

The Recorder

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Highlanders weigh future of Hayfields Farm

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Hayfields Farm consists of roughly 1,100 acres, including one mile of the Bullpasture River. It is situated along Route 678 south of McDowell, and abuts state-owned land. (Photo courtesy David Cockerham Photography)

MONTEREY — Virginia Outdoors Foundation key staff on Tuesday, Oct. 9 heard from Highland residents about their visions and fears for the future of Hayfields Farm.

VOF took ownership of the roughly 1,100-acre property last year as settlement compensation for abandoning multiple open-land conservation easements, mainly in northern Bath County, in the path of the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline at the direction of pipeline project manager Dominion Energy. The investor-owned utility hopes to gain double-digit dividends for delivering

Marcellus field gas to the Carolinas for power production and other markets, including overseas export.

The meeting Tuesday was designed to engage the public on the farm's future.

Public officials present included supervisors David Blanchard and Kevin Wagner, Sheriff David Neil, Captain Ronald Wimer, county administrator Roberta Lambert, Monterey mayor Rich Holman, Economic Development Authority members, and Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries' senior officer Beth McGuire.



Breakout groups agreed the worst outcome would be no change at Hayfields Farm, currently owned by the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, which acquired the land from Dominion after abandoning conservation easements in the path of the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline.

While there has been much local discussion over the prospect of turning Hayfields into a state park, just two of three breakout groups of county residents Tuesday mentioned a state park among many other possible uses, and none had a state park at the top of the list. All agreed the worst thing that could happen would be no change.

With respect to serious public discourse about Hayfields, one of the breakout groups identified the farm's potential acquisition by the DGIF to add onto the abutting wildlife management area as a fear, while another group listed it as a community vision. Most agreed, however, that visitors and residents alike are interested in hiking, birding and other recreational opportunities.

In her introduction to the meeting, VOF deputy director Martha Little said the overall goal was to determine "the best possible goal for the commonwealth for the property."

VOF assistant director of stewardship Henry Hibbitts reviewed VOF’s mission and benefits of land conservation such as clean water, prime soil and wildlife habitat. VOF has more than 4,000 conservation easements, more than any conservation agency in the nation, including 11,500 acres in Highland, Hibbitts said.

The facilitator devoted a full half-hour of the two-hour meeting to discussing the physical description of Hayfields, demographics, and statistics of Highland as lumped into those of the Shenandoah Valley.

Following break-out sessions, there was a “what if” exercise, examining seven different possibilities. They included:

- Development with a focus on agritourism — Continuing to use Hayfields as a farm, but opening it up to things like farming education, and production of agricultural-based products.
- An institute or research center — Something similar to the way Virginia Tech uses farms for educational purposes and farming research, or a solar lab.



About 35 people attended the Virginia Outdoors Foundation public engagement meeting Tuesday evening at The Highland Center.
(Recorder photo by Anne Adams)

- A physical and/or mental health center — Something like the Wounded Warriors “Project Odyssey” or a drug/ addiction rehabilitation center.
- State park — A park not necessarily owned and operated by the state, but a park focused on recreational opportunities for the public.
- A private recreation area — Something that offers recreational opportunities in a more privately run way, with fees for public access.

- A private retreat or spa — A place that could accommodate large groups for events like company retreats or weddings.
- An event center — Something like a center for the arts, or a think tank, that’s more privately run.

Attendees were asked to “vote” on these options and discuss the pros and cons of each. Afterward, the consensus seemed to be more support for options that provided the most access for Highland residents and visitors, and offered the most choices for recreational development. The more privately-run options that could provide more jobs were deemed impractical because they could take a long time to get financially established here, or might not get off the ground at all.

However, several folks pointed out there could be a “mixed use” choice, too — making room for a private retreat or center on a small portion of the property while opening up the rest to higher public access and recreation.

VOF director Martha Little concluded the meeting, explaining the foundation will now collect the data and input provided and create reports, then proceed to get feedback from other policy makers across the state. VOF, she said, will do more research on all possible uses for the land, and look for partners to help guide future development.

Little assured those attending that throughout the process, VOF will provide information to Highland County residents and keep them informed about the next moves. “Our board is very involved, and intends to be open and transparent about all this,” she said. “There’s no set timeline, but we intend to keep moving forward.”

Meanwhile, she said, VOF will keep the property safe and productive as it is now.