

James River Park sites shielded from developers

The conservation easement that protects land forever becomes official next week

BY REX SPRINGSTON
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There will never be condos on Belle Isle or a pizza place at the Pony Pasture.

Richmond and state officials signed an agreement yesterday designed to protect 280 acres in the city's James River Park system forever.

But river lovers feared a cash-strapped city might someday sell off an island here or a piece of shoreline there to raise money.

"We love the park the way it is right now and want to see it protected like that for future generations," said Chris Hull, a member of the James River Outdoor Coalition.

As the ceremony proceeded at Brown's Island downtown, the river's rapids roared and paddling Canada geese tended fuzzy goslings.

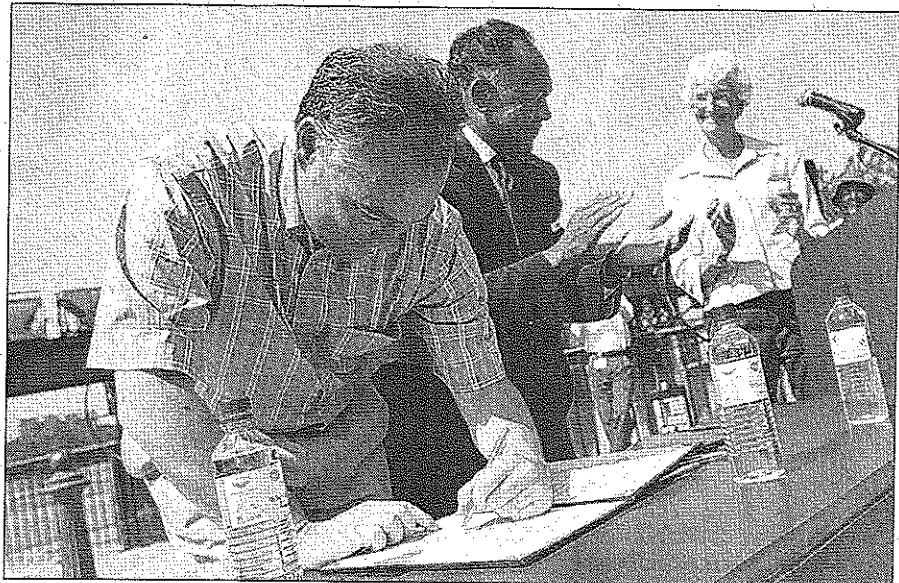
The park system encompasses more than 500 acres where people hike, fish, paddle, swim and walk dogs.

The protections cover the park's core areas, including Pony Pasture Rapids and Huguenot Flatwater in South Richmond, Belle Isle near downtown and North Bank Park and Great Shiplock Park on the river's north side.

Under the agreement, a conservation easement, banned activities include the building of homes, stores and businesses. Permitted work includes maintenance and the cutting of trails.

"It means we are going to have an urban wilderness park intact in perpetuity," said Charles Price of Richmond, an environmentalist and retired educator who began lobbying for the protections in 1999.

That proposal failed to get political support. About five years later, a developer



EVA RUSSO/TIMES-DISPATCH

Gov. Timothy M. Kaine (from left), Richmond Mayor Dwight C. Jones and Richmond City Council President Kathy C. Graziano were on hand for the announcement that James River Park property would always be protected.



Protecting the park

Go to TimesDispatch.com and read the easement signed by the governor and the mayor. Learn more about Richmond's waterfront park. Keyword: featured

suggested using Great Shiplock Park for part of a condominium project. That fell through, but the idea of protecting the park gained new strength.

City Council President Kathy C. Graziano, a key supporter of the protections, said it took about four years to put them in place because of the complexity of the task.

Conservation easements typically are used to protect open land — not a busy park where people need access to tend sewer lines and railroad tracks.

City and state officials said the deal makes Richmond the first city in Virginia to place a major urban park system under a

conservation easement.

That's a higher level of protection than even state parks receive. The job of enforcing the protections falls to the state Department of Conservation and Recreation and two nonprofit groups, the Capital Region Land Conservancy and the Richmond Recreation and Parks Foundation. In legal parlance, they hold the easement.

"It's a wonderful day for us to appreciate the natural, God-given gifts that we are the stewards of," said Richmond Mayor Dwight C. Jones.

Gov. Timothy M. Kaine said the protections tie in with his program of preserving land to keep pollutants from washing into streams. "When you preserve open space, you protect water quality," he said.

The City Council approved the easement Feb. 23. It will go into effect when it's filed in court next week.

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