

Committee: Environment and Transportation

Testimony on: HB959 Natural Resources - Establishment of Gwynns Falls State Park

Position: Support

Hearing Date: February 25, 2026

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club strongly supports HB959 to designate Gwynns Falls Park as a State park to be managed in partnership with the City of Baltimore. We expect that a strengthened State-City partnership, as envisioned by HB959, would over time support investments in land stewardship, facilities, safety, and programs at the park and yield an asset of outstanding value to residents of the City and the entire State.

Since its founding with the creation of the National Park movement, Sierra Club has advocated for parkland to preserve habitat for native plants and wildlife, and to facilitate people's enjoyment of nature. In studies throughout the world, spending time in nature has been proven to benefit mental and physical health.¹ Exposure to nature improves cognitive function, brain activity, blood pressure, mental health, and sleep and helps prevent cardiovascular disease.² A review of multiple studies found "positive effects of nature exposure on immunological health parameters; such as anti-inflammatory, anti-allergic, anti-asthmatic effects."³

Gwynns Falls extends over more than 1,200 contiguous acres within Baltimore that would be impossible to create today. A hundred years ago this year, it was envisioned by the nationally acclaimed Olmsted Brothers as a "stream valley park" to protect Baltimore's watershed from over development, reduce damaging stormwater, protect water quality, and offer residents a vital connection to nature. While Gwynns Falls Park in its current state might be described as a diamond in the rough, it could be a crown jewel for the city much like New York's Central Park, San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, and Washington, D.C.'s Rock Creek Park. These large iconic parks anchor their cities with access to nature, beauty, and activities to delight residents and appeal to tourists.

Revitalizing Gwynns Falls Park by moving it into Maryland's state parks system is not just a park project—it can serve as a strategic catalyst for urban redevelopment and economic growth. Despite budgetary pressures, we must invest in Baltimore, our state's largest city to attract businesses and residents to Maryland and to improve our overall economy. Investing in this park can help encourage redevelopment and revitalization of the 18 surrounding communities and the city overall. A recent study of economic impacts found that even small

¹ Topol, Eric. *Super Agers: An Evidence-Based Approach to Longevity*, 2025, pp. 257-259.

² Jimenez MP, et al., Associations between Nature Exposure and Health: A Review of the Evidence. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2021 Apr 30;18(9):4790. DOI: 10.3390/ijerph18094790. See also,

³ Anderson, Liisa, et al, Nature Exposure and Its Effects on Immune System Functioning: A Systematic Review, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 3 Feb, 2021 DOI: [10.3390/ijerph18041416](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18041416)

urban parks led to approximately four percent higher employment and five percent higher incomes in the surrounding area within four years after they opened.⁴

While Maryland boasts more than 70 state parks and natural areas, **only Baltimore City and Wicomico County have none.**⁵ This is an oversight that should be remedied. In 2023, the General Assembly passed the Greenspace Equity Act to address the lack of open spaces in Maryland's overburdened communities and to promote public health and livability statewide. Designating Gwynn Falls Park as part of the State Park system would go a long way to help address the oversights of the past and provide a boost to Baltimore.

For these reasons, we request a favorable report on HB959.

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⁴ Andrea Szabó, Gergely Ujhelyi, National parks and economic development, *Journal of Public Economics*, Volume 232, 2024, 105073, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2024.105073>

⁵ Maryland Government <https://msa.maryland.gov/msa/mdmanual/01glance/html/parks.html>