For all these reasons and more, trails deliver a positive return-on-investment.

Biking-walking trails are expected to continue to grow in the post-COVID era, including across Virginia. Four major bike-walk trails are under some level of development in Virginia:



- The Fall Line trail that will run through seven localities in the Richmond region (Ashland, Hanover, Henrico, Richmond, Chesterfield, Colonial Heights, and Petersburg)
- The Shenandoah Rail Trail that will stretch across a nearly 50-mile inactive Norfolk Southern rail corridor from Broadway to Front Royal
- The Virginia Eastern Shore Trail that will run along the Eastern Shore of Virginia between Cape Charles and Hallwood
- The Birthplace of America Trail (or BoAT) that will run from Williamsburg to Virginia Beach (from Williamsburg to Fort Monroe on the Peninsula and from Williamsburg across the Surry Ferry to the ocean front) as an extension of the Virginia Capital Trail (that currently runs from Richmond to Williamsburg)

A record-setting \$93 million in funding has been approved in the state budget for multi-use trails across Virginia - an eight-fold increase from the previous year's commitment. The funding establishes a Virginia Office of Trails, which is designed to manage a recurring fund of money that will support trail building and management.

Success of the Virginia Capital Trail to Date



The 51.7-mile Virginia Capital Trail opened in 2015.

The fully-paved trail runs through four jurisdictions (City of Richmond, Henrico County, Charles City County, and James City County) with dozens of attractions along the way. It took 15 years to go from an idea to opening.

The trail has been a huge success since its opening in 2015, according to the Virginia Capital Trail Foundation’s impact reports. The trail attracts more than 1.2 million users annually. About \$8.5 million in economic activity was generated within 50-miles of the trail in the 2018-19 fiscal year. During the same time period, the trail supported 100-plus full-time equivalent, or FTE, jobs in the state, and generated \$613,000 in state and local tax revenues.

How did the Virginia Capital Trail become such a big success? Based on RVA757 Connects’ discussions with Virginia Capital Trail executive director and foundation board leaders, here are 10 key factors of success:

1. The concept of the trail had initial champions – elected officials and business leaders.
2. The energy of the initial champions was sustained by creating a 501(c)3 foundation.
3. A dedicated staff person was hired – someone who worked on advancing the concept every day.
4. Seamless integration with local governments and their planning/timing needs.
5. Most of the trail property was already owned by VDOT (rights-of-way already in place).
6. Built sections with gaps as starting at both ends would ensure the middle would have to be built.
7. The 2015 UCI Road World Championships took place in Richmond was a big deadline boost.

8. VDOT was and continues to be actively engaged (VDOT handles most of the trail maintenance).
9. Active ongoing marketing and engagement, including events, promotions, PR, trail cleanup, trail ambassadors, and advocacy.
10. Dedicated staff – the Foundation currently has four FTE staff members.

Plans for the BoAT Trail Construction

Plans are now underway to build the Birthplace of America Trail, or BoAT. This will be, de facto, an unofficial extension of the Virginia Capital Trail. The BoAT regional trail system will total 190 miles when completed, connecting residential communities, tourism attractions, historical sites, educational institutions, and recreational facilities.

Hampton Roads Transportation Planning Organization (HRTPO) is at the center of planning efforts. HRTPO has conducted a high-level planning study and identified two potential routes for the BoAT Trail from Williamsburg to Virginia Beach:

- One route would run from Jamestown (the eastern terminus of the Virginia Capital Trail) through Williamsburg, James City County, York County, and Newport News to end on the Peninsula at Fort Monroe.
- The other route would cross the James River at the Surry Ferry, and run through Surry County, Isle of Wight County, Suffolk, Portsmouth, Norfolk, and end at the Virginia Beach ocean front.
- These two routes are not mutually exclusive. They can and eventually will co-exist.



The 757 region’s local governments have unanimously endorsed this vision and plan.

The initial buildout focus is on the Peninsula – the Williamsburg to Fort Monroe segment. Some small sub-segments of this Peninsula part of the BoAT Trail are in

place and are being used, such as along a stretch of Monticello Avenue in James City County, part of McReynolds Athletic Complex in York County, and along part of Chesapeake Boulevard in Newport News.

But this represents a small part of the total. Most of the BoAT on the Peninsula must be designed, funded, and constructed. The estimate to complete the entire BoAT Trail network on the Peninsula is about \$125 million.

The BoAT buildout comes with some complexity. While most of the Virginia Capital Trail traverses through rural areas along Route 5, the BoAT Trail in Hampton Roads will proceed through suburban and urban areas. This can create planning challenges.

However, the BoAT's proximity to residential and employment areas creates a potential to serve residents, businesses, and tourists. For instance, residents could use the BoAT Trail as a preferred mobility choice for their trips to work, school, and play, while tourists could find the BoAT Trail attractive in connecting popular tourist destinations. The trail also would provide access to underserved populations across the Peninsula.

The region's 17 local governments have unanimously supported the BoAT Trail in Hampton Roads. Chief administrative officers from James City County, Williamsburg, York County, Newport News, Hampton, and Poquoson all have committed to advancing the trail network in their localities. Some have committed local funds to support the BoAT Trail completion.

Future segments are planned in 2023 for construction including the completion of Compton Drive Shared-use Path (Monticello Avenue to Brooks Street) in Williamsburg; Mellen Street Bicycle and Pedestrian Project (South Mallory Street to South Willard Avenue) in Hampton; and Mercury Boulevard Road Diet Project (North Willard Avenue to Fort Monroe) in Hampton. Other segments are planned to be completed in 2026, 2027 and 2028 in Poquoson, in James City County, and in York County.

