

**Statement to the House Environment & Transportation Committee in support of HB 1358:  
“Natural Resources – Establishment of Gwynns Falls State Park”**

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’s 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.