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The Rural Road Network of Loudoun County

A Proposal for Maintenance

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Prepared and Submitted by:

Loudoun County Preservation and Conservation Coalition

Rural Roads Committee

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Loudoun's Rural Road Network

The Loudoun County Preservation and Conservation Coalition (LCPCC) Rural Roads Committee has prepared these recommendations to aid elected officials in their development of policies for Loudoun's network of largely unpaved rural roads. The Coalition's view is that these old roads are a valuable county asset and that it would be good public and economic policy to provide resources for their proper maintenance and preservation. VDOT estimates that an additional \$1m/year would address most of the maintenance issues.

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Executive Summary:

- 1) Loudoun County has about 330 miles of unpaved roads, the most of any county in Virginia. Many are in the rural part of the county.
- 2) Many of these roads follow their ancient roadbeds and are narrow and winding, lined with stone walls, mature trees and old farmsteads – they form a network, showing clearly how our villages, towns and farms connected and add hugely to the ambience of our historic rural landscape.
- 3) They are part of and connect our historic battlefields and add to their appeal to visitors and scholars.
- 4) They were used by residents, farmers and soldiers in our past, are part of our heritage, are valued by residents and are attractive to visitors. And, properly maintained they serve us well today.
- 5) Historians from the US National Park Service, touring these roads, called them a unique treasure.
- 6) They also provide recreational use for equestrians, carriage drivers, bicyclists and hikers – and, many say they provide natural traffic calming.
- 7) However, funds for maintenance of these roads is limited and some areas are severely deteriorated. This makes local travel difficult and unsafe, and discourages visitors. Only a portion of the old road network is protected through a historic district – but even this area has some serious maintenance problems.
- 8) New state funds for rural roads will likely be made available, but they are aimed at paving, not maintaining or preserving.
- 9) The gravel roads cost far less to maintain properly than they would to pave. As an example, Loudoun plans to pave 9 ½ miles of unpaved road (mostly in suburban eastern Loudoun) in the current six year plan, at a cost of \$35 million (about \$3.7 million/mile). However, maintenance of all 330 miles of unpaved roads costs only \$12 million/year or about \$36k/mile/year. VDOT says that only a 10% increase in annual funding (about \$1million) would address most of the rural road deterioration.
- 10) Proper maintenance of the unpaved road network is good public policy, follows existing County policy guidelines and makes fiscal sense. Providing needed funds requires the cooperation of the Loudoun BOS, VDOT and our State representatives.

Our Specific Policy Recommendations Support Proper Maintenance and Preservation of Our Rural Road Network:

- 1) Maintain ALL unpaved roads in safe and usable condition.
- 2) Maintain unpaved roads in traditional alignment, surface treatment and width and protect banks, stonewalls and roadside trees in all rural, agricultural and historic areas.
- 3) Make improvements to selected sections of unpaved roads to reduce severe maintenance problems, when needed, without significantly altering their appearance and alignment and avoid paving and widening.
- 4) Only consider paving when there is a combination of very high traffic, significant maintenance and safety issues, no historic or scenic significance and clear community support.
- 5) Apply VDOT "rustic road" policies in any paving program in rural, agricultural or historic areas.
- 6) Focus limited paving resources primarily on highly traveled roads in developed areas.
- 7) Encourage VDOT and our State delegation to provide more resources and appropriate legislation to support proper maintenance and preservation of these roads. Include additional unpaved rural road maintenance funds in the legislative agenda.

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I: Discussion

The following discussion provides more detail on the Coalition's Rational for These Recommendations

1) Loudoun County Will Be Competing for Economic Growth

Loudoun County has been one of the nation's fastest growing areas, and one of its wealthiest, for much of the last decade. Loudoun offers attractive suburbs, good schools, an international airport and an advantageous location. But Loudoun also offers spectacular rural landscapes, a rich and accessible history and a thriving rural economy. This combination creates a unique and powerful advantage for Loudoun – but it is also a fragile combination that requires wise governance to protect.