The segment around Williamsburg-Jamestown is a critical part of Virginia's infrastructure supporting and participating in America's 250th anniversary in 2026.

The next steps for the bike trail include dealing with right-of-way issues, property ownership, routing and design, and identify funding. The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) is providing \$200,000 of consultant resources to support engineering-related work, but there is still not enough funding for all of the needed design work. The current strategy is to fund and advance the construction of key trail segments through grants. HRTPO also continues to explore state and federal funding opportunities.



Securing all of the needed \$125 million in funding for Peninsula BoAT segment is key. Several potential sources of funding include:

- Smart Scale, working with Commonwealth Transportation Board
- Tapping into funding from the new state trail agency/department
- Using federal infrastructure package funds
- Utilizing locality's capital improvement programs
- Coordinating with developers and related development proffers
- Creating a public-private partnership where local governments, state government, and businesses all contribute to the cause.

Possible Ways RVA757 Connects Can Help

As previously stated, one of RVA757 Connects' Board-approved 2022 priority focus areas is accelerating the planning and construction of the BoAT Trail. RVA757 Connects staff have been working with parties involved in advancing the BoAT Trail to identify several ways our organization can help. The top ideas include:

1. Help identify and engage trail champions. This includes elected local, state, and federal officials, community leaders, and business leaders. Recall, this was a key success factor for the Virginia Capital Trail. (Note: Local officials in Hampton Roads are on board with the bike trail and are supportive.)
2. Help raise awareness and benefits of the trail by creating a project website, promoting the project through RVA757 Connects' communications efforts, and generating earned media.

Use this awareness-building effort to position the BoAT as a critical infrastructure investment that will help advance the RVA and 757 regions. Bike-walk trails attract and retain residents, improve quality life, and provide greater support to underserved communities/neighborhoods while helping to grow regional and local travel industry.

3. Advocate for funding from the new state bike agency to support all of the "Big Four" trails (Eastern Shore Trail, Fall Line Trail, Shenandoah Trail, and BoAT). Note that the RVA region is advancing the Fall Line Trail, so RVA757 Connects needs to support all trail development.

4. Conduct a return-on-investment (ROI) study that makes a powerful economic case for investment in the BoAT. Most successful trails in other cities benefited from having an ROI study to advance investment in their facilities.
5. Provide organizing support to make the case for financial support for the BoAT. This could include organizing and packaging “adopt-a-trail” funding opportunities for corporations and others that give them recognition on signage, websites, and e-newsletters. Craft a public-private partnership approach.
6. Facilitate BoAT stakeholder discussion on the best name for the new trail. Trail advocates currently call the route from Williamsburg to Virginia Beach the BoAT Trail – the Birthplace of America Trail.

So why isn't this new Williamsburg-to-Virginia Beach trail (from Williamsburg to Fort Monroe on the Peninsula and from Williamsburg across the Surry Ferry to the ocean front), simply called the Virginia Capital Trail? After all, on a map, the Williamsburg-to-Virginia Beach trail appears to be a logistical extension of the Virginia Capital Trail. The reason makes practical sense.



The Virginia Capital Trail Foundation owns the name the Virginia Capital Trail. While the organization is open to discussing use of the name, many issues must be raised, studied, and addressed. Three examples include:

- Would using the Virginia Capital Trail name for the entire Richmond-to-Virginia Beach segment be confusing from a branding perspective?
- Would the experience be similar? The Virginia Capital Trail Foundation has spent considerable time and resources over the years ensuring a great and consistent experience on the Richmond-to-Williamsburg trail. Will the same experience be delivered consistently for the Williamsburg-to-Virginia Beach trail?
- Another question centers around trail maintenance. The Foundation currently does not have the resources to take on the responsibility to make sure the mile markers, signage, cleanliness, and safety be seamless and delivered consistently for the Williamsburg-to-Virginia Beach portion.

The Tidewater Trails Alliance came up with the name “Birthplace of America Trail.” The major advantage to this name is that it easily ties into America’s 250th anniversary in 2026.

The two primary negative issues related to the Birthplace of America Trail name include:

- The name “Birthplace of America Trail” may morph into just the “BOAT” Trail. There already are examples of this happening on social media including finding “boat craft” references.
- A direct connection with history may not be a large draw for trail users and visitors. History is complicated and can be a source of tension / disagreement. While it’s critical for more Americans to understand our nation’s history, making “history and heritage” the cornerstone of a multi-use trail could make things difficult.

The positive issues related to the Virginia Capital Trail name include:

- The Virginia Capital Trail has already built strong brand reputation.
- Extending the Virginia Capital Trail also would create the longest trail In Virginia.

So, the naming issues is not so simple. RVA757 Connects could help facilitate a process to explore the naming topic, making sure all parties - the jurisdictions, HRTPO, Virginia Capital Trail Foundation, Tidewater Trails Alliance - are all in.

Summary

In late 2021, the RVA757 Connects’ Board and MIC made the acceleration of the planning and construction of the Birthplace of America Trail or BoAT Trail a priority focus area, and for good reason.

The BoAT trail could become a natural extension of the Virginia Capital Trail, running from Richmond all the way to the Virginia Beach ocean front (from Williamsburg to Fort Monroe on the Peninsula and from Williamsburg across the Surry Ferry to the ocean front), creating another important connection between the RVA and 757 regions.

This 190-mile trail when joined with the Virginia Capital Trail would create the longest bike-walk trail in Virginia, a signature experience for residents and visitors alike. The question now before the RVA757 Connects’ Board/MIC is this: How can we best accelerate the planning and construction of the Birthplace of America Trail, creating another physical connection between RVA and 757?