

HB959 -Establishment of Gwynns Falls State Park -

Uploaded by: barbara johnson

Position: FAV



February 23, 2026

**Natural Resources - Establishment of Gwynns Falls State Park (HB959)
Position: FAVORABLE**

Dear Chair Korman, Vice Chair Guyton, and honorable members of the House Environment and Transportation Committee:

Blue Water Baltimore is a local nonprofit organization with a mission to protect and restore the quality of Baltimore's rivers, streams, and Harbor to foster a healthy environment, a strong economy, and thriving communities. **On behalf of Blue Water Baltimore, I write to express our strong support for HB 959 – Establishment of Gwynns Falls State Park .**

Blue Water Baltimore, home of the Baltimore Harbor Waterkeeper, is part of the global Waterkeeper Alliance that is composed of over 300 watchdog organizations with a mission to protect and restore waterways all over the world. Our licensed Waterkeeper jurisdiction includes the entirety of the Patapsco and Back River watersheds, which means that Blue Water Baltimore is uniquely positioned among environmental NGOs in the region to focus on the health and prosperity of these waterways, and that of the people who live, work, and recreate around them.

Gwynns Falls Leakin Park is one of the largest urban woodland parks in North America. At more than 1,200 acres, it represents an extraordinary natural, historical, and cultural asset, not only for Baltimore City residents, but for all Marylanders.

Blue Water Baltimore has been monitoring water quality in the Baltimore region for the past fifteen years, and we have seen the impact of public attention and care on the ecosystem. Our monitoring data from Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park tell us that stormwater, trash, and sewage pollution are major concerns in the park; but long-term trends are also telling us that **we have the power to heal the stream by investing in the upland strategies to protect our local waterways.**

We also know that **people care about and steward what they love**; the opportunity to raise the profile of this gem of the State would have benefits "downstream" in many ways. There is already evidence of the value of Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park in the numerous volunteers and partners who have been working for decades to raise its profile and protect its assets. The park is an invaluable resource and living classroom that we have used to educate the community about the impact of stormwater on water quality. We have done this through experiential programming such as stream clean ups, sewage hunting expeditions, water bug surveys, and more.

Despite its immense ecological and recreational value, Leakin Park has long suffered from underinvestment, limited state-level visibility, and a public perception shaped more by stigma

919 West 34th St., P.O. Box 4863 • Baltimore, MD 21211 • www.BlueWaterBaltimore.org



than by its true character. Designating the park as a Maryland State Park would bring transformative benefits:

1. Environmental Stewardship and Protection

State park designation would ensure stronger long-term conservation of forests, waterways, and wildlife habitats within the Gwynns Falls watershed. Increased state resources could support invasive species management, trail restoration, and environmental education programs.

2. Public Safety and Infrastructure Improvements

With Maryland Park Service oversight, the park could benefit from improved signage, trail maintenance, ranger presence, and visitor amenities. These enhancements would increase public safety and accessibility while encouraging greater community use.

3. Economic and Community Revitalization

As a state park, Leakin Park could become a regional destination for hiking, biking, birdwatching, and heritage tourism. Increased visitation would support nearby neighborhoods and small businesses while fostering positive engagement with one of Baltimore's most significant green spaces.

4. Equity in Access to Nature

Baltimore City residents deserve the same level of access to well-funded, high-quality natural spaces that communities across Maryland enjoy. Elevating Leakin Park to state park status would demonstrate Maryland's commitment to environmental equity and urban investment.

Leakin Park is not simply open land; it is a living ecosystem, a historic landscape, and a place of renewal for thousands of residents. With thoughtful planning and state partnership, it can become a flagship example of urban conservation done right.

For the reasons outlined above, we respectfully ask that you support this effort and return a favorable report on HB959.

Sincerely,

Barbara Johnson
Sr. Manager of Water Protection & Community Advocacy
Blue Water Baltimore
bjohnson@bluewaterbaltimore.org

Speech for Gwynns Falls State Park.pdf

Uploaded by: Gale Fletcher

Position: FAV

Good afternoon, Chairman Korman and Members of the Committee. My name is Gale Fletcher and I am Vice President of the Hunting Ridge Neighborhood Association, one of the communities surrounding Gwynns Falls Leakin Park. I am also among the five community members on the Stateholder's Committee that offered a community vision for a partnership park.

The Stakeholder Committee rallied more than 500 community members through focus group meetings and surveys to share their ideas, and hopes for a partnership park.

