



Committee: Environment & Transportation
Testimony on: HB 959 – Establishment of Gwynns Falls State Park
Position: Favorable
Hearing Date: February 25, 2026

Chair and Members of the Environment and Transportation Committee:

My name is **Pickett Slater Harrington**, and I serve as the Executive Director of the **Friends of Gwynns Falls Leakin Park (FOGFLP)**, the nonprofit partner dedicated to preserving, enhancing, and activating Gwynns Falls Leakin Park through community engagement, equitable access, and sustained stewardship.

I respectfully submit this testimony in strong support of **House Bill 959 – Establishment of Gwynns Falls State Park**.

Gwynns Falls Leakin Park is one of the largest urban forest parks on the East Coast. It includes hundreds of acres of mature forest, miles of trails, vital tributaries to the Gwynns Falls watershed, and historic assets such as Winans Meadow and Eagle Drive. It is a natural treasure in the heart of Baltimore yet Baltimore remains one of the only jurisdictions in Maryland without a State Park.

HB 959 would establish **Baltimore's first State Park** through a City–State partnership model that provides dedicated staffing, long-term stewardship, and coordinated investment. A State Park designation is not symbolic, it brings operational capacity, accountability, and sustained care.

This bill is also about community and economic development. Research consistently demonstrates that well-managed parks increase nearby property values, support small businesses, generate tourism spending, and create jobs in the outdoor recreation sector. According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, outdoor recreation contributes over \$1 trillion annually to the national economy. For West Baltimore neighborhoods surrounding the park, this investment signals long-term commitment, stability, and opportunity.

HB 959 also advances equity. Gwynns Falls sits adjacent to historically Black and underinvested communities. This legislation ensures that Baltimore residents receive the same level of park care, safety presence, and programming that communities near other Maryland State Parks enjoy.

Finally, the bill includes funding to develop a comprehensive park master plan. This modest investment will shape the park's future for generations aligning conservation, recreation, historic preservation, and safety improvements through a community-informed vision.

House Bill 959 is about stewardship, equity, and civic pride. Great cities, and great states, invest in great parks. Baltimore deserves a State Park.

On behalf of Friends of Gwynns Falls Leakin Park and the communities we serve, I respectfully urge a favorable report on HB 959.

Respectfully submitted,

Pickett Slater Harrington

Executive Director

Friends of Gwynns Falls Leakin Park

Sources

- U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, *Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account*
- National Recreation and Park Association, *Economic Impact of Parks*
- Trust for Public Land, *The Economic Benefits of Parks and Open Space*