The competition in regional markets for new commercial and government operations is going to intensify. Success in attracting and retaining the well qualified people who can start, manage and staff these operations will be fierce. Loudoun County, to its advantage, has a unique and impossible to duplicate competitive weapon to use as it continues to seek opportunities for continued economic success.

2) Our Rural Countryside is a Valuable Asset

The rural and scenic assets of Loudoun County, coupled with its wonderful location, educated workforce and great schools and neighborhoods, create an almost unbeatable competitive advantage.

In several recent surveys conducted by the University of Virginia's Weldon Cooper Center, Loudoun's rural character, open space and beautiful scenery were cited by the County's residents as the best (2002) or second best (2005, 2007) single thing about the County. In the last two surveys only Loudoun's very advantageous location topped scenery, beauty and rural character as the best things about the County.

Western Loudoun includes abundant open space, working farms and lovely rural roads, the largest horse industry and most equestrian events in Virginia and the largest number of vineyards and wineries in the State. And, it has five important Civil War battlefields, a half dozen historic villages and many buildings on the National Register of Historic Places.

Western Loudoun County provides wonderful recreational opportunities just minutes from suburban neighborhoods. On weekends, crowds of bicyclists ride on winding roads, hikers fill local trails, horseback enthusiasts ride through open fields and forests and on hundreds of miles of unpaved roads. Hunters find abundant game in western Loudoun's open spaces and woods while birdwatchers count hundreds of species along streambanks and in the trees and fields. Visitors on its winding rural roads lined with old stone walls

pass alongside pastures populated with cattle, horses and sheep and glimpse wonderful views of the Blue Ridge through the trees.

Travelers from the Washington Metro area, from all over the United States and from all over the world come out to Loudoun's beautiful and historic west to spend a weekend or a week at its many B&Bs and County Inns enjoying local sites, wineries, restaurants, trails and country roads. And, almost a thousand couples chose to hold their weddings in Loudoun County last year inviting family, friends and guests to enjoy our scenery and hospitality.

Civil War scholars, re-enactors, tourists and students come to visit Loudoun's pristine and authentic Civil War battlefields. Loudoun's battlefields are at the very center of the Journey Through Hallowed Ground, close to a major metropolitan area and an international airport and convenient to restaurants, inns, shopping and other amenities.

Loudoun also has an amazing array of historic homes, villages, country roads, battlefields and beautiful landscapes that provide, according to historian Eugene Scheel, the most authentic 19th century rural landscape in all of Virginia.

These resources provide economic benefit to the country. Heritage tourists spend more and stay longer than other travelers. As the County's Heritage Preservation Plan (as amended Feb 9, 2009) states (p34): *"Visitors to historic sites stayed an average of 5.7 nights per visit while cultural visitors stayed an average of 5.1 nights. This exceeds the average pleasure visitor stay of two nights . . . expenditures per trip were also higher for historic travelers, spending (in 2001) an average of \$722 . . . compared to all travelers, spending an average of \$437."*

As one example, in 2011 the three-day antiques and craft show at the National Register listed village of Waterford attracted 35,000 visitors and generated \$8 million in local spending.

Overall, Loudoun's thriving and growing tourism industry brought the County almost \$1.4 Billion last year and Loudoun's hospitality industry provides over 15,000 local jobs.

And, Loudoun has a large and thriving agricultural sector, the largest equine industry in the state and a large and growing rural viticulture industry – all contributing significantly to Loudoun's economics, and to its appeal.

3) Its Network of Unpaved Rural Roads is a Key Part of Its Appeal

One of Loudoun's least heralded assets underpinning its wonderful rural character are its three hundred miles of unpaved rustic roads – the most of any county in Virginia. Most of these old roads follow courses laid out almost two centuries ago. They follow winding courses, lined by mature trees and stone walls and afford views of old farmsteads, open fields, and woods. They cross numerous streams over old and historic bridges. They are key parts of our pristine Civil War battlefields and connect our historic villages.

