

Testimony of Elly Cowan

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Before the
Senate Budget and Taxation Committee
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Pertaining To: SB541 - Great Maryland Outdoors Act
Support

On behalf of the staff and Board of Directors of Preservation Maryland and our thousands of statewide supporters, we greatly appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony on the future of Maryland's state parks and the critical role they play in preserving our state's diverse history.

SUPPORT FOR SENATE BILL 541, GREAT MARYLAND OUTDOORS ACT

In late 2021, the Maryland General Assembly convened the State Park Investment Commission to explore the challenges associated with the operation, maintenance, staffing and access to Maryland's State Park system – and to identify next steps for improving the parks. The bill before you today is the result of the hard work of that Commission.

Over our 90-year history, Preservation Maryland has had a long-term interest in *preserving, restoring, and expanding* our state parks and protected lands. As such, we are proud to offer our enthusiastic support for SB541 which represents the greatest investment in our State Parks in a generation. This sweeping legislation creates and funds a pathway for a State Park system that addresses needs for acquisition, accessibility, and equity. It seeks to invest in the parks we already have while looking to expand the portfolio to ensure all Marylanders have public access to open space. Preservation Maryland is supportive of the many laudable goals that would be achieved through SB541 but will focus our testimony on the investment in the preservation and maintenance of the vast number of historic and cultural resources in Maryland parks and the expansion to include the diverse histories of underrepresented communities.

Maintain, Expand & Invest in Existing Resources

As the statewide, nonprofit preservation organization, Preservation Maryland is particularly interested in this issue as the Maryland Park Service (MPS) system and the broader Maryland Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) *protect more historic structures and resources than any other entity in the state* – making their success critical to our mission. Additionally, according to a study previously conducted by MDNR, visiting historic resources was the number one interest of visitors to Maryland state parks – tied only with walking. Well-preserved historic places are not just important to preservationists – they are a priority experience for Marylanders.

According to mobility data collected by Google ([google.com/covid19/mobility](https://www.google.com/covid19/mobility)), visitation to parks in Maryland is currently up more than **134%** against the pre-pandemic baseline. For popular state parks with limited access, constricted public spaces, and few park rangers, this has meant parks turning away guests during many peak visitation weekends. From the Eastern Shore to the foothills of western Maryland, the same story is repeated often.

At the same time, this influx of visitors has left a significant impact on the park resources themselves – from roads to historic sites to pools – park infrastructure requires strategic and significant investment.

The increased visitation, increased federal support, and a desire to preserve diverse history presents a unique opportunity to invest in our state parks – and help address systemic challenges faced by the system. Preservation Maryland believes that the Maryland Great Outdoors Act does just that.

To address the critical maintenance backlog throughout the Parks system, SB541 requires the Department of Natural Resources to conduct a systemwide survey of historical and cultural resources and include an estimation of the restoration costs, and the legislation provides funding to address those needs, including additional staff to be hired to increase the Park Service's capacity to administer and accomplish this monumental undertaking. Simply put, we cannot maintain or preserve what we don't know is there. This is a critical step towards addressing the preservation needs of the many invaluable historic resources in parks across the state.

Strategically Grow Park Units and Prioritize Accessibility and Inclusion

SB541 would ensure that the state prioritizes the acquisition and development of more accessible state parks to meet a growing population eager to escape to nature and learn about the state's rich history. This includes ensuring decisions related to the location and establishment of new state parks or amenities targets areas identified by the Department of Natural Resources' Park Equity tool as in need of recreational opportunities or would relieve overcrowding in existing parks that have consistently had to close due to capacity restrictions. Additionally, special attention is to be paid to the establishment of state historical parks that preserve or interpret historically underrepresented communities and that speak to the *full story* of Maryland. To that end, SB541 would establish the Freedman's State Historical Park, a park that will preserve and interpret the lives and experiences of Black Marylanders, both before and after the abolition of slavery.

Maryland has an opportunity to make a once in a lifetime investment to make our state parks more accessible and inclusive and to address the critical maintenance backlog. The Great Maryland Outdoors Act provides not only the path forward but also the much-needed funding to accomplish the vision.

Therefore, I respectfully urge a favorable report of SB541.