



Larry Hogan, Governor
Boyd K. Rutherford, Lt. Governor
Jeannie Haddaway-Riccio, Secretary
Allan Fisher, Deputy Secretary

Bill Number: House Bill 788

Short Title: State and Local Parks – Child Safe Zone Program – Establishment (Equitable Access to Safe Parks Act)

Department's Position: Letter of Information

Explanation of Department's Position

The Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) provides the following information on HB 788.

The bill establishes a “Child Safe Zone” Program in DNR that seeks to (1) improve and enhance public safety at state and local parks; (2) install signage identifying parks as Child Safe Zones; and (3) facilitate collaboration with local jurisdictions. A Child Safe Zone designation includes the area surrounding the park, within 50 feet of the park’s boundaries. DNR must communicate the identification of state parks as Child Safe Zones to the public in its marketing materials. The bill establishes a Child Safe Zone Fund in DNR to provide funding for capital and operating expenses associated with enhancing public safety in state and local parks. At least \$1 million must be included in the FY24 budget bill for the fund.

The bill appears to apply broadly, making all 141,000 acres of State Parks land a Child Safe Zone. The Maryland Park Service would be required to post extensive signage, implement new marketing efforts, and manage a grant program for local governments. Furthermore, the bill could result in additional responsibilities for the Natural Resources Police.

Maryland’s 141,000 acres of State Park land, unlike county/city parks, is largely located in rural areas and does not have the intense recreation uses (ball fields and large playgrounds) in neighborhood settings. **Making all State Park land a Child Safe Zone would be problematic.** There are many inherent risks on natural and/or undeveloped state park lands (i.e., waterfalls, cliffs, vast forested tracts, wildlife, etc.) and developed state park lands (i.e. roads, agricultural equipment, stoves, off-road vehicles, etc.). Furthermore, the bill creates some level of expectation for increased public safety within a Child Safe Zone; however, the level of expectation is not defined in the bill. The impact on DNR’s liability is not clear. Finally, while the bill extends a Child Safety Zone to a 50-foot area surrounding the park’s boundaries, DNR has no jurisdiction over private property and thus cannot enter or implement safety efforts in those areas.

For any additional information, please contact our Legislative and Constituent Services Director, Bunky Luffman.

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