



## Upper & Middle James Riparian Consortium Meeting Summary

**Tuesday, May 16, 2023 - Virtual Meeting**

**Tuesday, May 23, 2023 - Field Visit**

### Meeting Overview

The Upper & Middle James Riparian Consortium (Consortium) held its second general meeting of the year on Tuesday, May 16th, 2023. The meeting's objective was to share knowledge about existing resources and dream of new solutions to protect and to plant urban/non agriculture buffers. Though originally planned as an outside gathering at Peaks View Park in Lynchburg, VA, the meeting was held virtually due to thunderstorms in the forecast.



The Consortium thanks Shereen Hughes with the Chesapeake Bay Landscape Professional Program, Nathan Burrell with the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, and Brent Hunsinger with Friends of the Rappahannock, who shared their insights and resources on designing, planting, and connecting communities to urban buffers. On Tuesday, May 23rd, 2023 a group met at Peaks View Park in Lynchburg for a stream walk and lesson to learn the basics of stream dynamics led by Kip Mumaw of Ecosystems Services, LLC. The group then enjoyed a river float down the James River with the James River Association Lynchburg's educational staff. Thank you to all who participated!

### May 16th, 2023 Virtual Meeting

The May 16th virtual meeting was hosted by Amber Ellis, James River Association Restoration Director and convener of the Consortium. The meeting was facilitated by Christine Gyovai and Philippa Belsches with Dialogue + Design Associates. A [list of participants](#) is located at the end of the document.

Christine welcomed participants and invited everyone to introduce themselves and share their favorite urban buffer or park. Amber provided an [overview of the Consortium](#). Learn more about the Consortium, and how to get involved, by visiting the website at [www.jamesriverconsortium.org](http://www.jamesriverconsortium.org).

Amber highlighted key issues and topics related to urban buffers and defined an urban buffer as one that is usually smaller in size, in a more developed area, or simply a non-agricultural buffer. These buffers are located in more developed landscapes like residential areas, golf courses, and parks. In 2021, the Consortium held a series of roundtable discussions and produced an [Urban Buffers - Key Issues Report](#). Three key themes of the report are, 1) *Rails, Trails, and Park: Buffer Corridors that Connect our Communities*, 2) *Policy and Local Ordinances: Structures to Restore and Protect our Riparian Buffers*, and 3)

*HOAs, Golf Courses, and Small Private Parcels: the Non-Traditional Buffer.* Some of the ideas highlighted in the report inspired the topics of this meeting.

Additionally, a webinar will be held on June 1st highlighting different programs to help landowners get buffers on their property. Amber also noted that the Consortium has a [Streambank Stabilization Request for Projects](#) that is open until June 30th. This RFP will provide partners and landowners to connect to identify potential sites, narrow down a site for a project, learn about design and permitting, and observe installation. Partners are invited to join Louise Finger with the Department of Wildlife Resources on field visits in July to assess potential sites.

### **Design Considerations for the Small Site and Urban Buffer – Shereen Hughes, Chesapeake Bay Landscape Professional (CBLP) Program**

Shereen Hughes with the Chesapeake Bay Landscape Professional (CBLP) Program shared considerations and resources for small site and urban buffer design. Shereen compiled a collection of design templates and resources for urban buffers available at this [link](#).



Shereen noted that in an urban setting, urban buffers are often missing or not wanted, and have many challenging site conditions. These sites are often smaller, constrained, and disconnected. Site context and use are therefore very important considerations. Shereen shared, “good design, compromise, a sales pitch, and community based social marketing and funding are often needed to convince and entice people to fund, restore, and manage buffers.”

Shereen encouraged attendees to embrace the idea that “some buffer is better than no buffer”. As a result, the buffer may have less water quality benefits and look more like a conservation landscaping bed. Shereen highlighted that the buffer design also needs to account for conflict between human use and wildlife use. Additional considerations include landowner concerns over property loss, public utilities, mature tree roots, and compacted soil. Invasive species management is critical and using native plants, native to that community, is also important. Community social marketing and a good sales pitch can often facilitate the process of navigating permitting and permissions. When asked about private sector interest in getting involved in design of urban buffers, Shereen shared that the private sector is often motivated when regulator compliance is required.

