



# 2024 VACo LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

Virginia Association of Counties

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## AGRICULTURE AND RURAL AFFAIRS

### **Farm and Forestland Preservation**

VACo supports increasing state allocations to the Office of Farmland Preservation (OFFP) Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) locality matching funds program. VACo also supports increasing allocations to the newly established Forest Sustainability Fund, created as an incentive for the establishment and maintenance of local forest land use valuation programs. Such programs preserve prime soils for food production and protect important forest land and environmentally sensitive areas in the Commonwealth.

VACo supports preserving and enhancing the ability for counties to balance growth and development, as it pertains to farm and forestland, within their jurisdiction.

## COMMUNITY, ECONOMIC, AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

### **Broadband**

VACo requests that the Commonwealth provide 100 percent funding to counties to build the necessary telecommunications infrastructure to deploy universal affordable access to the internet for all areas, particularly in underserved and rural areas, and streamline the application process for Virginia Telecommunication Initiative (VATI) grants. Additionally, VACo supports legislation that provides additional tools for counties to finance, build and operate open access networks in partnership with commercial internet service providers. VACo also supports efforts to streamline the permitting of broadband infrastructure in the VDOT right-of-way, at railroad crossings, and within utility easements.

### **Affordable and Workforce Housing**

VACo supports increasing federal and state funding and appropriate incentives to assist localities in fostering affordable housing, as well as workforce housing for employees such as teachers, and first responders, and for business growth.

## EDUCATION

### **Education Funding**

VACo supports full state funding for public education, including the Standards of Quality (SOQ) as recommended by the Board of Education and the Joint Legislative Audit & Review Commission (JLARC), as expeditiously as possible. As long as these recommendations coincide with prevailing local practice, VACo supports targeted incentive programs, capital, and maintenance support, and teacher salaries. Full state funding should be achieved without reduction to other parts of state public education budgets or to other core services.

VACo supports additional state resources and additional statewide funding options for localities for capital and school construction costs, including expanding dedicated local sales and use tax authority first given to select counties by the General Assembly in 2019 as well as continuing to fund the School Construction Grant Program and School Construction Assistance Program.

VACo supports state incentives that encourage localities to increase teacher salaries to reflect the national average in compensation, as long as this is done without a required minimum local match. The state share of compensation for the base rate of salaries should reflect the actual average salary as determined by prevailing local practice.

## ENVIRONMENT, ENERGY, AND AGRICULTURE

### **Energy Policy**

VACo supports energy policies and goals that reduce greenhouse gas emissions without compromising reliable and affordable access to electricity, and that address potential environmental impacts and life cycle costs for the manufacture, disposal, re-use, or recycle of material inputs. New sources of potential energy generation should include a range of technologies such as solar, wind, hydroelectric, hydrogen, and nuclear, including small modular nuclear reactors. Such policies should allow for responsible coal and natural gas extraction, processing, and transport while protecting agricultural interests and natural resources.

### **Water Quality Funding**

VACo supports sufficient and sustained financial and technical assistance to counties to improve water quality and meet all federal and state standards to reduce pollution.

## FINANCE AND ELECTIONS

### **Local Finance**

VACo supports preserving the authority of county governments to collect revenues necessary to provide local public services.

VACo appreciates the starting point that the discussions in the 2022 legislative session took regarding adjustments to sales taxes on food purchased for human consumption and essential personal hygiene products -- that any local revenue losses would be replaced. VACo believes that the compromise forged in the budget negotiations in 2022 protects local K-12 revenue and respectfully requests that no further changes be made that would negatively affect this important local funding source.

## GENERAL GOVERNMENT

### **Local Authority**

VACo supports relaxation of the Dillon Rule by enhancing local authority and autonomy in matters including land use, revenue measures, procurement, and other issues of local concern. VACo supports extending powers currently granted to some local governments to all local governments. VACo opposes legislation that erodes local authority.

### **Unfunded Mandates**

VACo opposes unfunded mandates and shifting fiscal responsibility for existing and new programs by the Commonwealth from the state to localities. When funding for a mandated program is altered, the mandate should be suspended until full funding is restored. When legislation with a cost to localities is passed by the General Assembly, the cost should be borne by the Commonwealth, and the legislation should contain a sunset clause providing that the mandate is not binding on localities until funding by the Commonwealth is provided.

## HEALTH AND HUMAN RESOURCES

### **Health and Human Resources Funding**

VACo supports transparent state policies and funding to ensure the Commonwealth's at-risk families have access to high quality and appropriate services. The Commonwealth should provide full funding to localities and their state administrative entities for state-mandated human services and provide the necessary program flexibility to enable localities to provide comprehensive and case-tailored services.

VACo supports resources necessary for behavioral health and mental health facilities to ensure the protection of residents' and staff health and safety, such as appropriate staff qualifications, training, compensation, and condition of the facilities.

### **Crisis Services and State Hospital Capacity to Accept Individuals Subject to Temporary Detention Orders**

VACo supports efforts to address census pressures at state hospitals through near-term funding measures that will ensure that all state hospitals have the capacity to receive admissions of individuals subject to temporary detention orders without delays. VACo supports competitive salaries and training for state hospital direct care staff. In addition, ongoing efforts to support community-based crisis services must continue.

## TRANSPORTATION

### **Transportation Funding**

VACo remains dedicated to advocating for transportation funding policies that empower counties to address their evolving infrastructure needs effectively. VACo is committed to working collaboratively with stakeholders to ensure the continued growth, safety, and prosperity of Virginia's counties and their residents. For more information, see Page 25 of the 2024 VACo Legislative Program regarding VACo's transportation funding priorities.

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*VACo exists to support county officials and to effectively represent, promote and protect the interests of counties to better serve the people of Virginia.*

**Virginia Association of Counties**

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