

MARYLAND RANGERS ASSOCIATION

Testimony in Support of:

SB541 / HB727 – Maryland Park Service and State Parks – Alterations - The Great Maryland Outdoors Act

Dear Madam Chair McIntosh, Chairman Barve, members of the Appropriations Committee, members of the Environment and Transportation Committee,

From the Allegany Mountains overlooking Deep Creek Lake State Park, to the waters of the Atlantic Ocean coming ashore at Assateague State Park, Maryland offers 75 of the most geographically diverse, naturally beautiful, and historically significant parks in the United States. These mystical settings, wisely preserved and protected decades ago so that they could continue to be treasured today, are now visited more than 20 million times annually. This serves as undisputable evidence of, and demands that we take note of, the priority that Marylanders place on their State Parks, and the role they serve in enhancing the quality of their lives. While this validation is gratifying, Marylanders are collectively loving their parks to death, stressing the existing park system and aging critical infrastructure, and compromising the very essence of our mission to forever preserve these natural wonders.

On August 6, 2021, Senate President Bill Ferguson and Speaker Adrienne A. Jones announced the creation of a legislative commission to study the needs of, and make consequential recommendations for, Maryland's State Park system. Maryland's dedicated State Park Rangers were humbled to be given the opportunity to participate in this once-in-a-generation initiative, providing their first-hand professional observations of the pressing needs of the parks in their care, as well as suggestions for potential solutions to enhance our ability to effectively pursue public safety, resource protection, and outdoor recreation equity goals.

On the pages that follow, you will find the written testimony that the Maryland Rangers Association submitted to the State Park Investment Commission, which included action items intended to address what Rangers view as some of the most significant challenges. The Great Maryland Outdoors Act is seen by those Rangers as the catalyst that will alter the trajectory of our State Park system, making long-overdue investments in funding, maintenance, staffing, and land acquisition, and ushering in a new era in our State Park system's history, one which future generations will look back on with admiration and gratitude for visionary leadership and bold action. On behalf of Maryland's Rangers, Maryland's State Parks, and every Marylander, we urge a Favorable Report on this comprehensive recreation and conservation effort so that you and your loved ones, and millions of Maryland families, may forever enjoy the precious natural, cultural, historical, and recreational opportunities inherently available in our State.

Sincerely,

Ranger Dean Hughes

Ranger Dean Hughes
President
Maryland Rangers Association
mdranger2020@gmail.com



Record Visitation / Overcrowding –The number of visitors to State Parks has doubled since 2013 and repeatedly set new attendance records, including a 45% increase from 2019 to 2020, and continued increases to-date in 2021.

*Excessive demand at State Parks leads to frequent closures of many developed day-use parks, **primarily those with water access**, and results in increased pressure on surrounding undeveloped areas, leading to a compromised visitor experience, significant resource degradation and impacts to neighboring communities. These outcomes run counter to one of the most important and sought-after benefits of State Parks, that being the enhancement of the health and well-being, as well as the economic prosperity, of people.*

*Developing additional park areas **with water access** would provide more recreational opportunities and reduce pressure on existing resources. However, significant additional staff resources are already needed to meet the demands of existing operations. Any enhancements of the acquisition aspect of public lands must be paired with enhancements to the staffing and operational component.*

Action Items:

*1. As addressed by the Commission, a full inventory and assessment of existing State Park units / properties should be conducted to identify those **areas which could provide water access within reasonable proximity to the more heavily populated areas of the state**, to determine their viability for further development and enhanced access if additional staff, equipment, facilities and all operational requirements are provided in order to allow for the safe public use and efficient operation of those existing units / properties.*

2. The commission should also recommend a comprehensive assessment of acquisition opportunities to create new waterfront parks in or near Baltimore, the District of Columbia, and other heavily populated areas, to serve the critical need for access to open space for swimming and fishing in locations that are easy to reach from metropolitan counties.

Staffing - The Maryland Park Service (MPS) has identified a need for additional Rangers and other personnel / resources to effectively manage ever-growing demands.

*Visitation to State Parks has doubled since the Department of Natural Resources and Department of Budget and Management collaborated on a **five-year Strategic Plan** which was **submitted to the General Assembly in 2013**, identifying an **additional 70 positions** needed for the operation and management of the then-66 state parks. In the eight years since the Strategic Plan was submitted, **25 new State Parks and areas have been acquired / opened, yet only 13 permanent positions have been added.***

In order to meet its mission in a rapidly urbanizing state, the MPS strategically acquires new acreage and parkland as it becomes available, but is rarely successful in adding positions, budgets, vehicles and equipment, and other resources to manage the acquisition. The MPS needs adequately funded New Facility Requests to be viewed favorably, and acted upon, by DBM.



