



Sustainable Promise Ordinance and Handbook

**Commitment to Foundational Environmental Standards Necessary for
Sustainability in Virginia Beach, Virginia**

**The Greater Good Initiative
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POLICY BRIEF

Amidst devastating news coverage of the continued spread of COVID-19 in the United States and mass protests erupting against police brutality, there is increasing demand for soft news and silver-linings. One of the most damaging examples is the supposed “return” of wildlife and an assumed improvement of the environment given the shuttering of the economy. While this is traceable in the news cycle¹, it is also indicated in public opinion polling. When voters were asked “the most important problem facing our country today,” before and after the pandemic began, “the environment” experienced one of the largest drops of any answer². Despite wildlife sightings³, and maps showing reductions in smog and carbon emissions⁴, the environment is, measurably, in as poor a state as it was when the pandemic began. According to the Economist, even under current conditions, “the world would still have more than 90% of the necessary decarbonization left to do to get on track for the Paris agreement’s most ambitious goal”⁵ based on data collected by the International Energy Agency⁶. In Virginia, after a small improvement following Governor Northam’s stay-at-home order, ozone pollution is once again

¹ Daly, N. (2020, March 20). *Fake animal news abounds on social media as coronavirus upends life*. Retrieved July 13, from

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/2020/03/coronavirus-pandemic-fake-animal-viral-social-media-posts/>

²Gallup (2020, July 1). *Most Important Problem*. Retrieved July 17, from

<https://news.gallup.com/poll/1675/most-important-problem.aspx>

³ Chalasani, R. (2020, April 22). *Photos: Wildlife roams as the planet's human population isolates*. Retrieved July 17, from

<https://abcnews.go.com/International/photos-wildlife-roams-planets-human-population-isolates/story?id=70213431>

⁴McGrath, M. (2020, March 19). *Coronavirus: Air pollution and CO2 fall rapidly as virus spreads*. Retrieved July 13, from

<https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-51944780>

⁵ The Economist. (2020, May 21). *Countries should seize the moment to flatten the climate curve*. Retrieved July 15, from

<https://www.economist.com/leaders/2020/05/21/countries-should-seize-the-moment-to-flatten-the-climate-curve>

⁶ International Energy Agency (2020). *Global Energy Review 2020*. Retrieved July 17, from

<https://www.iea.org/reports/global-energy-review-2020/global-energy-and-co2-emissions-in-2020>

on the rise⁷. Globally, as the world reopens, carbon emissions are “rebounding fast”⁸. Even still, the Trump administration has rolled back emissions targets, stated an intent to take no new action on particulate pollution, and limited the EPA’s regulatory arsenal, all in the past few months⁹. With an incomprehensive environmental policy being implemented at the federal level and state governments generally out of session or occupied with COVID-19 related policy, the responsibility falls on local governments to account for continuing environmental challenges throughout the pandemic. The Greater Good Initiative’s Sustainable Promise Ordinance (SPO) provides a broad framework for such action, highlighting the commitments all local governing bodies must maximize their impact on environmental health and emission reduction. In Virginia Beach, a city facing extinction due to rising sea levels associated with climate change, and Fairfax¹⁰, a county that regularly struggles with limiting air pollution, such a framework is fundamental to the reopening process. It will serve as an assurance to community members that local governments are actively fighting, continued threats to the environment during the outbreak.

⁷Gourley, R. and McQuate, S. (2020, June 17). *Is the air getting cleaner during the COVID-19 pandemic?* Retrieved July 17, from

<https://www.washington.edu/news/2020/06/17/air-quality-pollution-covid-19/>

⁸McFarlane, S. (2020, July 9). *Covid-19’s Environmental Benefits Evaporate as World Reopens*. Retrieved July 14, from

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/covid-19s-environmental-benefits-evaporate-as-world-reopens-11594290145>

⁹Tollefson, J. (2020, April 28). *Five ways that Trump is undermining environmental protections under the cover of coronavirus*. Retrieved July 17, from

<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01261-4>

¹⁰Leayman, E. (2019, April 24). *How Fairfax County Stacks Up On Air Pollution*. Retrieved July 12, from <https://patch.com/virginia/kingstowne/how-fairfax-county-stacks-air-pollution>