So today, I return to you not just with a request, but with evidence of meaningful community engagement and broad public support. The community has stated loud and clear that they want a park with dedicated staff, well-maintained trails, enhanced amenities, and expanded programming that highlights the distinctive natural, historical, and cultural features of this unique jewel in Baltimore City. And we want this momentum to continue by funding the park's masterplan in FY 2027.

With clear priorities and stronger governance, the park can live up to its potential as a safe, healthy space that uplifts, rather than depresses the many working -class neighborhoods that surround it. This is more than a park designation. It is an investment in equity, stewardship, safety, and pride for the residents who live alongside and cherish this remarkable space.

We respectfully ask that you vote in favor of House Bill 959 with funding for the park masterplan starting FY 2027.

HB959 Support Letter.pdf

Uploaded by: Jasmine Brown

Position: FAV



HOPE HARBOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

Together for a Better Tomorrow

4711 Edmondson Ave.
Baltimore, MD 21229

410.945.7263 📞 27-3526620 EIN
info@hopeharborbaltimore.org ✉️
www.hopeharborbaltimore.org 🌐

HB959 Written Testimony | Jasmine Brown

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

Dear Members of the Maryland General Assembly,

On behalf of Hope Harbor Community Development Corporation, I am writing to express our **strong support for House Bill 959 – Establishment of Gwynns Falls State Park**. As an organization dedicated to strengthening neighborhoods, expanding access to opportunity, and improving quality of life for the residents of the Edmondson Corridor in West Baltimore, we view this legislation as a transformative step toward environmental justice, community health, and long-term economic vitality.

By establishing Gwynns Falls as a state park, Maryland has the opportunity to spark a new era of inclusive growth and neighborhood revitalization in West Baltimore. State-level research demonstrates that parks are powerful economic catalysts; according to the National Recreation and Park Association's Economic Impact of Local Parks report, local park and recreation agencies generated billions in economic activity across states. Top states such as California, Florida, Texas, and New York each see \$10–21 billion in annual economic impact from park operations and capital spending, including:

- Direct spending by park agencies
- Indirect and induced spending in the local/surrounding economy
- Visitor spending, which includes tourism-related dollars
- Resulting tax revenue at the state and local levels

Maryland's own local park systems contribute to this national pattern of measurable economic return, supporting jobs, strengthening local business ecosystems, and increasing municipal tax bases through higher property values and visitor spending. The Maryland Park Service's earlier State Parks Economic Impact Study estimated that Maryland state parks alone contributed approximately \$650 million annually to Maryland's economy. These findings reinforce what decades of urban planning research has shown — that well-maintained parks reliably increase surrounding property values, stimulate local commerce, and expand long-term tax revenue for cities and states.

Gwynns Falls has the potential to deliver economic and community benefits on a scale comparable to — and in some ways greater than — Maryland's most successful state parks. Gwynns Falls offers an extraordinary 1,216 acre green corridor embedded directly within Baltimore City, placing a major state-managed natural asset within walking distance of tens of thousands of residents who currently lack access to high-quality open space. Unlike Assateague or Sandy Point, which rely heavily on seasonal tourism, Gwynns Falls would serve a dense, year-round urban population while still attracting regional visitors for its historic mill sites, mature forest canopy, stream valley ecosystem, and extensive trail



HOPE HARBOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

Together for a Better Tomorrow

4711 Edmondson Ave.
Baltimore, MD 21229

410.945.7263 ☎ 27-3526620 EIN
info@hopeharborbaltimore.org ✉
www.hopeharborbaltimore.org 🌐

network. Its proximity to major institutions — including Coppin State University, Baltimore City Community College, and multiple public schools — positions it as a uniquely powerful hub for outdoor education, workforce development, and community programming. In short, Gwynns Falls combines the ecological richness of one of the largest urban woodland parks in the United States with the accessibility and daily-use potential of an urban anchor, giving it the capacity to generate sustained economic activity, strengthen neighborhood business corridors, and deliver measurable public health and environmental benefits

With HB 959, Maryland can harness these proven economic dynamics to create a vibrant, accessible state park that uplifts surrounding neighborhoods and contributes to a stronger regional economy. Establishing Gwynns Falls as a state park would:

Promote Environmental Health and Resilience by protecting critical watershed areas that directly impact the health of West Baltimore communities, supporting cleaner air, and improving stormwater management.

Advance Equity and Community Well-Being by expanding access to safe, well-maintained green space for families we serve who have long deserved such a resource. It will create opportunities for recreation, outdoor education, and intergenerational programming, and strengthen community pride and connection through shared public assets.

