

GOVERNOR MOORE SIGNS BILL ADVANCING EFFORT FOR STATE-CITY PARTNERSHIP AT GWYNNNS FALLS/LEAKIN PARK

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On Thursday, May 16th, Maryland Gov. Wes Moore signed legislation that advocates say will lead to the establishment of Baltimore City's first state park – a potentially transformative move for West Baltimore.

House Bill 1358, which goes into effect on June 1, calls for a report to the Maryland General Assembly next year spelling out the requirements for creating a "state-city partnership park" in West Baltimore's Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park. The bill requires the Maryland Department of Natural Resources and Baltimore City Department of Recreation and Parks to create a stakeholder advisory committee and convene focus groups of local residents, ensuring a vital role for the community in determining the future of the park.

The legislation was a top priority for Friends of Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park (FOGFLP), the grassroots organization whose volunteers have served as the park's caretakers, protectors and defenders since 1983.

"This park has been neglected and underutilized for far too long, leading to its unsavory reputation," said Erica Lewis, president of FOGFLP. "With a strong state-city partnership, Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park will fulfill its potential as a true asset for community residents, as well as a place that visitors to Baltimore will want to seek out and explore."

Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park is Baltimore's largest park, with 1,000 acres of mature forest, streams, trails, historic structures, ballfields, and playgrounds. It is one of the largest urban forest parks east of the Mississippi River, an area of great beauty where nearly 200 species of birds have been identified. And yet, despite its attractions, most Baltimore residents avoid the park. Community leaders and environmental advocates see HB 1358 as an important step toward changing that.

"By signing HB 1358 into law, Governor Moore demonstrates Maryland's commitment to bring Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park the resources needed to meet the park's potential as an ecological and cultural gem in West Baltimore," said Jim Brown, policy director for Mid-Atlantic Audubon. "This is a critical step in creating a greener Baltimore and giving the residents of Baltimore access to world-class park experiences. Audubon stands ready to partner with Baltimore City, the State of Maryland, and FOGFLP to make this vision a reality."

Many major cities have at least one state park, but not Baltimore – which is also one of only two jurisdictions in Maryland without a state park. The Maryland General Assembly passed legislation in 2022 allowing for co-management of a park between the state and another entity, such as a city, a county, or the federal government.

Delegate Malcolm Ruff, who represents the 41st District and was the bill's chief sponsor, said: "This is an exciting day for our district. At the end of this process, Baltimore will have the beautiful, welcoming

state park it has long deserved. It's been thrilling to see the community come together behind this effort, which will benefit not only West Baltimore but the entire region."

In addition to their obvious recreational and public health benefits, state parks are economic engines. According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, every dollar the State of Maryland invests in state parks [generates \\$29.27](#) in economic activity. Moreover, by introducing a Governor's Service Year Option for 18- to 22-year-olds and a Conservation Job Corps site for high schoolers, the park can become a workforce incubator, providing young Baltimoreans with valuable skills and work experience while exposing them to the natural world.

"A state park here will bring jobs and visitors to West Baltimore," said Mike Cross-Barnet, executive director of FOGFLP. "It may encourage people to buy homes and start businesses here. This project could well catalyze an economic renaissance in a part of town that has long suffered from redlining and disinvestment."

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*The Friends of Gwynns Falls/
Leakin Park is a 501(C)3
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