



February 15, 2022

The Honorable Guy Guzzone
Chair, Budget and Taxation Committee
3 West, Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: SB541: Natural Resources – Maryland Park Service and State Parks – Alterations
(Great Maryland Outdoors Act) (Fiscal Year 2023)

Dear Senator Guzzone:

I'm Kristen Pironis, the executive director of Visit Annapolis & Anne Arundel County. I came on board in April 2021, just as we thought we were coming out of the worst of COVID. It was an exciting time in the travel and tourism industry. While the industry had suffered horrific and substantial setbacks, we knew we could re-establish the industry in Maryland and make it even better. Looking back at that sentiment now, I realize it may have been wishful thinking as the tourism industry continues to struggle. But there have been bright spots. Even during the worst of the pandemic what set Anne Arundel County and, in fact, Maryland as a whole was its vast park and recreation spaces.

The past 18 months have driven home like never before just how valued, beloved, and essential our state parks are when it comes to helping provide a sense of calm and wellbeing in an unsettled world. During the COVID-19 pandemic, visitation to Maryland's state parks skyrocketed as individuals and families sought safe forms of outdoor recreation. In 2020, Maryland's state parks welcomed 21.5 million visitors, a 45 percent increase over 2019 and the trend continued through 2021.

In 2020, 1.5 million individuals visited Sandy Point State Park in Anne Arundel County. With increased visitation to the park comes increased wear and tear on the facility and the need for more frequent maintenance and repair work. Allocating adequate funding to accomplish this task is essential to providing an enhanced visitor experience that will help grow the number of loyal customers, encourage repeat visitation, and increase visitor expenditures. With heightened visitation comes the need for additional staffing to provide adequate oversight for the state parks and the satellite parks many of them simultaneously manage.


Further, the availability of parks and open spaces is a key deciding factor for individuals making vacation plans. In recent years, Sandy Point State Park often has had turn people away because it has reached capacity early in the day—especially on weekends. Vacationers who are turned away must find other things to do and other destinations to patronize. This results in reduced tourism revenue for Annapolis and Anne Arundel County and the State of Maryland.

Overcrowding at Sandy Point State Park prompted the nonprofit organization, Chesapeake Region Accessible Boating (CRAB), to find a more suitable location for providing sailing experiences for individuals with disabilities. Because of regular and predictable early park closings on weekends, CRAB limited its hours primarily to weekdays, when its guests had a better chance of getting into the park and accessing CRAB's pier. In order to expand its hours of operation and make its services available to a larger number of disabled area residents and visitors, the organization is building an adaptive boating center with multiple piers at the former Port Williams Marina on Back Creek that's slated to open in spring 2022.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it abundantly clear that area residents and visitors alike rely on Maryland's green spaces for safe, affordable recreational opportunities. I urge you to support Senate Bill 541 to directly address the challenges facing Sandy Point and its sister state parks when it comes to issues of accessibility, funding, staffing, and overcrowding. Maryland's state parks have always been among its greatest assets. At a time when an entire nation is seeking superior outdoor recreational opportunities, we cannot afford to let Maryland's reputation slip. With your support, Maryland's parks will be able to shine for the state's residents and for the millions of individuals who visit Maryland each year and infuse billions of dollars into our economy.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kristen Pironis', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Kristen Pironis
Executive Director
Visit Annapolis & Anne Arundel County

Cc: The Honorable Sarah Elfreth