

2026 VACo LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

Virginia Association of Counties



VACo 2026 TOP FUNDING **PRIORITY**

Federal Spending and Economic Diversification

Virginia's economy remains closely tied to the federal government, with nearly one-quarter of the Commonwealth's economic activity dependent on federal spending, according to recent estimates from the House Appropriations Committee staff. As the federal government undertakes efforts to reduce spending – through measures such as reductions in force, program rescissions, or the elimination of grant funding – VACo urges the Commonwealth to take steps to mitigate the potential impacts of these actions.

VACo encourages the state to take prompt action to support displaced federal employees and contractors, including short-term enhancements to the social safety net and targeted investments in workforce development to assist affected individuals in securing new employment opportunities within Virginia.

VACo also supports continued and expanded efforts to diversify Virginia's economy by recruiting new industries and employers and by investing in site development and infrastructure to enhance the Commonwealth's competitiveness.

In the event of reduced federal support, VACo strongly urges the state to avoid shifting the costs of operating federally funded programs to local governments. VACo recognizes that reductions in federal funding may create additional pressures on the state budget; however, the Commonwealth must maintain its commitments to essential state-local partnerships.

VACo further encourages the state to continue implementing the recommendations of the 2023 JLARC report on K-12 education, particularly those items that align with prevailing local practices, to ensure sustainable funding for public education across Virginia.

VACo 2026 LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Farm and Forestland Preservation

VACo supports increasing state allocations to the Office of Working Lands Preservation 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 match funding to counties to build the necessary telecommunications infrastructure, including cellular communications, to deploy universal affordable access to the internet for all areas, particularly in underserved and rural areas, and streamline the application process for both the Broadband Equity Access and Deployment (BEAD) and 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 to create and sustain more affordable housing.

EDUCATION

Education Funding

VACo supports full state funding for public education, including the Standards of Quality (SOQ) as recommended by the Board of Education, the Joint Legislative Audit & Review Commission (JLARC), and the Joint Subcommittee on Elementary and Secondary Education Funding. 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. Funds from these latter two programs should be as accessible as possible.

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 LAND USE

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, geothermal, 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.

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.

Fire and EMS Funding

VACo supports additional state resources for fire and EMS coverage across the Commonwealth.

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.

Implementation of Changes to Benefits Programs in 2025 Federal Reconciliation Legislation

Changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid enacted at the federal level in 2025 are substantial and will require significant support from the state and coordination between state agencies and local departments of social services to implement.

VACo supports the provision of appropriate tools and investment in staff training to enable local staff to administer these programs effectively and efficiently, and urges the state to work closely with localities in implementing changes to programs with shared state/local responsibility, such as the new community engagement requirement for certain individuals covered by Medicaid. Building on the investment made in the 2024 session and providing the full funding necessary to replace the current benefits management IT system (VaCMS and CommonHelp) is a critical need, and additional state technical support is also needed to improve the administration of the SNAP program in order to reduce Virginia's error rate.

VACo encourages the state to pursue available federal funding to assist with implementation of program changes and to advocate with the federal government for reasonable implementation timelines.

VACo urges the state to avoid shifting costs for program administration or benefit payments to localities, which are already stretched by existing responsibilities for human services programs and other critical public services.

TRANSPORTATION

Transportation Funding

The Virginia Association of Counties (VACo) is committed to advocating for a robust and sustainable transportation funding framework that effectively addresses the evolving needs of our communities across the Commonwealth. We recognize the critical role transportation infrastructure plays in connecting our counties, supporting economic growth, and ensuring the safety and well-being of our residents.

VACo supports continued study and action to address the causes for declining growth in transportation revenues and to develop recommendations to grow revenue over time to meet increasing demands for new construction and maintenance for existing transportation infrastructure. Such actions must, without impacting other transportation

funding, address the secondary road needs of counties as well as unpaved roads.

VACo supports simplifying the Smart Scale process and maintaining transit capital state match rates.

VACo supports the efforts of the federal government to provide additional infrastructure funding to state and local governments, preferably through a multi-year surface transportation reauthorization. As Congress debates the contents of the next surface transportation reauthorization, VACo believes that this funding should supplement, not replace, funding the Commonwealth should provide for localities and regional bodies regarding their transit and infrastructure needs. VACo supports flexible funding for transportation, transit and infrastructure projects across the Commonwealth.

VACo remains dedicated to advocating for transportation funding policies that empower counties to address their evolving infrastructure needs effectively and is committed to working collaboratively with stakeholders to ensure the continued growth, safety, and prosperity of Virginia's counties and their residents.

Local-State Cooperation

VACo is committed to the protection of local government authority to regulate land use. This authority must be recognized by the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) and the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) when evaluations are conducted to determine the consistency between local transportation plans and the Commonwealth's transportation priorities.

VACo opposes the reduction of local control that is associated with the CTB's process of designating Corridors of Statewide Significance and the implementation of Arterial Preservation.

VACo supports additional flexibility within the VDOT project approval process and standards to be responsive to localities' individual needs. VACo supports the expansion of authority and discretion of Resident Administrators of VDOT to approve modifications to design standards where appropriate with local needs, including reduction of speed limits. VACo supports preservation of local authority to reduce speed limits below 25mph in certain business and residential districts.

VACo Legislative Team



Dean Lynch, CAE
Executive Director
804.343.2511
dlynch@vaco.org



Katie Boyle
Deputy Director
804.343.2514
kboyle@vaco.org



Jeremy Bennett
Director of Intergovernmental
Affairs
804.343.2510
jbennett@vaco.org



James Hutzler
Government Relations
Associate
804.343.2503
jhutzler@vaco.org



Joe Lerch, AICP
Director of Local Government
Policy
804.343.2506
jlerch@vaco.org



Gage Harter
Director of Communications
804.343.2502
gharter@vaco.org

Virginia Association of Counties
1207 East Main Street
Richmond, VA 23219
804.788.6652



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