

DRILLING FOR GOLD



FILE, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Trucks hauled gold ore out of an open pit at the Marigold Mine located in eastern Nevada in 2004.

Gold mining in Va. has makings of an environmental disaster

In 2020, Buckingham County residents discovered that a mineral exploration company, Aston Bay, had been performing exploratory drilling for gold in their county since the previous year.

Why had Aston Bay looked to Virginia as a prospecting location for new, large-scale gold mining operations? First, Virginia has historically contained gold, and is home to a legacy of abandoned small-scale gold mines dotting the Gold-Pyrite Belt, a volcanic-plutonic belt that stretches from Fairfax County south to Appomattox County. Second, Aston Bay found the commonwealth's lack of existing regulations, including "no drill permitting required" on private land, appealing. This led Buckingham residents to sound an alarm statewide about this potential new industry and its possible threats to water, air, the environment and local populations.

Those advocacy efforts led to passage of a bill sponsored by Del. Elizabeth Guzman, D-Prince William, in 2021 that required the state conduct a study of the potential impacts from large-scale gold mining.



Jessica Sims

As requested by the Virginia General Assembly, the law has resulted in recent reports by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (NASEM) and a state committee formed by the Department of Energy, Department of Environmental Quality and the Virginia Department of Health. Both reports found that Virginia's current regulatory system is not adequate to protect Virginians, our communities or our environment from the impacts of large-scale gold mining.

The NASEM report calls for up-

dating Virginia's laws and regulatory framework to minimize the potential damage to air quality and water quality, cumulative health impacts and possible catastrophic events from gold mining. However, Virginians should be asking themselves whether even the strongest regulations would provide enough protection. In its report, NASEM acknowledged that even with a robust regulatory framework, "the risk of adverse impacts cannot be completely eliminated."

The sad truth is that regulations have often failed to protect people and places from the consequences of mining and other resource extraction. Just ask anyone living in the shadow of a coal mine that still hasn't been restored despite regulatory requirements to do so, or those living along the Mountain Valley Pipeline route, where hundreds of water quality violations have occurred.

A close look at the potential im-

pacts from large-scale gold mining outlined in the studies should lead to the conclusion that the risks are too great to allow this type of mining to happen in Virginia — especially since likely areas for large-scale gold mining would threaten the James River and its watershed, risking the drinking water supply for 2.7 million people.

What are the risks of gold mining in Virginia? The greatest risk is probably to Virginia's waterways, including existing risks from mercury contamination from historic gold-mining operations and the potential for catastrophic failures of dams holding back toxic slurry from new gold-processing operations, which are much larger in scale and size.

The massive gold-mining operations being contemplated extract minute fractions of gold from the rock they dig up — fractions as small

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INVESTIGATION NEEDED

Accountability is missing in the Enrichmond Foundation debacle



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Six months after Enrichmond Foundation's vote to dissolve, and the vanishing of tens of thousands of dollars it was holding for its 86 partner organizations, none of its victims have been made whole and no one has been held accountable.



The foundation, established in 1990 to support the development of local parks and public spaces, dissolved in July, two months after its longtime executive director, John Sydnor, quietly left the nonprofit.

The foundation's longtime relationship with the city of Richmond gave it a measure of



BRIAN PALMER

Mark Schmieder, president of Friends of East End, worked at the historic African American cemetery on Jan. 1.

credibility as a fiscal agent that in hindsight was vastly unwarranted. The situation carries a stench. But the response so far to its abrupt dissolution is to ignore the fresh mound of up-turned dirt covering the buried body.

"I am sorry to say that 'debacle' continues to be an apt description of this situation," Dave Pohlmann, president of Richmond Tree Stewards, said in an email Friday. "Very little,

if any, progress has been made in coming to any kind of resolution, of making the 80-plus partners whole, or of holding anyone accountable for what has happened."

Pohlmann said he and a few other former Enrichmond partners had brief conversations with a Richmond detective, "but his position was that there was no evidence of a crime, and without some

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ENABLING THE DISABLED

The fight for our most vulnerable students is just beginning

After multiple investigations, the U.S. Department of Education has confirmed widespread violations of the rights of disabled students spanning many years by the Virginia Department of Education and Fairfax County Public Schools. The DOE announced on Nov. 30 that the Fairfax school system profoundly failed to provide disabled children an appropriate education during the pandemic as required under federal law.



Vivian Chaplick



Trevor Chaplick

As the most vulnerable community in Virginia, could it be any worse for disabled children and their families? Tragically, the answer is yes. Virginia school districts have been secretly mistreating disabled stu-

dents for decades by withholding needed educational accommodations and aggressively litigating against their parents. As a result, the Virginia public school system — rated among the best in the nation — is arguably the worst for disabled students.

Such mistreatment violates a federal law called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Congress designed the IDEA to protect disabled children by guaranteeing them a free and appropriate education. When a school district violates that guarantee, the IDEA empowers parents to challenge the school district in a "due process" hearing before a neutral and impartial hearing officer. Without an impartial due process hearing, parents have no meaningful way to secure an appropriate education for their children.

Based on nonpublic documents obtained through a Freedom of Information Act investigation, we discovered that

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