Action Items:

1. The MRA submits to the Commission that the **minimum threshold for supplemental staff is the 70 positions** recommended by the 2013 Strategic Plan, and will further submit that the significant increase in visitation since 2013, the addition of additional operational units / areas since 2013, as well as the proposed future acquisition of additional properties, require the **addition of approximately 150-200 classified positions** (managerial, operational, maintenance, administrative, naturalist, historian and planning personnel).
2. The MRA will further stress that every additional staff position must be accompanied by a **supplemental budget allocation that will adequately support the work of that specific employee**, i.e. the vehicles, equipment, offices, shops and all fiscal resources necessary to support the effective functioning of those staff.
3. The Commission should identify or develop a **formal, perpetual and sustainable funding mechanism** to accompany and support every new acquisition which involves a new operational unit of the State Park system, with the necessary staff (managerial, operational, maintenance, administrative, naturalists, historians and planning personnel), as well as vehicles, equipment, offices, shops and all fiscal resources necessary to support the effective functioning of those staff.

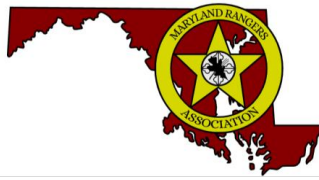
Human Resources – Seasonal and Classified employee recruitment and hiring processes are excessively rigid and protracted.

State Parks rely on a **very robust surge of short-term seasonal employees** to operate visitor centers, contact stations, beaches and campgrounds, as well as to perform grounds maintenance and other mission-critical functions during the busiest times of the year. **The inability to adequately staff any State Park function compromises public safety, resource protection and the visitor experience.**

The **timeline to hire a seasonal employee is approximately two months**, in many cases including rehires for vacancies occurring in the middle of the three-month summer season. **Classified vacancies are sometimes carried for up to a year or more**, for critical operational functions at parks already deemed in need of additional staff.

Action Items:

1. Given the unique nature of hiring 800 seasonal employees, and replacing those employees, as necessary, in an expeditious fashion, the MPS should be provided with an administrative **waiver to the current JobAps hiring process**, which is not well-adapted to the timely initial hire and/or replacement hiring of temporary employees during a condensed period of high demand for critical operational staff, i.e. the busy summer season in State Parks.
2. Given the officially designated and recognized essential nature and status of 100% of MPS operational staff, an **expedited process to backfill classified vacancies** is needed, e.g. the **elimination of the requirement to request Hiring Freeze Exemptions (HFEs) for all critical operational positions.**



Budget / Funding – Despite ever-increasing attendance and associated demands, statutorily dedicated MPS funding sources are often redirected to balance the statewide or DNR budget, or for other purposes. Repayments of mandated funding are often delayed and, if and when made, are earmarked with restrictions.

Action Items:

1. The General Assembly should take the action necessary to mandate the **immediate and full repayment of all Program Open Space funds** previously redirected / deferred.
2. The General Assembly and appropriate Executive Departments should collaborate to identify a permanent, sustainable dedicated funding source that can adequately fund the additional resources identified and recommended by the Commission. **This funding source should not redirect / reallocate existing funding sources, e.g. POS funding, from local or county parks and recreation agencies**, as these partners perform a critical role in addressing the surplus demand for outdoor recreational opportunities. This mandatory funding is seen as the “**Glendening Commission**” counterpart to the **Kirwan Commission**, and could do for State Parks what that Commission did for the state’s educational system (for a fraction of the cost).

\$68 Million Critical Maintenance Backlog – Many State Parks were developed in the 1930s through the 1960s, and, in many cases, critical infrastructure is original and far beyond its life expectancy.

Recurring delays and deferrals of capital project and critical maintenance funding, at a time when park attendance is at historically record high levels, results in straining and overwhelming infrastructure, leading to facility breakdowns, compromised visitor experiences, loss of services, and impacts to public safety.

This backlog also represents the Department’s inability to meet its responsibilities with regard to **preserving and restoring the significant number of historical / cultural resources** in its care, as well as the inability to move forward with **integrating green technology** into the State Park infrastructure and **modeling sustainable practices** for both the public and private entities.

DNR’s Engineering and Construction Unit is impeded by critical staffing shortages and unable to manage additional projects / funds with existing personnel.

Action Item:

1. The General Assembly and appropriate Executive Departments should collaborate to utilize current and anticipated federal funding to eliminate the existing critical maintenance backlog over the next several years. In order to accomplish this, and to avoid future backlogs created, in part, by inadequate staff to manage these projects, the DNR’s Engineering and Construction unit should be provided with supplemental permanent classified staff. The General Assembly should take the action necessary to mandate the **immediate and full repayment of all Program Open Space funds** previously redirected / deferred.
2. The critical maintenance program must include a robust funding allocation dedicated to the **preservation and restoration of historical / cultural resources** in the care of the Department, to ensure the integrity and permanent viability of those resources, and to better **enable the interpretation of difficult histories** of many of those places and sites, stories which have been historically underrepresented.



3. The capital and critical maintenance programs should include funding sufficient to allow the Department to modernize and integrate **green technology and sustainable practices** into all State Park facilities, whether through rehabilitation or replacement.

