



Wes Moore, Governor
Aruna Miller, Lt. Governor
Josh Kurtz, Secretary
David Goshorn, Deputy Secretary

February 25, 2026

BILL NUMBER: HOUSE BILL 959 - FIRST READER

SHORT TITLE: NATURAL RESOURCES - ESTABLISHMENT OF GWYNNNS FALLS STATE PARK

DEPARTMENT'S POSITION: SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS

EXPLANATION OF DEPARTMENT'S POSITION

HB 959 establishes Gwynns Falls State Park as a partnership park between the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and Baltimore City. While the Department is in favor of establishing this partnership park based on the findings and recommendations outlined in the Gwynns Falls State Park Report, we have some concerns regarding certain provisions within the bill that go beyond what was in the final report.

The Department does not currently utilize advisory committees for individual parks. Instead, DNR meets regularly with our Parks and Recreation Commission to share updates, gain insights, and hear feedback from the diverse group of stakeholders. This holistic approach to an advisory framework allows the department to take lessons learned from individual parks and apply them system-wide.

Additionally, the department is currently undertaking a multi-year effort to create greater consistency across our "Friends of" groups throughout the system, which has included dozens of individual meetings and the implementation of use agreements for each "Friends of" organization. Having a codified role for the Gwynn Falls Leakin Park Friends group would be inconsistent with the department's current policies and would run counter to our efforts to create a more uniform system.

The legislation also specifically prohibits the Department from applying an entrance fee at Gwynns Falls State Park. While DNR appreciates the need to ensure equitable access to all parks within the state park system, entrance fees are a critical tool used by the department to help subsidize park operations. Removing this discretion regarding entrance fees reduces the Department's ability to adequately fund this new partnership park and raises concerns over the precedent it may set or implications for other parks.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

HB 1358 required the Department to work with the City of Baltimore and the Gwynns Falls State Park Advisory Committee to look into the creation of a partnership park within Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park property. DNR has coordinated extensively with Baltimore City's Department of Recreation and

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Parks and the Mayor's office to gather community feedback. Such outreach included multiple focus group events, meetings with the Stakeholder Advisory Committee (SAC), a site tour of the park with SAC and local delegation members, and a public survey that received over 400 responses. A final report was published in December of 2025 with recommendations informed by these outreach efforts.

The report specifically mentioned revenue capture methods (e.g., entrance fees) as a necessary means of long-term funding for this partnership park. Entrance Fees are a tool deployed across the Maryland State Park System to help subsidize operational costs and control overcrowding at our most popular parks.

BILL EXPLANATION

This bill would require the Department of Natural Resources to establish Gwynns Falls State Park as a partnership park between the Department and Baltimore City. It requires the Governor to include \$2,880,354 in the budget for FY28 for the establishment of the Park and an additional appropriation of \$280,000 to cover the cost of the park's master plan. The bill also prohibits the Department from charging an entrance fee and creates permanent roles for the Gwynn Falls Leakin Park Friends group and the Stakeholder Advisory Committee.