Catalyze Local Economic Opportunity by attracting visitors and investment to neighborhoods that have historically been excluded from Maryland's tourism and park infrastructure. This patronage will support job creation in a variety of industries, and galvanize economies near the natural resource like the renewed Edmondson Village Shopping Center. All of these forces will encourage thoughtful, community-driven revitalization that aligns with residents' needs and aspirations.

Hope Harbor CDC is committed to supporting the West Baltimore Communities in the Edmondson Corridor, and we believe HB 959 aligns powerfully with that mission. Establishing Gwynns Falls State Park would signal a clear commitment from the State of Maryland to environmental justice, equitable development, and the well-being of Baltimore's residents.

We respectfully urge you to pass House Bill 959 and help bring this vision to life. Thank you for your leadership and for your consideration of this important legislation.

Respectfully submitted,

Jasmine Brown

Jasmine Brown

Executive Director

Hope Harbor Community Development Corporation



References

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Maryland Department of Natural Resources. Office of Outdoor Recreation. *Outdoor Recreation Economic Data*. <https://dnr.maryland.gov/Pages/Outdoor-Recreation.aspx> ([dnr.maryland.gov in Bing](#))

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([bcrp.baltimorecity.gov in Bing](#))

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FOGFLP State Park email.pdf

Uploaded by: Jill Jonnes

Position: FAV

HB959 Written Testimony

To the House Environment & Transportation Committee,

My name is Jill Jonnes and I am a longtime resident of Baltimore City (Keswick Neighborhood) and board member of the Friends of Gwynns Falls Leakin Park. I am writing to urge you to pass this State Park bill – HB959 -- AND provide the tiny sum requested to fund a Master Plan in the coming year. Project Open Space has well over \$100 million in its coffers. We are asking for a minuscule bit of that big sum to advance the establishment of this state park.

As members of this Environment Committee, you well know the economic importance of parks in cities. When well-run and well-funded, parks are drivers of prosperity. In the past ten years, both Lake Roland Park and Cylburn Arboretum – now properly funded and with much larger dedicated staffs -- have become magnets for people and activities. They are half the size of Gwynns Falls and do not house as many attractions. But we all honestly know that many people are fearful of Gwynns Falls Leakin Park because of an old reputation. Unfortunately, that will not change until people see dedicated staff in a well-funded park.

You have a chance to do something historic and very good for Baltimore. I urge to support this bill AND the needed funding for 2026-27.

Sincerely, Jill Jonnes

HB959_Audubon_Fav_ENT.2.25.26.pdf

Uploaded by: Jim Brown

Position: FAV



Maryland Office
2901 E. Baltimore St
Baltimore, MD 21214

February 23, 2026

To: Chairman Korman, Vice Chair Guyton, and members of the Maryland House Committee on Environment and Transportation

From: Jim Brown, Policy Director, Audubon Mid-Atlantic

Subject: Favorable Testimony for Maryland HB 959 – Natural Resources – Establishment of Gwynns Falls State Park

Audubon Mid-Atlantic submits this testimony in support of House Bill 959. Audubon Mid-Atlantic is the regional office of National Audubon Society, representing over 35,000 Marylanders who advocate for the protection of birds and bird habitat. We advance policies to protect both birds and human communities in the face of increasing environmental challenges, habitat loss, pollution, and climate change. Audubon believes HB 959 will bring a much-needed equitable investment to one of the largest urban parks in the country, right here in Baltimore. Gwynns Falls Leakin Park and Baltimore City deserve this important investment. As one of the largest urban forests in the country, Gwynns Falls Leakin Park is an important bird area, critical to hemispheric bird migration, and it is a significant landmark to the people of West Baltimore.

Audubon Mid-Atlantic was proud to serve on the Stakeholder Advisory Group convened by the Maryland Department of Natural Resources and Baltimore City which was formed as a result of 2024's HB 1358 to study a State Partnership Park. State support for the park will allow the park to reach its full potential, providing benefits to local communities, the environment, and the hundreds of species of resident and migratory birds which call the park home. The budget investments outlined in HB 959 will make this park more accessible to all Marylanders. Baltimore city is one of only two jurisdictions in the state to not have a state park. HB 959 addresses this inequity. Gwynns Falls Leakin Park presents an opportunity for the state of Maryland, Baltimore City, and the communities around the park to benefit from the much-needed investment. In short, a state partnership park will elevate this important cultural and environmental gem as a catalyst for equitable community development and natural resource management in West Baltimore.

