

Members of the Committee,

Thank you for your consideration of HB 1358 and review of my testimony. I live in Windsor Hills along the northeastern boundary of Leakin Park and I am in support of this proposal to establish Gwynns Falls State Park.

As a hiker, biker, and birder, I have taken advantage of many of the greenspaces and parks in our region and beyond, and having a trailhead 5 minutes from my doorway was a major draw when we moved across the city to our current home. Besides my own personal interests, health and ecological benefits of greenspace, such as stress and pollution reduction, are well documented and benefit everyone in the community. Think about how incredible it is, that for over 100 years, in an industrial city, this 1200 acre patch of greenspace has managed to remain intact, escaping commercial development, highway and road expansions, and conversion to housing. We're the only city in the northeast that can boast to have such a significant urban forest.

Unfortunately, keeping 1200 acres "intact" has at times been the bare minimum given to this park. Like a lot of West Baltimore, Gwynns Falls Leakin Park has suffered from decades of disinvestment and lack of crucial maintenance, and let's be honest, we all know the notoriety that the park has for illicit activities. Last fall a 71 year old member of the community was abducted and sexually assaulted while walking the trails in the park. Issues leading up to this assault are twofold: 1) without a permanent staff of rangers, the assailant had been able to set up an encampment in the park that he had been living at for months prior to the assault and 2) safety concerns and disinvestment keep people away from the park, leaving those of us who use the park isolated and vulnerable. I hike the park alone, that attack this fall could have happened to me.

Baltimore City Rec and Parks is stretched thin and simply does not have the budget to devote the capital and staff needed to address the unique needs of an urban forest park on top of the 250 park units they also maintain. The Great Maryland Outdoors Act has just recently made this new type of partnership possible and Program Open Space already has money allocated for projects like this one. We just need your support to move this initiative forward so that Gwynns Falls Leakin Park can reach it's full potential.

Audra Agnelly

Windsor Hills (21216)