



Friends of Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park

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www.friendsofgwynnsfallsleakinpark.org

March 4, 2024

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*The Friends of Gwynns Falls/
Leakin Park is a 501(C)(3)
organization.*

Dear Chairman Korman, Vice Chairwoman Boyce, and the members of the House Environment and Transportation Committee: Friends of Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park wishes to submit the following testimony in support of House Bill 1358, "Natural Resources – Establishment of Gwynns Falls State Park." The statement is co-signed by the organizations and individuals listed at the bottom of this letter.

State parks provide recreational, economic, educational, and cultural benefits to their host communities. Many large cities have at least one state park within their borders, but Baltimore does not. Moreover, Baltimore is one of just two jurisdictions in Maryland lacking a state park. Maryland Department of Natural Resources Secretary Josh Kurtz has said this needs to change – and we agree.

Baltimore City has many parks, but Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park is unique. With its mature forest, diverse wildlife, scenic trails and historic structures covering more than 1,000 acres, it one of the largest urban forest parks on the East Coast and already resembles a state park in many ways. It is past time for the park to fulfill its potential as the pride of West Baltimore and a true regional destination.

The current situation is not sustainable. Signs of neglect are everywhere in the park: missing or broken gates, dumped trash that reappears as soon as it is removed, dilapidated trails and bridges. All this disrepair sends a message that bad actors hear loud and clear.

The park's condition reflects a history of disinvestment and racist policies affecting West Baltimore. The city's underfunded Department of Recreation and Parks oversees a massive system of more than 250 parks totaling nearly 5,000 acres. Try as it might, the department can't provide the resources that a complex landscape such as Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park requires.

To truly thrive, Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park needs its own robust ranger team assisting visitors, reporting problems, running family programming, and signaling that this park is cared for and protected. It also deserves a permanent, dedicated funding stream for repairs, trash removal, trail maintenance and general upkeep. The best solution is to bring GFLP into the state park system under a cooperative agreement with the city and a supportive role for the Friends of Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park, volunteer custodians and protectors of the park for the past 40 years.

State parks are economic engines. According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, [every dollar the State of Maryland invests in state parks generates \\$29.27 in economic activity](#). Moreover, by introducing a Governor's Service Year Option for 18- to 22-year-olds and a Conservation Job Corps site for high schoolers, we can turn the park into a job incubator, providing young Baltimoreans with valuable skills and work experience while exposing them to the natural world.

To be clear, this proposal does not benefit Baltimore City alone. Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park abuts Baltimore County and is a short drive from Howard and Anne Arundel counties. A new state park would serve an area with well over 1 million people, relieving pressure on nearby state parks that have seen huge increases in demand since the pandemic.

In summary, a state-city partnership park at Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park will have clear benefits for the city, region, and state. We respectfully request the committee's favorable vote.

Signed,

Friends of Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park (Board of Directors listed on Page 1 of this letter)

Co-signed by the following organizations:

Audubon Mid-Atlantic

Forever Maryland

Chesapeake Bay Outward Bound School

Blue Water Baltimore

Rails to Trails Conservancy

Baltimore Green Space

Baltimore Tree Trust

Windsor Hills Neighbors

Greater Walbrook Neighborhood Association

Greater Mount Holly CDC

Westgate Community Association

Ten Hills Neighborhood Association
Forest Park Action Council
Allendale Community Association
Uplands Community Association
Druid Hill Park Partnership
Leakin Parkrun
Yieldcamp, Ltd

The following additional organizations are joining FOGFLP in supporting House Bill 1358:

Chesapeake Conservancy
Baltimore Heritage
Bikemore
Friends of the Jones Falls
Baltimore Herb Festival
Chesapeake & Allegheny Live Steamers (CALs)

The following individuals are also joining FOGFLP in supporting House Bill 1358:

Baltimore City residents: Nancy Pelton, Samantha Goetz, Ivan Wright, Amanda Glassco, Dustin Meeker, Ruth Frey, Bridget Nugent, Matthew Davis, Rafael Ortiz, Timothy Kish, Barry Blumberg, Robin Kessler, Thomas McConnell, Rebecca Campany, Thierry Peters

Baltimore County residents: Salina Bastian, Suzanne Kantt, Tekoa Lucas, Alexandra Johnson, Jeanette Czajkowski, Edwin Simmons, Laia Tiderman, Susan Lattimore, Ruben Dagold

Howard County residents: Ann Scrupski, Susan Banks, Lillian Banks