



House Bill 727

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

MACo Position: **SUPPORT**
WITH AMENDMENTS

To: Environment and Transportation and
Appropriations Committees

Date: February 23, 2022

From: Dominic J. Butchko

The Maryland Association of Counties (MACo) **SUPPORTS HB 727 WITH AMENDMENTS**. The bill would make broad and historic investments in Maryland's State Parks to improve service and accessibility. Among the funding changes in HB 727 is an alteration to repayment of local-side park funding – **MACo urges an amendment to remedy a worrisome diversion of these funds, and to expand on collaborative elements already in the bill.**

State parks are a proven asset in growing healthy communities. They complement the various county park systems, providing leisure space, recognition and reflection of historical events, and tools for economic development. Active and healthy spaces add to a high quality of life for Marylanders.

During the great recession, several areas of state government were forced to make drastic cuts to their operating budgets. One major change was a diversion of funds away from local Program Open Space to help support state parks. Fast forward to the global pandemic, where demand for parks surged, and this unwise short-term solution has been exposed as a poor long-term policy. While HB 727 proposes a wholesale realignment of park funding and payback, the window is wide open to remedy this weak link in park support. **Amendments could stabilize and enhance state parks funding from the General Fund, and still reinstate the traditional local one-half share of Program Open Space.**

Under HB 727, in establishing the Freedman's State Historical Park, the State will be undertaking an innovative partnership model first implemented between federal and state parks. Counties urge that this provision be expanded to encourage more partnership parks, particularly in those few counties still lacking a state park, or where underserved populations can be more effectively reached.

Sections 9-207 and 9-503 of HB 727 draw particular concern for counties, especially starting on page 27. These sections would establish new and far-reaching worker's compensation presumptions for various classes of county parks employees. MACo has concerns with both the presumption and how germane this section is to the broader bill. According to the fiscal note:

"...local government expenditures increase, potentially significantly beginning in fiscal 2023 to pay for workers' compensation benefits, due to the bill's expansion of the State's occupational disease presumptions (provision 11), to the extent local government employees qualify as park services associates, forest rangers, park rangers, or wildlife rangers."

The financial implications of the presumption set by HB 727 would be significant for local governments. Not only would HB 727 include a diagnosis of Lyme disease, heart disease, hypertension, or lung disease as a presumed occupational disease, but it would also include leukemia or prostate, rectal, throat, multiple myeloma, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, brain, testicular, bladder, kidney or renal cell, or breast cancer that is caused by contact with a toxic substance that the individual has encountered as a direct result of their work. Additionally, these conditions may include indefinite or co-diagnoses that would also be covered as workers' compensation under HB 727. While the Commission whose work evolved into this legislation addressed a variety of staffing concerns, they surely have not fully explored the medical and legal ramifications of such broad changes.

MACo urges the committee to remove these provisions of the bill, and if suitable, to ask the Joint Committee on Pensions to study their State and local long-term fiscal and administrative costs.

HB 727 makes sensible investments in the state parks system and its next steps. Amidst these elements, amendments to the local funding and park partnerships could make a productive bill better, as part of a comprehensive approach to public recreation across Maryland. Accordingly, MACo urges the Committee to issue a **FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS** report for HB 727.
