



Wednesday, February 23, 2022

HB 727 “Natural Resources – Maryland Park Service and State Parks – Alterations (Great Maryland Outdoors Act)”

Position: Favorable

TO: Kumar Barve, Chair of the House Environment and Transportation Committee, Maggie McIntosh, Chair, House Appropriations Committee, and Committee Members

We, the undersigned 13 organizations representing over 100,000 Maryland members and supporters, are writing in support of HB 727/ SB 541, the Great Maryland Outdoors Act, which delivers a needed infusion of funding for the state parks so vital to Maryland. This bill will provide better parks and recreation experiences for Marylanders by increasing the number of parks, park amenities, and park employees; improving transportation options to parks; creating a strategic planning process to direct increased funding; mitigating climate change through green infrastructure; and improving park equity.

Founded on research provided by the State Parks Investment Commission led by former Governor Glendenning, this bill is built on sound planning and the expressed needs of constituents. Several features of the bill would provide an organizational upgrade, including establishing a Parks and Recreation Commission to provide ongoing support and oversight of the Maryland Park Service. Effective use of state monies would be promoted by data collection, tracking, and evaluation of programs over time that are proposed by this legislation. The comprehensive strategic plan will help the programs to adjust over time to new challenges. Upgrades to online access to information about park availability and amenities available will also be beneficial.

The bill also directly addresses overcrowding and access issues. The funding for acquisition of land for new parks in underserved areas, for more beach access, and for more historical parks will help alleviate the need for more outdoors activity options. The plan to survey, track, and fund park infrastructure, critical maintenance needs, and historical and cultural resources will ameliorate these areas. The funds to provide increased access to recreational bodies of water will increase aquatic opportunities statewide.

Another valued component of the Great Maryland Outdoors Act is the funding of green infrastructure improvements to mitigate climate change. The strengthening of natural systems by using tools such as forest and buffer preservation, support for natural wetlands, and stormwater infrastructure such as rain gardens, permeable surfaces, and native plants should contribute to the long-term health of the parks and all of Maryland.

The bill proposes increased agency collaboration to promote transportation options and increased public access through improved bike trails and walkability measures. This would be of benefit to anyone visiting a park. The increase in the number of employees by 100 and improved salary equity and benefits for park employees should lead to fewer closures and less crowding.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of this bill is the increased access to parks everyone will have in Maryland. The adoption of Universal Design principles will help establish more access to facilities for people with disabilities and seniors. The use of a Park Equity Mapping Tool will promote the placement of new parks in locations where the population and park distribution merit them. The establishment of the Freedman's State Historical Park will share an untold part of Maryland history.

The Great Maryland Outdoors Act has a whole-system approach to improving our park system. It will bring jobs and other economic benefits across the state. Its package of improvements promises broadly shared benefits for Marylanders. We strongly urge a favorable report for this bill.

Sincerely,

Sierra Club Maryland Chapter, Rosa Hance, Chair

Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Robin Clark, Staff Attorney

Audubon Mid-Atlantic, David Curson, Director of Bird Conservation

Maryland Campaign for the Environmental Human Rights Amendment, Nina Cardin, Director

Chesapeake Climate Action Network Action Fund, Victoria Venable, Maryland Director

Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake, Jodi Rose, Executive Director

Prince George's Audubon Society, Ken Cohen, President

Indivisible Howard County, Richard Deutschmann

Safe Skies Maryland, Mark Southerland, Legislative Director

Maryland Legislative Coalition, Monica O'Connor

The Nature Conservancy Maryland/DC Chapter

Maryland Ornithological Society, Kurt Schwartz, Conservation Chair

WISE Women Indivisible Strong Effective