

Tuesday, April 2, 2024

TO: Brian Feldman, Chair of the Senate Education, Energy, and Environment Committee, and Committee Members

FROM: Michelle Dietz, The Nature Conservancy, Director of Government Relations; Cait Kerr, The Nature Conservancy, State Policy Manager

POSITION: Support HB 1358 Natural Resources - Gwynns Falls State Park - Focus Group, Advisory Committee, and Report

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supports HB 1358 offered by Delegate Ruff. HB 1358 seeks to establish an advisory committee and focus group to discuss and make recommendations for a Gwynns Falls State Park partnership park between the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the City of Baltimore. Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park is considered one of the largest urban forests on the East Coast. Over the past few decades, this natural resource has faced challenges including underfunding and urban development expansion. The volunteer-run nonprofit Friends of Gwynns Falls does what they can to maintain healthy habitat, but a park of this size and importance requires dedicated funding and resources for maintenance and operations. By ultimately designating this vitally important landscape in Baltimore as a state park, Gwynns Falls would receive the necessary resources and budgeting to maintain a healthy urban park environment and continue to provide visitors with access to nature, recreation, and environmental learning opportunities.

HB 1358 will establish a stakeholder advisory committee to provide guidance on creating and managing Gwynns Falls State Park. Prior to the park's establishment, DNR will host a focus group meeting with community members and interested parties to identify a list of priority needs and costs for park operations and improvement. Carrie Murray Nature Center, which is located within the city park and owned by Baltimore City, currently supports environmental education and community engagement programming for Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park and the surrounding neighborhoods. Many community residents have discovered the park through the Nature Center's seasonal, family-friendly programming. As a part of the potential State Park, the Carrie Murray Nature Center would advance the state's goal for providing accessible outdoor, nature-based recreation and learning opportunities through current programming, with the possibility to expand and reach additional Baltimore residents.

In Maryland, we are fortunate to have so many open and natural spaces from Western Maryland to our coastal communities. State parks offer residents access to nature, with opportunities for recreation such as hiking and bird watching, as well as opportunities for education and environmental stewardship. Urban parks are vital to expanding access to outdoor spaces and provide significant physical and mental health benefits, including stress recovery and improved well-being.

The Nature Conservancy thanks Delegate Ruff for introducing HB 1358, which will help to protect Maryland's natural places and increase Marylanders' nature-based recreation and education opportunities by laying the groundwork for a future designation of Gwynns Falls State Park.

Therefore, we urge a favorable report on HB 1358.