While the park has important historical and contemporary cultural significance, it is also home to iconic Baltimore birds such as the Baltimore Oriole and Raven. It is vital to the survival of over two hundred resident and migratory bird species which either live in the park year-round or use it as breeding and feeding grounds on their migratory journeys. It is important habitat to eastern wood thrushes, black and white warblers, great blue herons, and wood ducks. Science tells us birds are in decline due to habitat loss and climate change. 1/3 of all Maryland bird species experienced significant population declines in the past 50 years. Through increased management and investment, the important bird habitat of Gwynns Falls Leakin Park, can help reverse this disturbing loss of birds in Maryland.

Gwynns Falls Leakin Park not only provides vital habitat for Maryland birds, but it is also an important part of our ecosystem. This 1100 acre forest acts as the lungs of Baltimore city, cleaning our air and

water. The park filters large amounts of water that enter the Baltimore Harbor and Chesapeake Bay. Urban parks are also where democracy happens. They are the places that people from diverse backgrounds come together to interact with each other, and with their public spaces. Audubon has seen in our urban conservation work in Baltimore and beyond that this type of investment will create more access to the natural and cultural history in the park, and in return engage more Baltimore residents in environmental and civic issues.

The budget investments in HB 959 will continue to hold Maryland up as a leader in ecosystem preservation, equitable public access to parks, and the protection of birds now and in the future. A Gwynns Falls State Park will enhance and protect these shared public resources and make them more accessible to Baltimoreans and Marylanders from near and far – highlighting the diverse landscapes and neighborhoods of West Baltimore and their important role in Maryland’s history.

Audubon Mid-Atlantic respectfully urges a favorable review of this legislation. We look forward to partnering with Baltimore City and the State of Maryland to bring Gwynns Falls State Park and the people of Baltimore the resources they deserve to support vibrant communities with access to a world class state park.

Thank You,

Jim Brown
Policy Director
Audubon Mid-Atlantic

HB 959 - National Aquarium - Support.pdf

Uploaded by: Maggie Ostdahl

Position: FAV



NATIONAL AQUARIUM®

Date: February 25, 2026

Bill: HB 959 - Natural Resources - Establishment of Gwynns Falls State Park

Position: Support

Chair Korman and Members of the Committee:

The National Aquarium respectfully requests a favorable report for HB 959 – Natural Resources – Establishment of Gwynns Falls State Park. This legislation would designate Gwynns Falls a state park and establish an official partnership between the Department of Natural Resources and Baltimore City to provide accessible outdoor nature-based recreation and learning opportunities.

The National Aquarium connects people with nature to inspire compassion and care for our ocean planet. We help Baltimore City residents discover urban biodiversity through community science, a collaborative process that engages the public in scientific investigation, through the annual City Nature Challenge and other programming. In recent years, we have proudly partnered with the Greater Baltimore Wilderness Coalition, the Carrie Murray Nature Center, and others to organize Leakin Park Bioblitz events, which have resulted in hundreds of research-grade observations of Maryland’s plant and animal species. We have also hosted trail hikes, contributed to restoration work in the park, and participated in Baltimore’s Urban Bird Treaty program activities.

Gwynns Falls Leakin Park consists of more than one thousand acres and is one of the largest urban wilderness areas in the region. The park is within walking distance of thousands of city residents, and is accessible to the residents of Baltimore, Anne Arundel, and Howard Counties. A new state-city partnership park would serve an area of at least one million people and provide improved access to outdoor recreation, enhance conservation of urban forest, and protect important habitats for many diverse species of Maryland wildlife.

Baltimore City is the only jurisdiction in Maryland that lacks a state park, and along with it, the recreational, educational, economic, and cultural benefits which state parks offer. The creation of Gwynns Falls State Park would increase necessary investment in Baltimore’s greenspaces and would allow Marylanders in the region to forge deeper connections with nature and enjoy the benefits of urban wilderness. **We urge the Committee to issue a favorable report on HB 959.**

Contact:

Maggie Ostdahl

Director of Conservation Policy

410-385-8275

mostdahl@aqua.org

HB959_SierraClub_FAV_ENT_2.25.26.pdf

Uploaded by: MARIE LAPORTE

Position: FAV

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.

Marie LaPorte
Biodiversity and Natural Places
MarieLaPorte@verizon.net

Josh Tulkin
Chapter Director
Josh.Tulkin@MDSierra.org

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>

HB959 Friends of GFLP FAV ENT 2.25.26 .pdf

Uploaded by: Pickett Slater Harrington

Position: FAV



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*

HB0959_DNR_SWA_ENT_2-25-26.pdf

Uploaded by: Josh Kurtz

Position: FWA



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

Contact: Lydia McPherson, Director, Legislative and Constituent Services
lydia.mcpherson1@maryland.gov ♦ 410-260-8113 (office) ♦ 443-875-7785 (cell)

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.