As the County's Heritage Preservation Plan states: *"Roads, trails and waterways are important heritage resources that represent the migration, settlement and travel patterns of the County's early populations . . . Roads and trails are also the leading places from which residents and visitors enjoy the cultural landscape*

These extraordinary roads support a wide variety of users – local motorists and Loudoun's farmers, sightseers and visitors, but also equestrians, carriage drivers, bicyclists and hikers. Their rough surface provides natural calming making the roads safer for all users. And these narrow, winding and unpaved routes give visitors an extraordinary experience – guiding them through an authentic and beautiful 19th century landscape and vastly enhancing their visit to a local winery, shop or restaurant.

Loudoun has acknowledged the value and historic character of these roadways by including some of them in the County's Beaverdam Creek Historic Roadways District (BCHRD). The old roads in one section of the County connect beautifully preserved farms, villages and black settlements, cross over old bridges and are important parts of several Civil War battlefields. This unique roadways district, officially created in 2002, encompasses a network of some of Loudoun's old, largely unpaved, roads in the southwestern part of the County and provides guidelines for the preservation of their character and historic appeal.

But Loudoun's rural road network extends significantly beyond the boundaries of this unique district and there are many locations along these old roads of great beauty, significant history and delightful vistas.

4) But, The Rural Roads Need More Care

This historic and unique network of roads is threatened. When properly maintained, these gravel roads provide safe and comfortable travel and are an important part of our overall transportation system. But, budget limitations in maintenance funding have forced VDOT road crews to focus on repairs and reaction to storms and other problems. Routine care and reasonable preventive steps have been difficult to undertake. As a result some sections of these old roads have erosion damage, suffer in heavy rainstorms, are plagued with potholes, have a washboard surface and offer narrow passage between deeply rutted ditches. And, while the roadways in the BCHRD are protected from significant change, they still suffer from lack of maintenance like the rest of Loudoun's unpaved rural roads.

Visitors and residents alike can find their trips to view old Civil War battlefields, to go to a local winery, to enjoy the scenery or just to shop or go to work, school or church, to be difficult, slow and unpleasant. And, when new development occurs, VDOT policies often create stretches of incongruous wide sections with curbs, turn lanes and other improvements that destroy old banks, eliminate trees and stonewalls, stick out in a rural setting and damage the rural scenic appeal of those roads.

5) Maintaining These Old Roads Ensures Driver Safety And Makes More Sense than Trying to Pave All of Them

Paving some of Loudoun's unpaved roads in highly traveled, developed areas makes good sense, but it is very expensive. Loudoun's current 6-year plan assumes that \$35 million in new funding will be available and used for paving about 9 ½ miles of current gravel road. That works out to about \$3.7 million per mile for preparing and paving these segments.

In comparison, according to VDOT, the current annual Loudoun County maintenance budget for all 330 miles of unpaved roads is \$12 million or about \$36,000/mile/year. VDOT estimates an additional \$1 million/year would allow them to carry out the proactive maintenance and do spot repair on a few particular trouble areas needed for adequate maintenance and avoid the problems currently being experienced. Based on these figures, the cost of adequately maintaining existing gravel roads is about \$40,000/mile/year or 1/100 the cost of paving them (even if the cost of maintaining paved roads were zero).

And, with adequate maintenance, the unpaved road network can, as it has for many years, provide good transportation along with major contributions to our heritage, our unique sense of place and our appeal to visitors and residents.

6) Paving Should be Limited to High Traffic or Highly Problematic Sections, and Carried Out Using "Rural Rustic Road" Guidelines

To wisely utilize scarce transportation funds, paving should be reserved for road segments which are highly traveled, where proper maintenance has become prohibitively expensive and the roads have become unsafe, which do not contribute to scenic and historic value and where local residents desire it.

When paving in rural areas does make sense, it should be done, where appropriate, following VDOT's Rustic Road policies, which encourage paving in place, retention of exiting alignment and width, protection of roadsides, trees, walls and viewsheds and flexibility on various standards that could damage the rural character and appearance of the roads and neighborhoods.

