

Summary of the Problem:

The marker program, staffed by one full-time and one part-time employee, is receiving a record number of applications from the public. At the same time, we are also responsible for producing DHR-initiated markers, governor's contest markers, and replacement markers. In the last four state fiscal years, we have added an average of 52 new markers to the system per year. This volume is unsustainable for the following reasons:

- DHR staff, VDOT, Sewah Studios (the marker manufacturer), and VDOT's sign contractor each play a crucial role in the process of bringing a new marker to the roadside. Limitations at each organization mean that we cannot collectively handle this volume of markers without a large backlog forming. The backlog is already formidable and is continuing to grow.
- Each marker is a physical object that is intended to stand on the roadside indefinitely, and each one will eventually require maintenance and replacement. It is expensive and logistically difficult to provide perpetual care for more than 2,500 markers scattered around the state. Our focus on adding new markers to the system means that we have very little time to devote to updating and replacing the hundreds of markers that are missing or deteriorated.
- The state marker program was intended to highlight subjects of statewide or national significance, but those requirements have eroded over the years. At some point, it was determined that topics of regional significance were acceptable. We now routinely approve markers about subjects of local scope, such as schools, churches, and cemeteries, as long as we are able to demonstrate that they reflect broader trends in American history. By that standard, there is almost no topic that does not qualify for a state marker after DHR staff revises the text. This lack of selectivity means that there are no limits on how large the marker system may become.

Summary of the Current Marker Approval Process:

There are four marker application deadlines throughout the year. We accept the first 11 applications we receive for each deadline on a first-come, first-served basis, deferring any additional applications to the next board cycle. Once we have our group of 11, we research the topics and revise the proposed texts so that they meet our program criteria. We then bring all 11 texts before the Board of Historic Resources for approval. As time permits, we also try to prepare some DHR-initiated markers, governor's contest markers, and replacement markers in each board cycle, but the application markers take precedence.

We typically receive 15-20 applications per deadline, which means our future board agendas are filling up well in advance. As of late October 2021, all 11 slots for the March 2022 board cycle were full, as were 9 of 11 slots for the June board cycle.

Proposed Policy Revision:

DHR marker program staff will select the five best applications from the pool we have received by each deadline. We will base our selections on a set of scoring criteria outlined below. At the next meeting of the BHR, staff will ask for approval of the five topics/applications that we have chosen. At the subsequent meeting of the BHR, staff will present the actual texts of those five markers for approval. Any applicant whose project is not chosen as one of the top five will be eligible to apply again in the future, but applications will not automatically be carried over to future board cycles.

Handling only five applications per board cycle will allow DHR staff to devote more time to DHR-initiated markers, governor's contest markers, and much-needed replacement markers. Being more selective with the applications by putting them in competition with each other will increase the overall quality of the program. Decreasing the number of markers moving through the system will alleviate the backlog that has built up.

This policy change should take effect in September 2022 so that staff can adequately prepare and so that the public can be informed well in advance. If we adopt this timeline, DHR staff would present the first group of five selected applications to the board in September for approval. In December, staff would present the texts of those five markers to the board, and we would also present the next group of five selected applications for approval. DHR-initiated markers, governor's contest markers, and replacement markers would continue to be presented to the board as usual.

Scoring Criteria:

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| 25 points | Has potential to educate the public |
| 25 points | Fills a gap in the historical marker program; addresses a topic that the program has not extensively covered |
| 20 points | Addresses the history of a community that has been marginalized or underrepresented |
| 20 points | Reflects a breadth of historical significance that extends beyond the locality, preferably demonstrating statewide or national significance |
| 10 points | Contributes to a more equitable geographic distribution of markers |

Causes of the Backlog:

When 15-20 new markers are approved at once, it becomes very difficult to move all the projects through the pipeline efficiently. For each marker approved by the BHR, the marker program manager must complete the following tasks. *(These are the procedures for working with VDOT; the 80 localities in which VDOT does not erect markers are each handled on an individual basis in cooperation with local authorities):*

- Schedule site visit from a VDOT traffic engineer (can take two weeks to two months to complete)
- Receive detailed information about the approved site and pass it along to VDOT's sign contractor, which is known as DSP.
- Await cost estimate approval from VDOT's Central Office (can take two weeks to two months to complete)
- Order the marker from the foundry (because of the large number of markers we're ordering, it now takes 3-4 months from order to delivery)
- Approve proof sent from foundry before casting
- Coordinate installation with DSP and the sponsor, depending on the sponsor's plans for the dedication ceremony (at the earliest, DSP can install a marker 3-4 weeks after it is delivered)
- Coordinate the dedication ceremony with the sponsor; line up a DHR representative to attend

As of 15 Nov. 2021, these are the numbers of active marker projects:

15 new texts currently being finalized for December 2021 board meeting

6 replacement texts being finalized for December 2021 board meeting

6 markers awaiting site approval from traffic engineers

10 markers awaiting cost estimate approval from VDOT Central Office

1 marker in queue for DHR staff to order

21 markers currently on order; not yet delivered

37 markers have been delivered but not yet erected

This is a total of 96 active projects.