

HB1358.Audubon.EEE.pdf

Uploaded by: Jim Brown

Position: FAV



Maryland Office
2901 E. Baltimore St
Baltimore, MD 21214

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,

Jim Brown
Policy Director
Audubon Mid-Atlantic
Jim.brown@audubon.org

HB 1358 - CBF - FAV - EEE.pdf

Uploaded by: Matt Stegman

Position: FAV



CHESAPEAKE BAY FOUNDATION

Environmental Protection and Restoration
Environmental Education

House Bill 1358

Natural Resources - Gwynns Falls State Park - Focus Group, Advisory Committee, and Report

Date: April 2, 2024

Position: **Favorable**

To: Education, Energy, and the
Environment Committee

From: Julieta Rodrigo
Urban & Community Resilience Manager

Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF) **SUPPORTS** HB 1358 which requires the Department of Natural Resources and Baltimore City government to jointly engage in a stakeholder-driven process to map out the priority needs and associated costs related to establishment of a Gwynns Falls State Park.

Parks Increase the Health of the Chesapeake Bay Ecosystem and its Residents:

The preservation and stewardship of parks and green spaces furthers the Chesapeake Bay restoration effort. Through their forests and streams, parks provide critical habitats for local wildlife species and ecosystem services like carbon sequestration, nitrogen removal, stormwater mitigation, and flood prevention.¹ Miles of trails and acres of lush areas provide recreational activities and health benefits for residents of all ages, such as increased physical activity, mental wellbeing, and improved air quality.² Parks are also important to fostering community cohesion and local pride, which are necessary components of increasing resilience in a changing climate.

HB 1358 Is Consistent With State's Commitment to Environmental Justice and Equitable Access:

In June 2022, our state enacted the Great Maryland Outdoors Act to address infrastructure, capacity, and accessibility needs within the Maryland Park Service and State parks³, which were made evident through increased park visitation during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ HB 1358 is one way to continue to deliver on that legislative commitment. In addition, Governor Moore has pledged to further environmental justice and climate resilience⁵, and equitable access to nature is a key component of Maryland's healthy future.

CBF urges the Committee's FAVORABLE report on HB 1358.

For more information, please contact Matt Stegman, Maryland Staff Attorney, at mstegman@cbf.org.

¹ "Ecosystem Services." *Maryland Department of Natural Resources*, dnr.maryland.gov/ccs/Pages/Ecosystem-Services.aspx. Accessed 29 Feb. 2024.

² "Park Equity." *Maryland Department of Natural Resources*, dnr.maryland.gov/Pages/ParkEquity.aspx. Accessed 29 Feb. 2024.

³ "Legislation - SB0541. Natural Resources - Maryland Park Service and State Parks - Alterations (Great Maryland Outdoors Act)." *Maryland General Assembly*, mgaleg.maryland.gov/mgawebsite/Legislation/Details/sb0541?ys=2022RS. Accessed 29 Feb. 2024.

⁴ Shwe, Elizabeth. "'Great Maryland Outdoors Act' Aims to Bolster State Park System as Demand Grows." *Maryland Matters*, 24 Jan. 2022, www.marylandmatters.org/2022/01/24/great-maryland-outdoors-act-aims-to-bolster-state-park-system-as-demand-grows/.

⁵ WEAA. "Maryland Gov. Wes Moore Unveils \$90m for Environmental Initiatives." *WEAA*, 16 Feb. 2024, www.weaa.org/local-news/2024-02-16/maryland-gov-wes-moore-unveils-90m-for-environmental-initiatives.

Maryland Office • Philip Merrill Environmental Center • 6 Herndon Avenue • Annapolis • Maryland • 21403

HB 1358 Natural Resources - Gwynns Falls State Par

Uploaded by: Michelle Dietz

Position: FAV

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 Gwynn 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 Gwynn 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.