ORDINANCE

RESOLUTION URGING THE MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL TO ADOPT THE
SUSTAINABLE PROMISE ORDINANCE INTO ITS POST-PANDEMIC REOPENING
PROCEDURES AND PLANS

WHEREAS federal agencies and officials have failed to provide—and even inhibited—framework for substantive regulation or environmental guidelines throughout the re-opening process; and

WHEREAS recent economic inactivity has not resulted in meaningful progress against climate change, merely slight, temporary reductions in global emission

WHEREAS local governments, with the powers expressly granted by the state, play a meaningful role in the broader movement towards sustainability and; therefore, be it

RESOLVED, the Mayor and the City Council will adopt a clear strategy to ensure environmental standards continue to be met at the local level; and therefore be it

RESOLVED, that the eleven currently serving City Council Members, including the Mayor, as of July 6, 2020, pledge to 1) defend the sanctity and security of waterways, wildlife habitats, preserved land, and other natural ecosystems within the City of Virginia Beach; 2) consider environmental concerns when managing economic growth; 3) work to inspire passion for

wilderness and outdoor spaces within the city's border by protecting outdoor spaces for recreation and encouraging citizen engagement with the outdoors; and therefore be it

FURTHER RESOLVED, given inclement financial pressures to reopen rapidly, the City of Virginia Beach reaffirms its commitment to meeting previously established sustainability targets in development, growth, and policy.

PRELIMINARY REPORT

What is the problem that you're trying to fix?

Amidst the current public health crisis, the long-term environmental challenges facing the state of Virginia, and the nation as a whole, have been placed on the back burner. The Trump administration has implemented- with little oversight or media coverage- one of the most extensive regulation scale backs in our nation's history¹¹. This includes a freeze on the EPA's ability to regulate most forms of industrial pollution, and the relaxing of legal environmental precautions for the mining industry. While this approach may seem warranted given the apparent "improvement" of the environment since COVID quarantine procedures grounded air traffic, and cut automobile pollution, this is nothing more than a myth. According to the Economist, the globe has only made a 10% dent into what is necessary to meet the most conservative goals of the Paris Climate Accords, even with new quarantine measures. In essence, there is a dangerous misconception that the environment is on the mend as a result of the coronavirus, the Trump

¹¹ Holden, E. (2020, Mon 11). *Trump dismantles environmental protections under cover of coronavirus*. Retrieved July 16, from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/may/10/trump-environmental-blitzkrieg-coronavirus>

administration is taking advantage of this to implement its deregulatory agenda, and local governments are best positioned to serve as stewards of a newly threatened environment.

What is the solution proposed?

The solution consists of two parts. The first is an advocacy campaign which shines light on how environmental challenges are only increasing under quarantine, as well as steps to counteract new threats to the environment at the local level. While this part includes a social media and activism dimension, it will largely consist of a physical and virtual handbook which in 12 short pages, will outline how local policymakers should be responding to some of the most dire, and common environmental crises under quarantine. The handbook will highlight three angles of environmental policy which show exceptional promise amidst the current epidemic, and real world cases of local governments leading by example. The second part of the policy is a generalized ordinance which will provide a framework for local legislators to avoid damaging local ecosystems, or contributing to air and water pollution, or climate change while reopening their jurisdictions. It will also push legislators to harness the potential of outdoor spaces to safely unify communities isolated by a long-standing stay-at-home order. While the ordinance serves as a broad commitment rather than an enforced law, it will reaffirm cities and counties commitments to environmental preservation as they focus on economic revitalization and public health management.

Why was this specific issue chosen?

Addressing a misconception caused not by malicious politics, but by anecdotal observations and misleading news articles, will allow our organization to pursue environmental policy outside of its most polarized overlaps. This issue is also prescient, as quarantine and COVID-19 have drastically shifted the landscape of environmental regulation and the role of local governments in the protection of natural resources and outdoor space¹².

What were the broad questions that guided research into this issue?

