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MAJORITY LEADER

Ways and Means Committee

Chair, Revenues Subcommittee



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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

SPONSOR TESTIMONY

**House Bill 727 - Natural Resources - Maryland Park Service and State Parks - Alterations
(Great Maryland Outdoors Act)**

Chair Barve, Vice Chair Stein, Members of the Environment and Transportation Committee,

Over the July 4th weekend, 2021, Marylanders were starting to come out of the original COVID lockdown. Coronavirus case rates were low, businesses had opened back up, and people began mingling again. To celebrate the holiday, thousands came together and headed to state parks. But instead of spending their time as planned with friends and families, many were turned away as parks around the state had been closed due to overcrowding.

These closures attracted quite a bit of media attention but were not unique. In fact, parks were closed due to overcrowding 292 times in 2020 alone, setting a new record. And while there was certainly an uptick in visits in 2020 due to COVID preventing us from taking part in many of our usual activities, this high number of annual closures was not an outlier. These closures are part of a trend spanning decades and which continued into 2021. Each year, Maryland parks are greeted with record numbers of visitors. Unfortunately, this increase in visits has not been met with an increase in support from the state.

Our state parks today are overcrowded, underfunded, inaccessible to many, and in need of critical repairs. In recognition of these shortcomings of our park system, Speaker Adrienne Jones and Senate President Bill Ferguson created the State Parks Investment Commission last year to assess how to tackle these challenges. I had the pleasure of serving on this Commission and, together with my colleagues, we released a report in December that includes dozens of recommendations that would provide Maryland with a world-class park system. A system that is well-managed, easily accessible, and that provides all Marylanders greater access to greenspaces, trails, water, and the great outdoors. A system that gives each of us the opportunity to connect with our natural world, all while improving our health, quality of life, and economy. Today, I am proud to present House Bill 727, the Great Maryland Outdoors Act, which seeks to implement many of these recommendations and make a generational impact on our state parks.

This legislation will paydown the MPS critical maintenance backlog, require DNR to hire 100 additional employees with special focus on maintenance and acquisitions, direct DNR to

create a Comprehensive Long Range Strategic Plan every 5 years as well as a regular Capital Improvements Plan, create an oversight commission, and more. The ultimate goal of this legislation is to invest in parks to reduce capacity closures and ensure that every community has access to a high quality state park. The Great Maryland Outdoors Act takes a long-term approach to our park system to ensure that we pass down a sustainable system for generations to come.

I thank the Committee for considering this legislation and ask that you support our parks in communities around the state by voting favorable on House Bill 727.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Eric Luedtke". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "E".

Delegate Eric Luedtke