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Budget and Taxation Committee

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Joint Committee on the Chesapeake and
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THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

February 16, 2022

Testimony in Favor of SB541
Natural Resources - Maryland Park Service and State Parks - Alterations
(Great Maryland Outdoors Act)

Chairman Guzzone, Vice-Chair Rosapepe, & members of the Budget and Taxation Committee:

I respectfully request a favorable report of SB541, the Great Maryland Outdoors Act, to implement the recommendations from the [State Park Investment Commission's final report](#) and provide a once-in-a-generation investment to our State Parks and the Maryland Park Service (MPS).

In August 2021, the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House jointly appointed a commission to investigate and make recommendations regarding overcrowding in Maryland State parks, including: the adequacy of existing State Park facilities to meet the demand for recreational opportunities in the State; levels of operational funding and staff for existing State parks; the need for capital funding to provide a high-quality experience to park visitors; the need for new State park offerings and identification of any recreational deserts across Maryland; and the extent to which State parks and associated recreational opportunities are adequately accessible to all populations of Marylanders, including low-income Marylanders, those who lack access to a car, and Marylanders with disabilities.

Our Commission's work was directly connected to the record levels of visitorship experienced and record-setting capacity-related shutdowns experienced over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic; however, we also approached this challenge and work with the mindset of ensuring that each and every Marylander throughout the State have equitable access to our State Parks.

Through this process, we also learned more of the critical role that our State Parks play in our State – from the public health benefits of more outdoor recreation to the important land preservation role and environmental protections our parks provide. Furthermore, they are also an economic engine for our State with outdoor recreation opportunities generating more than \$14 billion in consumer spending yearly; 109,000 direct jobs; \$4.4 billion in wages and salaries; and, \$951 million in State and Local tax revenue in Maryland

With all of this in mind, our Commission's recommendations have taken the form of this legislation and **the Great Maryland Outdoors Act will:**

Correct decades of underfunding to our State Park System through the creation of an \$80 million dollar Park System Critical Maintenance Fund to help pay down the \$68 million dollar backlog of repairs needed on properties throughout the System. The Governor included significant funding to front-load this work in his FY23 Budget - the funding in this legislation will ensure we tackle the entirety of that backlog as well other critical maintenance projects.

Address overcrowding of State Parks through the creation of a \$70 million dollar Park System Capital Improvements and Acquisition Fund and directly earmark:

1. \$30 million for land acquisition and directing these new acquisitions to prioritize: locations in Central and Southern Maryland to relieve overcrowding and expand public access; sites with historic significance to minority communities; and waterfront/beachfront property.
2. \$20 million for transportation improvements including targeted investments to avoid capacity shutdowns, expanding parking availability, and improving trail connectivity.
3. \$10 million for increasing water access opportunities such as kayak boat launches.
4. \$5 million for historic preservation
5. \$5 million for infrastructure projects that mitigate the effects of climate change such as flood barriers and forest buffers.

Support the dedicated staff and park rangers by fixing the decades of understaffing experienced in the Park System and recognizing their service to our State by:

1. Requiring MPS and DNR to fill 100 additional positions – with at least 5 of these staff in the engineering and construction unit, 5 in the land acquisition and planning unit, and 1 volunteer program coordinator.
2. Acknowledging the role of State Park Rangers as first responders and thereby guaranteeing them the benefits and rights offered to those individuals who perform critical public services

Ensure transparency & accountability as we appropriately plan for the future of our State Park System by:

1. Requiring the development of a Capital Improvement Plan, with appropriate public input, to ensure that the needs of the Park System are prioritized and organized.
2. Developing a Comprehensive Long Term Strategic Plan to look holistically at the Park System and the establishment of new parks, historic areas, trails, and other opportunities.
3. Establishing Freedman's State Historical Park to tell the critically important story of Black Marylanders both before and after the abolition of slavery – but to also set the groundwork for future partnership parks.

Providing necessary oversight to the Maryland Park System by establishing the Parks and Recreation Commission in DNR to support the Maryland Park Service and ensure that we do not reach a critical moment like the one we are in again.

Additionally, through recent conversations with the Department of Natural Resources and input from various stakeholder groups, we are also working on a comprehensive amendment to the legislation with our House cross-file to encompass some of the suggestions we have heard, including:

1. Adding intent language to the bill that it is the General Assembly's intent to identify and fund a State Park within the Beltway in Prince George's County to create more equitable access.
2. Changing the staffing of the Parks and Recreation Commission from DLS to DNR.
3. Establishing a Great Maryland Outdoors Fund and authorizing the Governor to appropriate up to \$3 million dollars annually and authorizing the Office of Outdoor Recreation to provide grants to direct marketing organizations for the purpose of promoting and marketing State parks. Earlier today we received news that our Federal partners have secured \$15 million towards this similar effort. The amendment will make clear that these federal funds will be utilized towards this effort.
4. Authorizing counties to establish partnership parks through MOU's anywhere in the State.
5. Requiring DNR to report on the reactivation of Fort Tonoloway State Park following an archeological excavation of the site.
6. Changing the effective date of the legislation to June 1, 2022.

This legislation is the opportunity to create the "third wave" of conservation and Park expansion - with the first wave being when President Theodore Roosevelt in the early-1900s led the creation of the first National Forests, National Monuments, and National Parks; then with President Franklin Delano Roosevelt creating the Civilian Conservation Corps and expanded the National Park Service in the mid-twentieth century; and most recently through the passage of the Great American Outdoors Act in Congress just a year ago.

This is the time for us to create a nation-leading Park System and I hope we seize it. Once again I respectfully request a favorable report of SB541.