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EDITORIAL

COASTAL MANAGEMENT IN VIRGINIA:

AT THE CROSSROADS

Coastal zone management will soon be entering a critical phase in its brief history in Virginia. The Commonwealth's Coastal Resource Management Program, born of the Federal Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972 and currently in its third year of development, will soon be deciding the organizational structure which the proposed regulatory and planning program will take. To those unfamiliar with coastal zone management, it is essentially a process by which federal, state and local governments coordinate their often haphazard and conflicting regulation of land and water resources in the nation's ecologically fragile coastal areas. Public hearings concerning the program are scheduled for the fall, with possible legislation for implementing the proposals to be submitted to the 1978 General Assembly.

Two areas of critical importance in organizing the structure of coastal zone management in Virginia will be the allocation of responsibility for management between the state and local governments, and the determination of how the state agency itself will be organized and staffed. While the Coastal Zone Management Act is flexible in permitting either a sharing of control between the state and localities or direct state regulation of coastal zone activities, it appears to be generally agreed that any final management plan will provide for generally local administration in conformity with state guidelines and review. Such an allocation of responsibility is a political necessity if the final program is to have any chance of legislative passage. It does not, as some suggest, signal a field day for local politicking. The 1972 Virginia Wetlands Act provided for a similar sharing of power, with the administration of the Act being retained by the localities, and with review and authority for the establishment of guidelines being vested in the state. From our reports, the Wetlands Act has been effective, resulting in a dramatic decrease from the rate of destruction of the state's wetland acreage.

Perhaps the more controversial issue relates to the organization of the state agency itself. In our view, the most favorable alternative would be the consolidation of all state environmental responsibilities, including coastal zone management, into one comprehensive environmental agency. Rather than fragmenting coastal zone management functions (grant administration, fiscal management, local government review, etc.) among several offices, housing all these responsibilities in one agency could help to insure the coordinated effort which is the very heart of coastal zone management. By combining the state's other environmental regulatory offices into one large agency, broad based planning could become more efficient, and duplication of staff and effort could be minimized. Such an agency would demonstrate the commitment of the Commonwealth to environmental matters, of which coastal zone management is only a part.

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