Shereen noted that the next CBLP-Buffers certificate training is scheduled for September and early October. Please contact Shereen at [shereen.hughes@wetlandswatch.org](mailto:shereen.hughes@wetlandswatch.org) for details and scholarships information.



### **Insights on the Urban Buffer – Nathan Burrell, Virginia Outdoors Foundation**

Nathan Burrell, Director of Community Conservation and Government Relations at Virginia Outdoors Foundation, shared examples and strategies for connecting communities, protecting riparian areas, accessing funding and technical support to restore buffers in urban communities.

Nathan noted that over 50% of the land in Virginia is classified as

“metropolitan” and over 80% of all Virginia citizens live in these metropolitan areas. Many of the tools communities use to develop riparian buffers and conservation initiatives do not exist in urban areas in Virginia. A 35 foot buffer may not be possible in an urban setting, but a 10 foot buffer is still important.

Nathan emphasizes that “as a conservation community, we have to get over this hurdle of an urban-rural divide” and that this divide limits the ability to clean up the water. Nathan notes that the key is to get everyone engaged in the fight. This can be accomplished by providing opportunities for people to engage with organizations that are doing the work. Parks are the nexus for these activities and a driver of economic development. Nathan also advocates for building infrastructure in urban environments, such as bike paths, that can help facilitate activities in the corridors and forested spaces near streams. Nathan noted that riparian areas are often the ‘leftover’ space in developed areas, which provide a unique opportunity for creating accessible greenspace for communities.

Nathan noted that technical expertise needs to be built within urban environments, and the hurdles to access funding in urban communities needs to be considered. There is a lot of money for conservation efforts within Virginia, but they are not equally accessible to urban environments. Finally, Nathan highlighted the recent Chesapeake Bay Foundation Report, that Virginia will not meet its goals due to urban runoff.

### **Programs to Plant the Urban Buffer – Brent Hunsinger, Friends of the Rappahannock**

Amber compiled a list of urban buffer resources, available at this [link](#), of urban buffer programs and available funding in the James Watershed. The Virginia Cost Assistance Program (VCAP) and the James River Buffer Program (JRBP) are the two main consistent programs available, and the details of each program are available in the document. The document outlines information for each program related to administration, regions, cost sharing, responsibilities of landowners and organizations, land use eligibility, width and density requirements, maintenance support, eligible practices, limitations, and notes from field practitioners. The [Charlottesville Conservation Assistance Program \(CCAP\)](#) is an extension of the VCAP program available in the city of Charlottesville.



Amber introduced Brent Hunsinger with Friends of the Rappahannock to offer an overview of the organization’s urban buffer technical assistance and buffer projects, including MOUs with SWCDs on the Virginia Cost Assistance Program. Friends of the Rappahannock is working to implement VCAP and are supporting local Soil and Water Conservation Districts through MOUs to provide technical assistance. Without this technical assistance the districts would not be participating in VCAP. Friends of the Rappahannock have five or six staff members, who are all CBLP certified, currently working with the Districts. Friends of the Rappahannock staff members attend the Soil and Water Conservation District meetings every month, and in some cases, will also attend Technical Review Committee meetings. Through the MOUs Friends of the Rappahannock agree to conduct site visits and help submit the applications, but they do not agree to design or install the practices. However, this option could be available with additional funding.

Brent noted that approximately 75% to 80% of site visits do not turn in their applications. He also reminded the group to remind landowners they are responsible for the tax liability of having a project paid for by VCAP. When asked about installing riparian buffers, Brent stated that buffers are considered

a conservation landscape and practice under VCAP. Shereen noted that buffers need to be 35 feet to fit the VCAP definition of a riparian buffer versus just a conservation landscaping. Brent thanked all of the Department of Forestry partners for their involvement in the planting plans.