As VDOT's Rural Rustic Road Program Manual (July 2012, P1) states: *"The Rural Rustic Road concept is the paving of an existing unpaved road with a compacted or impervious surface and reestablishment of existing associated ditches and shoulders, and usually the new hard surfaced road is on the same horizontal and vertical alignment as the prior gravel impervious area. Furthermore, a focal point of the program is on leaving trees, vegetation, side slopes, and open drainage abutting the roadway, undisturbed to the maximum extent possible."*

Since VDOT will apply these standards to roads officially designated by the County Board of Supervisors as “rural rustic roads”, we urge the Loudoun Board of Supervisors to consider nominating appropriate roads in Loudoun’s current network where paving makes sense as “rural rustic roads”. This will allow paved sections to retain as much rural and traditional character as possible while providing for safe and comfortable passage.

7) Maintaining The Rural Road Network is Good Public Policy and Would Follow Existing Policy Guidelines

Properly maintaining Loudoun’s unpaved rural roads makes economic sense and protects a very important and valuable asset . Current County policy documents support efforts to protect and preserve this network. For example:

Loudoun County’s 2010 Transportation Plan, Chapter 2, supports the preservation of these rural roads as a matter of County policy, stating: *“Loudoun County has a network of over 300 miles of unpaved rural roads that reflect the County’s agricultural heritage. The unpaved rural road network has a natural traffic calming effect that permits their shared use for horseback riding and hiking and contributed to the quality of life sought by rural households. They are recognized as adding to the rural character that attracts tourists. They also facilitate the safe, efficient movement of farm vehicles. **The County is committed to the preservation of a safe unpaved rural road network.**”*

The Six Year Plan encourages preservation and proper maintenance of these roads and goes on to state: *“Transportation road improvements in the Rural Policy Area will be focused on the safety of all users and will be designed to protect the rural character of the road network. . . . In cases where unpaved roads must be paved, pave-in-place and rustic road standards will be used to the maximum extent possible.”*

The unpaved rural road network provides great appeal to visitors and tourists, recreational opportunities for residents and, properly maintained, provides safe and comfortable travel for all. However, maintaining them properly is required so that they are safe for all drivers and attractive for visitors and travelers. Conducting proper maintenance of these roads would cost far less than attempting to pave them all, and would ensure that Loudoun retains its unique and valuable character and appeal.

8) Funding for Road Maintenance is Provided by the State, But Needs More Flexibility to Support Our Rural Road Network

New State legislation will increase funding for rural roads, but it appears largely aimed at paving. In some cases, paving makes good sense and is appropriate. However, paving is very costly and the bulk of the rural road network requires proper maintenance to provide safe and comfortable passage for residents and visitors. County policy supports preservation and maintenance of these roads, but resources to carry out this policy must be acquired and allocated to this task.

Loudoun VDOT maintenance supervisors point out that the bulk of its maintenance issue for unpaved road arises from drainage and grading problems and is focused in a limited number of problem areas. They estimate that an increase in currently(2014) available maintenance funding of 10% or about \$1m/year would provide them with the resources required to carry out pro-active maintenance on a limited set of “trouble spots”. This, they say, will significantly reduce the problems and deterioration in our network of unpaved roads.

It will be important for Loudoun’s elected officials to work with VDOT and with our State delegation to ensure that these needed funds are available to preserve and maintain this very important asset, an essential part of our transportation system.

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II: Policy Recommendations

The Loudoun County Preservation and Conservation Coalition Rural Roads Committee, therefore suggests that the following guidelines be accepted as County policy for the rural and unpaved road network:

- 1) Maintain ALL unpaved roads in safe and usable condition
- 2) Maintain unpaved roads in traditional alignment, surface treatment and width and protect banks and roadside trees in all rural, agricultural and historic areas
- 3) Make improvements to selected sections of unpaved roads to reduce severe maintenance problems, when needed, without significantly altering their appearance and alignment and avoid paving and widening
- 4) Only consider paving when there is a combination of very high traffic, significant maintenance and safety issues, no historic significance and clear community support
- 5) Apply "rustic road" policies in any paving program in rural, agricultural or historic areas
- 6) Focus limited paving resources primarily on highly traveled roads in developed areas.
- 7) Encourage VDOT, and our State delegation, to provide more resources and appropriate legislation to support proper maintenance and preservation of these roads. Include additional unpaved rural road maintenance funds in the legislative agenda.

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