HB0959-ET-SWA.pdf

Uploaded by: Nina Themelis

Position: FWA



BRANDON M. SCOTT
MAYOR

*Office of Government Relations
88 State Circle
Annapolis, Maryland 21401*

HB0959

February 25, 2026

TO: Members of the House Environment and Transportation Committee
FROM: Nina Themelis, Director, Mayor's Office of Government Relations
RE: HB 0959 - Natural Resources – Establishment of Gwynns Falls State Park

POSITION: SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS

Chair Korman, Vice Chair Guyton, and Members of the Committee, please be advised that the Baltimore City Administration (BCA) **supports** House Bill (HB) 0959 **with amendments**.

Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park is one of Baltimore's most treasured green spaces. At more than 1,200 acres, it is the largest urban wilderness park on the East Coast. It provides miles of trails, historic sites, forest habitat, waterways, and year-round recreation opportunities for residents across Baltimore City and the region. The park plays a critical role in environmental stewardship, stormwater management, public health, and community connection.

We appreciate the sponsor's commitment to increasing attention and investment in Gwynns Falls. The goals behind this bill are to raise the park's profile, improve infrastructure, enhance environmental restoration, and expand access, all priorities that we share.

Baltimore City welcomes a stronger partnership with the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), which could bring additional resources, technical expertise, and statewide visibility to this incredible park. We are particularly supportive of coordinated master planning, in accordance with the City's land use responsibilities, and thoughtful long-term investment that strengthens both the natural environment and the visitor experience.

At the same time, we want to ensure that the governance structure is clear and workable. Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park is currently owned and operated by Baltimore City under authority in Article II, Section 21 of the Charter of Baltimore City, which vests control of City parks with the Mayor and City Council of Baltimore. As drafted, the bill would shift the park into the State park system, which carries operational and administrative implications, and would require the Maryland General Assembly to modify Section 21 of Article II of the Charter of Baltimore City.

If the shared goal is a collaborative model with the City retaining ownership and control while formalizing operational and funding partnerships with DNR through a memorandum of understanding, the bill language will need to be substantially amended to clearly reflect that. From an operational standpoint, clarity around roles, financial responsibility, staffing, maintenance, and public safety is essential to making the partnership successful.

The BCA also wants to ensure that any expansion of services or programming is paired with sustainable funding for ongoing operations, not just capital improvements. Long-term stewardship requires reliable operational support to maintain trails, facilities, natural areas, and visitor services at a high standard.

Baltimore City is actively working with the sponsor and DNR to refine the bill so that it strengthens Gwynns Falls Leakin Park while preserving a practical and effective management framework. We are committed to collaboration and believe we can arrive at a model that enhances the park for generations to come.

For the above reasons, the BCA respectfully requests a **favorable with amendments** report on HB 959.

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Uploaded by: Denise Gilmore

Position: INFO



1410 Bush Street (Suite A)
Baltimore, MD 21230
Phone: 410-547-1515
Email: info@afscmemd.org

Patrick Moran – President

**HB 959 – Natural Resources – Establishment of Gwynns Falls State Park
Environment and Transportation Committee
February 25, 2026**

Position: INFORMATIONAL ONLY

AFSCME Council 3 is proud to represent 55,000 public service workers across varying levels of government, including in our state, county, and local governments across Maryland. This includes the dedicated public employees who maintain our parks in the Baltimore City Recreation and Parks Department, as well as the Maryland Department of Natural Resources.

HB 959 requires the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to establish Gwynns Falls State Park in partnership with Baltimore City. We believe that the continued maintenance and operation of this beautiful treasure in Baltimore City should remain public. That is the best way to ensure that it will be supported for the public's good and will be publicly accessible for future generations to come. Public management also ensures transparency and accountability for the public dollars that going to continue to support this public park.

If HB 959 passes and this partnership is established, it is important to AFSCME as the exclusive representative for both City employees and State employees who do this work, that we are brought in and be involved in how the transfer of any personnel from one public agency to another will occur.

We appreciate the committee's consideration of this information as you deliberate over this legislation. Please do not hesitate to contact Denise Gilmore, Legislative and Political Director, at dgilmore@afscmemd.org if we can provide additional details.