Brent shared a number of documents used in their program implementation, from a [flow chart](#) detailing the steps involved in program implementation with a Soil and Water Conservation District, [website](#) with further information, and [form](#) for interested parties.

## Group Discussion and Suggestions for Next Steps

Following the presentations, Christine invited meeting participants to share responses in the chat to two questions. The responses are listed below thematically (*and all are direct quotes from the chat roll*):

What action can Consortium partners take to have the biggest impact on protecting buffers in urban/developed areas in the next 3 years?

- **Policies and Regulations:**
  - Protection and require buffers to be protected during development.
  - Improve ordinances to protect streams from piping and development.
  - Work with urban governments to develop tree policies that maintain and enhance tree canopies and stream buffers.
  - Stream erosion protection besides riprap
- **Focus on Green Infrastructure:**
  - Focus on green infrastructure associated with amenities - parks, trails, etc and connection of pocket parks as stepping stones.
  - More people biking and walking along urban buffers and developing relationships with urban parks.
  - Changing the mindset of parks departments and letting them know that messy is good, no need to mow all the way to the water's edge.
- **Invasive Plant Management:**
  - Widespread invasive plant management with an eye to remove and replace with native species.
  - Find resources to address invasive plants. Invasives are destroying existing buffers and make site prep for new buffers excessively expensive.
  - Invasive species management is always needed - ongoing.
  - Continue working with PRISM to train landowners and groups to help manage invasive species urban buffers.

What action can Consortium partners take to have the biggest impact on planting buffers in urban/developed areas in the next 3 years?

- **Outreach to Local Leaders, Buffer Staff, and Localities:**
  - Establish and increase support for VCAP programs in urban localities.
  - Reach out to smaller parks and recreation managers (County or the smaller cities).
  - Consortium partners could identify priority urban buffer areas and then invite local legislators on a tour of those areas to educate them about the value of buffers, with a

- goal towards encouraging local legislative actions to SUPPORT local plantings.
  - Some Community Based Social Marketing Campaigns aligned with cost-share programs.
  - Training for current buffer staff on VCAP to know when and how to refer.
  - Someone to apply for a grant to get strategically located TA staff to get VCAP on the ground in the Middle and Upper James.
  - Need to advocate for increasing capacity at the SWCDs so they can do more projects.
- **Landowner and Site Representative Support:**
    - Seek and apply funding to make sure buffers are free to install for landowners.
    - Work with the VCAP program and create a program that helps landowners in urban and suburban areas that are eligible or unreached.
    - Outreach to homeowners about available programs and fund, possibly through local offices (e.g., SWCDs).
    - VCAP-- need to build capacity to connect funding to homeowners--this might include designing and installation resources.
- **Invasive Plant Management:**
    - Find resources to address invasive plants. Invasives are destroying existing buffers and make site prep for new buffers excessively expensive.
    - Invasive management and not just planting 35 foot buffers.
    - Continue working with PRISM to train landowners and groups to help manage invasive species urban buffers.
- **Urban Buffer Design Considerations:**
    - Come up with standards for urban buffer design with associated templates (and make sure they are at least reported as a narrow buffer), so that folks can more easily DIY projects if they don't have funding for designers.
    - I'm not sure how we get around that 35 ft requirement on urban buffers. I agree that sometimes there just isn't space and that any buffer is better than no buffer. But with aggressive planting targets and a tight timeline, how do we build that into what we're already doing?
    - Planting trees on large mowed areas to reduce mowing and create habitat structure etc.
    - Creating and sharing resources on the design templates (like the one's Shareen shared at the beginning!) that can be used to demonstrate that buffers can be aesthetically pleasing and don't have to completely block water views.

### May 23rd Field Visit to Peaks View Park and River Paddle in Lynchburg, VA

On Tuesday, May 23rd, the Consortium held a gathering at Peaks View Park in Lynchburg, VA. Kip Mumaw with Ecosystems Services, LLC led participants through a stream walk and lesson through the park. Kip discussed stream dynamics and provided an overview of Ivy Creek, a tributary of the James River that runs through Peaks View Park.

