

March 6, 2024

Delegate Marc Korman
Maryland House of Delegates
251 Taylor House Office Building
6 Bladen Street
Annapolis, MD 21401

Delegate Regina T. Boyce
Maryland House of Delegates
251 Taylor House Office Building
6 Bladen Street
Annapolis, MD 21401

Dear Delegates Korman, Boyce and members of the House Environment & Transportation Committee:

On behalf of Chesapeake Conservancy, I write to urge your support for the HB1358 - Natural Resources - Establishment of Gwynns Falls State Park sponsored by Delegate Ruff and to move this bill favorably from committee.

Chesapeake Conservancy's mission is to conserve and restore the natural and cultural resources of the Chesapeake Bay watershed for the enjoyment, education and inspiration of this and future generations. We use technology to enhance the pace and quality of conservation, and we help build parks, trails and public access sites.

Chesapeake Conservancy serves as co-chair of the Partners for Open Space, and we advocate strongly for continued and full funding of Program Open Space and the conservation programs funded through the real estate transfer tax that helps create or expand parks all throughout Maryland.

Chesapeake Conservancy has helped protect and expand some of the Maryland's most cherished landmarks like the City of Annapolis' Elktonia-Carr's Beach Heritage Park, a new park where the Chesapeake's Black history and culture will be shared with this and future generations; Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, one of the most important waterfowl refuges on the East Coast; Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Historical Park, the first national park in honor of an African American woman; Malls Bay - Potomac River National Marine Sanctuary, an 18-square mile underwater park and the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail, the first national water trail and many others public places. We are currently advocating for the proposed National Wildlife Refuge Lands in Southern Maryland in Prince George's, Anne Arundel, Calvert, Charles and St. Mary's counties.

Baltimore — home to 576,000 Marylanders — is worthy of inclusion in the state of Maryland's Park System. A state park at Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park would also serve approximately one million people from nearby Baltimore County Howard and Anne Arundel counties and visitors to the area.

The experiences that we have at our state parks in Maryland stick with us for our entire lives. In fact, growing up in the Bronx, I can credit my time at a New Hampshire summer camp for inspiring my career in conservation.

During the global pandemic, more people turned to nature for solace and recreation, strengthening their relationship with the great outdoors and inspiring others to join them. In July 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 social distancing protocols, Chesapeake Conservancy conducted a study on park mobility during COVID-19. Our study found that visits to Baltimore parks had increased by 86.97% during that time frame.

Since March 2020, many people have learned to love spending time in parks, sometimes for the first time in their lives. We don't want them to stop. It is proven that spending time in nature is good for our physical health and mental well-being. Many physicians are writing prescriptions for nature for their patients. As Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health's Heather Eliassen, a professor of nutrition and epidemiology, recently reported, "Exposure to green space has been linked to better sleep, lower blood pressure, and reduced risk of chronic disease—likely because people who spend more time in green spaces also report higher levels of exercise."

At Chesapeake Conservancy, we talk a lot about "21st-century parks," collections of parks and other public lands that are formally connected through partnerships. Bringing the resources of Maryland's Park Service to Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park would help address generations of racist policies affecting West Baltimore, provide state maintenance and services for parkland for diverse communities, boost the local economy and ensure these 1,000 acres become an outdoor recreation gym and gem for all Marylanders to visit.

Parks can thrive through partnerships. People thrive in parks. It is time for the residents and visitors of Baltimore to have the resources that a state park provides with the creation of Gwynns Falls State Park through a cooperative agreement with the City of Baltimore and supported by volunteers with the support of the Friends of Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park.

Thank you for considering my testimony; I urge your support for HB1358.

Mark Conway
Executive Vice President, External Affairs
Chesapeake Conservancy