As we examined case studies of local governments addressing environmental crises under quarantine, we used several guiding questions to build a template for the handbook and ordinance. Most importantly, we asked “what tools are local policymakers using to combat instances of pollution or ecological contamination that are outside of their purview to simply end?” and “how are local governments responding to the demands of citizens to address environmental concerns under quarantine?” We wanted to hone in on the interplay between local governments, industry, development, and private citizens as we selected the key issues we would highlight in our handbook, and imply through the framing of the ordinance.

What is the relevance of the issues to the (state at hand) and its citizens?

Virginia is a bellwether state when it comes to environmental regulation. It has extensive natural resources in the west—which can be used both industrially and recreationally—surrounded

¹² United States Environmental Protection Agency (2020, 26 March). *State Guidances on Enforcement during the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency*. Retrieved July 17, from <https://www.epa.gov/enforcement/state-guidances-enforcement-during-covid-19-public-health-emergency>

by largely poor, conservative communities¹³. It has a large urban population that utilizes these resources primarily for recreation¹⁴. It also has a large, heavily subsidized monopoly which is responsible for most electricity usage in the state (Dominion Energy), and a divisive, polarized political climate making environmental policy stagnant at the state level. This positions local governments, particularly in high-energy-use, affluent counties in Northern Virginia, to serve as leaders in green urban planning, environmental stewardship, and resource and land conservation. Leading up to the quarantine, many counties were taking significant steps to address environmental concerns at the local level, through LEED certification, extensive recycling programs, and efforts to revitalize shared outdoor spaces like the W&OD Trail. Now, under new quarantine-related pressures, it is more important than ever that local policymakers are held accountable to these environmental commitments.

Why is this an issue that requires governmental response?

Environmental conservation, and maintenance of high air and water quality, and the protection of natural resources are all imperatives that are nearly impossible to ensure without government oversight. There are too many short-term, profit-oriented opportunities presented in the form of environmental exploitation to leave environmental policy to private citizen conservationists, and businesses. Under quarantine, it is even more important that local policymakers reaffirm their commitment to defending the environment because political pressure to do so has receded, as urgency has increased.

¹³ Cohen, M. (2012, 4 November). *In Virginia, It's Tradition Versus Change*. Retrieved July 18, from <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/in-virginia-its-tradition-versus-change/>

¹⁴ Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (2018). *Northern Virginia*. Retrieved July 17, from <https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/recreational-planning/document/voppd08.pdf>

What are the arguments for the creation of the programmatic or policy response to issues that will be proposed?

Our policy proposal is effectively zero-cost, and will not fall under the restrictions of the Dillon Rule, given it is more symbolic than legally binding. It is also timely and critically significant, given the ongoing environmental crisis masked by the public health nightmare. Through the creation of a handbook and ordinance tying local policymakers to their commitments as environmental stewards, there will be new impetus to incorporate sustainable policy into efforts to revitalize the economy and state in the coming weeks. The policy is also dynamic and versatile, adaptable to different local bodies, and broad enough to avoid political polarization.

What is the basic form of your policy response?

A handbook providing guidance for local lawmakers addressing environmental concerns amidst the COVID outbreak, and an ordinance reaffirming local governments' commitment to environmental stewardship and sustainable development.

What ongoing questions do you have?

How do we draft an ordinance that is simultaneously easy to pass, and not legally binding, but strongly worded enough to have a significant chance of shaping policy decisions of local lawmakers? How do we select common environmental challenges under COVID to

highlight in our handbook that are broad enough to be useful in different counties, but specific enough to provide specialized guidance?

POLICY ANALYSIS

What is the programmatic or policy response to the problem that was chosen?

In response to prescient environmental concerns in Virginia, we have developed two helpful resources to educate the public and public officials. The first, a handbook, compiles in-depth research on policy solutions to environmental concerns. Broken down into key tenants, the handbook establishes the fundamental environmental protections necessary for Virginian municipalities. This handbook is intended for distribution to the general public, alerting them of key environmental issues and how they can hold policy makers accountable. For a more material victory, we will also produce a drafted ordinance to be presented and passed by different municipalities. While less in depth, this ordinance outlines some of the key takeaways from the handbook. This legislation would act as an ordinance of support. While not causing any tangible shift in policy, it would help alert public officials and hold them accountable in the future.