As the group walked through the park and along the stream, Kip encouraged participants to consider the relationship of





the stream to the park, notable characteristics of the creek, and factors affecting its health. Participants discussed potential steps that could be taken to support restoration of the creek. During the walk, participants viewed a buffer installed by the Virginia Department of Forestry at the park. Deya Ramsden with DOF described the history, design, implementation, and maintenance of this buffer. We are very appreciative of Kip and Deya's wonderful insights.

Following the stream walk, and a picnic lunch at the Peaks View Park, attendees had

the opportunity to participate in a three-mile paddle on the James River. Thank you to Rob Campbell and staff of the James River Association Lynchburg office for organizing and leading the paddle.

### Next steps

The Consortium's Meeting #3 will take place on Tuesday September 12th at Catawba, VA. [Please RSVP here](#). Additionally, please save the date for the 2023 Buffer Summit on October 18, 2023. For more Consortium visit: [www.jamesriverconsortium.org](http://www.jamesriverconsortium.org)

### Virtual Meeting Participants

1. Amber Ellis, James River Association
2. Andrew Murray, Virginia Department of Forestry
3. Anne Marie Roberts, James River Association
4. Bob Morris, James River Association Member
5. Bob Schwartz, Maryland Forest Service
6. Brent Hunsinger, Friends of the Rappahannock
7. Caitlyn Verdu, Virginia Department of Forestry
8. Carol Heiser, James River Master Naturalist
9. Christian Anderson, Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay
10. Christina Bonini, Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay
11. Devon Hathaway, Rivanna Conservation Alliance
12. Deya Ramsden, Virginia Department of Forestry
13. Gareth Hunt
14. Heidi Jack, VMN Riverine Chapter
15. Joey Shelton, James River Association
16. Jordan Bennett, James River Association
17. Justin Doyle, James River Association
18. Kim Biasiulli, Piedmont Environmental Council
19. Kyle Simpson, Central Virginia Land Conservancy
20. Lilly Meighan, Lynchburg Water Resources
21. Lisa Wittenborn, Rivanna Conservation Alliance

22. Margi Vaughn, James River Association
23. Marilyn Knight, US Fish and Wildlife Service
24. Meghan Mulroy-Goldman, Virginia Department of Forestry
25. Matt Kowalski, Chesapeake Bay Foundation
26. Michael Daniel, Lynchburg Water Resources
27. Morgan Brazeau, Lynchburg Water Resources
28. Nathan Burrell, Virginia Outdoors Foundation

29. Neal Grandy, Virginia Master Naturalist Rivanna Chapter
30. Nicole Shuman, Virginia Cooperative Extension
31. Nora Cox, James River Association Volunteer
32. Samuel Vest, Trout Unlimited
33. Shereen Hughes, Chesapeake Bay Landscape Professional Program & Wetlands Watch
34. Christine Gyovai, Dialogue + Design Associates
35. Philippa Belsches, Dialogue + Design Associates

### May 23rd Stream Walk and Paddle Participants

1. Amber Ellis, James River Association
2. Anne Marie Roberts, James River Association
3. Charles Simmons, NRCS
4. Deya Ramsden, Virginia Department of Forestry
5. Joey Shelton, James River Association
6. Kim Biasioli, Piedmont Environmental Council
7. Kip Mumaw, Ecosystem Services, LLC
8. Kyle Ashmun, Ecosystem Services, LLC
9. Lauria McShane, James River Association
10. Lilly Meighan, James River Association
11. Lyndsey Weeks, James River Association
12. Margi Vaughn, James River Association
13. Mary Hays Scott, James River Association
14. Matalin Collins, James River

- Association
15. Michael Daniel, Lynchburg Water Resources
16. Morgan Brazeau, Lynchburg Water Resources
17. Nancy Allen
18. Christine Gyovai, Dialogue + Design Associates
19. Philippa Belsches, Dialogue + Design Associates

