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April 1, 2024

To: Chair Feldman and members of the Maryland Senate Committee on Education, Energy and the Environment

From: Jim Brown, Policy Director, Audubon Mid-Atlantic

Subject: Favorable Testimony for Maryland HB 1358 – Natural Resources – Establishment of Gwynns Falls State Park – Focus Group, Advisory Committee and Report

Audubon Mid-Atlantic submits this testimony in support of House Bill 1358. Audubon Mid-Atlantic is the regional office of National Audubon Society, representing over 35,000 Marylanders who advocate for the protection of birds and bird habitat. We advance policies to protect both birds and human communities in the face of increasing environmental challenges, habitat loss, pollution, and climate change. We use science and collaboration to work with partner organizations, government agencies, and local communities to protect birds and the places they need to survive now, and into the future. Audubon believes HB 1358 will bring a much-needed investment in resources through the “**partnership park approach**” to one of the largest urban parks in the country, right here in Baltimore. Gwynns Falls Leakin Park and Baltimore deserve this important investment. As one of the largest urban forests in the country, Leakin Park is an important bird area critical to hemispheric bird migration, and it is a significant landmark to the people of Baltimore.

Establishing an advisory committee to establish State support for the park will allow the park to reach its full potential, providing benefits to local communities, the environment, and the hundreds of species of resident and migratory birds which call the park home. The partnership park approach outlined in HB 1358 is an innovative tool that the State of Maryland has available to make more parks more accessible to all Marylanders. Baltimore city is one of only two jurisdictions in the state to not have a state park. HB 1358 will address this inequity. Gwynns Falls Leakin Park presents an opportunity for the state of Maryland, Baltimore City, and the communities around the park to benefit from the additional management, administrative and civic resources of a partnership park. In short, a state partnership park will elevate this important cultural and environmental gem as a catalyst for equitable community development and natural resource management in West Baltimore.

While the park has important historical and contemporary cultural significance, it is also home to iconic Baltimore birds such as the Baltimore Oriole and Raven. It is vital to the survival of over two hundred other resident and migratory bird species which either live in the park year-round or use it as breeding and feeding grounds on their migratory journeys. It is important habitat to eastern wood thrushes, black and white warblers, great blue herons, and wood ducks. Science tells us birds are in decline due to habitat loss and climate change. 1/3 of all Maryland bird species experienced significant population declines in the past 50 years. Through increased management and investment in the important bird habitat of Gwynns Falls Leakin Park, the state of Maryland will bend the bird curve back by investing in our important green infrastructure which has co-benefits for both birds and human communities.

Gwynns Falls Leakin Park not only provides vital habitat for Maryland birds, but it is also an important part of our ecosystem. This 1100 acre forest also acts as the lungs of Baltimore city, cleaning our air and water. The park filters large amounts of water that enter the Chesapeake Bay. It acts as the lungs of Baltimore, helping to clean our air and reduce the impacts of urban heat island effect. Urban parks are also where democracy happens. They are the places that people from diverse backgrounds come together to interact with each other, and with their public spaces. A state park partnership will create more access to the natural and cultural history in the park, and in return engage more Baltimore residents in environmental and civic issues.

HB 1358 will continue to hold Maryland up as a leader in ecosystem preservation, equitable public access to parks, and the protection of birds now and in the future. A State Park Partnership will enhance and protect these shared public resources and make them more accessible to Baltimoreans and Marylanders from near and far – highlighting the diverse landscapes and neighborhoods of West Baltimore and their important role in Maryland’s history.

Audubon Mid-Atlantic respectfully urges a favorable review of this legislation. We look forward to partnering with Baltimore City and the State of Maryland to bring Gwynns Falls Leakin Park and the people of Baltimore the resources they deserve to support vibrant communities with access to a world class urban park.

Thank You,

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