Employee Compensation - Numerous compensation actions over the past three years, while well-intentioned and appreciated, have resulted in unintended consequences and created significant inequities in the MPS Classification and Salary plan and resulted in salary compaction issues for many MPS employees, particularly managers.

In 2018, a Salary Equity Adjustment, requested by the MPS and approved by DBM, brought all Rangers, both current and new hires, to a Step 3 pay increment level without a commensurate increase to employees already at Step 3 or higher, **effectively resulting in the elimination of longevity pay for more senior employees.**

In 2019, a DBM-approved and union-negotiated action resulted in all Lead Rangers (Park Services Associate Leads – Grade 15) **being elevated to the same grade as their direct supervisors** (Park Services Supervisors – Grade 16). DBM later created a second Lead Ranger classification at a lower pay grade (15), **resulting in two different pay grades for the same position.**

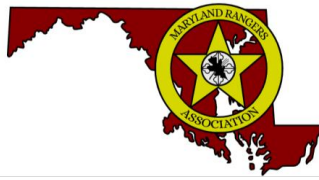
In 2021, the minimum wage for all state employees, including short-term seasonal employees, increased to \$15/hour, **further compressing the MPS salary scale** with regard to long-term contractual and career classified employees.

All of the above actions were accomplished in the spirit of raising the level of **compensation** for the professional employees of the Maryland Park Service and bringing it more **in line with the industry standard for professional park operations and maintenance work.** However, these efforts have still fallen short of the level needed to **retain the highest quality and most diverse candidates**, and many are leaving to pursue equally meaningful work with agencies able to provide the type of compensation sought by people supporting a family while also pursuing their passion.

Action Items:

1. DBM, unilaterally or by legislative mandate, **must resolve the pay disparity related to their error**, when the state collectively bargained with the Maryland Professional Employees Council (MPEC) to implement the Annual Salary Review (ASR) submitted by DNR to provide a one-grade salary adjustment for certain employees, at which time DBM subsequently created two pay grades for the same Lead Ranger classification, one of which was also equivalent to the pay grade for supervisory employees. The requested resolution, in order to avoid rescinding any benefit provided in error to certain employees, is to **apply the same one-grade salary adjustment to the remainder of the classifications utilized by the MPS**, in order to restore the integrity of the salary scale within the unit.

2. DBM should conduct a **comprehensive analysis of comparable professional park positions** in the National Park Service, comparable state park systems, and local park systems (e.g. counties and the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission) to determine the **appropriate compensation and benefit packages required to attract and retain a qualified, diverse MPS workforce.**



3. Commensurate with a previous Salary Equity Adjustment provided to certain MPS employees, which adjusted all salaries in certain classifications to a minimum of Step 3, **all MPS employee salaries should be adjusted** in a corresponding fashion to recognize seniority, as reflected in the longevity Step increments for non-included employees relative to those employees who benefited from the Salary Equity Adjustment.

Public Safety / Law Enforcement – Due to staffing limitations and competing demands imposed upon the Natural Resources Police (conservation vs. boating vs. public lands), providing a consistent law enforcement presence in State Parks presents challenges for both the NRP and the MPS, especially as those competing demands often occur simultaneously during certain times of the year.

Given the reliance on effective enforcement, and a consistent public safety presence employing a preventive deterrent-based strategy, to ensure safe and reliable park operations and the successful implementation of management policies (rules), the park management function must be closely and directly integrated with the law enforcement function. In order to effectively manage their parks and meet statutory and ethical obligations for visitor and public safety, **it is imperative that park managers be involved in the management and allocation of law enforcement resources.**

Action Item:

The Commission should recommend and formally request an **assessment of the current ability of the Natural Resources Police to provide law enforcement services in State Parks**, and to determine whether adequate resources are being allocated to the Natural Resources Police to allow them to effectively accomplish the dual and distinctly separate missions (conservation enforcement and park enforcement) merged as a result of the law enforcement consolidation implemented in 2005, or whether one or both of those competing elements of the current NRP mission is being compromised, e.g. the inability to provide a dedicated proactive, consistent public safety presence in State Parks vs. a reactive, response-based approach.

Status as First Responders for Rangers – Despite being certified in multiple emergency response disciplines and routinely responding to a wide range of emergencies in State Parks, Rangers are struggling to receive acknowledgment of their critical role and status as first responders in the context of the state’s emergency response apparatus.

Rangers routinely respond to a variety of emergencies in State Parks and other areas, in coordination with **police, fire, and EMS, who regularly rely on Rangers** to provide first aid, search and rescue, and other public safety services in undeveloped and often remote settings.

Rangers are often overlooked for various benefits afforded to more commonly-recognized first responders like police, fire, and EMS.

Action Item:

The Commission should recommend, and the Commissioners should sponsor, **legislation to provide statutory recognition of the status of Maryland Rangers as First Responders**, and amend existing statutes to **codify the inclusion of Maryland Rangers with regard to unique benefits afforded all other First Responders** including, but not limited to, emergency response pay, preferential income tax deductions, and legal presumptions for occupational diseases.