Outline the process your policy proposal will take once implemented. Explain any systems that will be in place, administrative changes, agency authority changes, etc.

Once implemented, the ordinance would not require any immediate alteration of policy, similar to local ordinances which honor historical figures or recognize culturally significant events and landmarks. The policy would establish the precedent that public officials would consider the environment in three critical contexts. These changes might appear abstract, but

with pressure from educated voters it could result in tangible benefits. The handbook would be separately distributed and would not require legislative implementation.

Why is this something that should be addressed at this level?

Given the complex, intersectional nature of environmental issues, with limited time and resources, it would be an especially difficult undertaking to specialize in nationwide environmental issues. As a result, we have limited the scope to Virginia. Instead of concentrating our advocacy at the state level, at risk of failure amongst other legislative priorities and bureaucratic red tape, we plan to pass the ordinance in a receptive municipality. From there, the ordinance can be co-opted elsewhere.

Are there alternative responses that should be taken into account?

Instead of pursuing an ordinance of support and accompanying public advocacy campaign, an alternative response would be immediate, material policy. At all levels of government, there are necessary regulations to curb developing environmental concerns. Our response does not alter current policy—instead it seeks to educate voters and commit public officials to environmental protections.

Why is the policy you have proposed the appropriate/best response to the problem you have identified?

Obviously immediate, material action would be ideal, but considering the resources and political capital available to young policy leaders, our plan is more feasible. Moreover,

producing materials for the general public is crucial given that many people struggle to recognize the severity of environmental issues. Especially in the midst of a global pandemic, our handbook could serve as a necessary reminder. So while our proposal may not have the immediate, desired impact, it will promote environmental activism amongst voters and politicians alike.

What are the resources that will be needed to carry out this programmatic or policy response?

Our policy response requires no resources to be carried out. Besides the initial research and time spent on our end, the ordinance would not have any instant, tangible effect on policy. Thus, it would not require any budgeting or systematic changes. This helps make it significantly more palatable for legislators.

What criteria are you using to determine if your policy is successful?

We would like to see the ordinance of support adopted in multiple localities. For the handbook, we would love to see it distributed to as many people as possible. Because there is no immediate effect, success might be somewhat abstract. In general, we want to see our handbook gain traction and be recognized by notable public officials.

What would happen with the problem if no action is taken and the problem were to continue on unchanged and undisturbed?

The handbook is separate from any legislative processes. However, if the ordinance is not well-received, we could pursue its passing in other municipalities. With enough connections and effort, we should hopefully be able to get the ordinance recognized somewhere.

CONCLUSION

The Sustainable Promise Ordinance (SPO) will revitalize the sustainability movement at the local level amidst a shifting of political priorities nationally. If passed in large population centers with extensive resources already earmarked to fight climate change and protect ecosystems, the Ordinance will provide a critical new mechanism of environmental accountability across Virginia. Beginning in Northern Virginia and the Tidewater, its impact and appeal will proliferate throughout the state and Mid-Atlantic region. The three critical provisions of the Ordinance each present enormous potential for bi-partisan and data-driven environmental reform. By directly preserving waterways, wildlife habitats, and other natural ecosystems, city officials will develop a sense of stewardship over not just the local economy, but protection of the preexisting natural systems. By creatively considering the environmental impacts of development, city officials will gradually dismantle the antiquated belief that expansion and preservation are opposites. Finally, by reviving public engagement with wilderness and the outdoors, city officials will inspire love and care for the environment through direct experience. The supplementary product to the Ordinance, the Handbook, lays out the case for why these provisions are not only possible to implement amidst a pandemic, but ideal. Coupled with a long-term grassroots advocacy

campaign, the Greater Good Initiative’s latest policy has the potential to radically improve our state and country’s environmental outlook. Designed by the generation most susceptible to a future of environmental devastation, policymakers can trust the Ordinance to pave the way for sustainable progress.

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¹⁵ Includes handbook citations

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HANDBOOK