

Momentum grows for city-state partnership on Baltimore's troubled Leakin Park – Baltimore Sun



Gwynns Falls Leakin Park sign on North Franklinton Road. (Kevin Richardson/Staff)

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Deserved or not, Leakin Park has a reputation.

Scores across the country know it as the site where [Hae Min Lee](#) was buried in a shallow grave, a case probed years later on the podcast [“Serial.”](#) Locals better know Leakin Park as the densely overgrown expanse in their backyards with a host of possibility but also insufficient staffing, illegal dumping and safety concerns.

Recently, however, there has been movement to improve Leakin Park’s circumstances, making it more of an asset for the historically disinvested West Baltimore

neighborhoods that surround it.

A bill currently before the Maryland General Assembly, sponsored by Del. Malcolm Ruff, a Democrat from Baltimore, would create a city-state partnership to manage Leakin Park. If passed, Ruff said the bill would unlock funds from the state's Program Open Space to assign a permanent force of park rangers, managers, foresters and technicians to the sprawling park.

On the local level, the Baltimore City Council is also taking action. This week, the council's Public Safety and Government Operations Committee advanced a bill calling for a study to look at closing a portion of North Franklinton Road, which traverses the park east to west, in an effort to control the illegal dumping that's prevalent there. Last month, the full council also voted in favor of a resolution in support of Ruff's legislation, calling on city and state leaders to enter into a partnership agreement.

The momentum surrounding Leakin Park, also known as Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park, comes on the heels of a [violent crime](#) there last fall. A 71-year-old woman was walking in the park in November when she was followed by a man who then threatened her with a gun. She attempted to flee but was attacked, dragged to an encampment in the park, and sexually assaulted. She managed to escape, but suffered severe injuries.

Police arrested and charged a man one week later, but the incident elevated existing fears among area residents and prompted a standing room-only community meeting at Cahill Recreation Center. There, staff of the Department of Recreation and Parks as well as Councilmen Kristerfer Burnett and James Torrence, both Democrats who represent areas of the park, heard concerns from residents. Park users pleaded for more proactive patrols to spot encampments in the park, better signage and additional lighting.

Recreation and Parks officials have since hired a small number of rangers for the park. Trash removal has increased in frequency as have police patrols in the park. The department sends regular updates to attendees of the meeting.

But Leakin Park's demands remain massive. The more than 1200-acre park is Baltimore's largest. (For comparison, Druid Hill Park has just 745 acres.) Consisting of several parks assembled via land acquisitions over many decades, the park's rolling forested landscape cut by streams feels, in places, more like wilderness than city. That

forest makes it hard to treat Leakin Park like others in the city, parks officials told residents during the November meeting. Lighting the park isn't feasible, they said, pointing to the same darkness that falls at Patapsco Valley State Park, a 16,000-acre park in Howard County.

Ruff, who grew up in West Baltimore and was a frequent visitor to Leakin Park, has long been interested in the park's potential. When Friends of Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park, a nonprofit that's been caring for the park on a volunteer basis for more than 40 years, approached him with a proposal to push for a state partnership, it was a meeting of mutual interests.

"Leakin Park has always been a place that could have had so much potential for so many people, but it has never received the care and attention that the park deserves — and that its surrounding neighborhoods deserve," Ruff said.

November's community meeting only further convinced Ruff of the proposal's necessity, he said. Residents from surrounding neighborhoods like Edmondson Village, Windsor Hills, Rognel Heights and Franklinton packed the gathering.

"That really was a ground swell," Ruff said. "I could literally see 100-plus people from the surrounding communities all charged up and wanting to see results. They were absolutely right to be demanding such."

The state legislation, which Ruff said is being championed by the entire delegation from the 41st District, is due for a hearing Wednesday before the Maryland House Environment and Transportation Committee. Ruff said the Maryland Department of Natural Resources has been enthusiastic about the concept. A spokesman for Recreation and Parks did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

In Baltimore this week, Burnett, who sponsored both the resolution in support of the hybrid park and the bill calling for a study on closing North Franklinton Road, said the city simply does not have the resources to care for a park the size of Leakin Park. Citing Patterson Park, one of the city's other large parks, as an example, Burnett said the challenges are not the same.

The council's conversation this week centered on dumping in the park. Burnett's proposed bill, which still faces a vote from the full council, calls for the city to study the effectiveness of closing to traffic the portion of North Franklinton Road that runs through the park in an effort to curb dumping. A separate stretch of Wetheredsville Road in the northern part of the park has already been blocked to traffic for the same reason.



The mayor and City Council are evaluating the effectiveness of closing the portion of North Franklinton Road extending through Leakin Park to deter illegal dumping. Household items line both sides of Winterbourne Road in Leakin Park. (Kevin Richardson/Staff)

Ty'lor Schnella of the mayor's office of government services told council members that Mayor Brandon Scott's administration was "committed" to addressing the issue, and supports two pieces of legislation on the table at the state level that it believes would help track down culprits.

Members of the council were critical however of the communication between city agencies when addressing dumping. Code enforcement, which responds to illegal

dumping violations, is housed under the Department of Housing and Community Development, but the Department of Public Works is responsible for picking up trash. The Department of Transportation will ultimately be responsible for the proposed study of North Franklinton Road's closure, but the Department of Recreation and Parks manages the park.

"This coordination piece is still missing," Torrence said Wednesday. "I'm just going to charge the administration with coming up with a conversation about it."

Burnett acknowledged there are potential problems with closing North Franklinton Road. There are some homes within the park that need to have access, and the road is also a well-traveled route. But the city closed the roadway on a temporary basis in 2018 after flooding washed some of it away, and the closure encouraged more walking and biking in the park, he said.

"Maybe the study comes back and says this is a terrible idea and we don't do it," Burnett said. "Hopefully this gets all of it out on the table."

Mike Cross-Barnet, executive director of Friends of Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park, said he's excited about the momentum surrounding the park, particularly the prospect of a "major state investment."

"When you have a facility like that that's not taken care of, that's not well-maintained, it's almost an invitation for people with bad intentions," he said. "The solution to unwanted behavior and people with bad intentions ... is to have good behavior and good intention in the park."

"We need people in the park enjoying its natural beauty, its trees and streams and trails — all the assets that it has," Cross-Barnet said. "They're not going to do that unless they feel comfortable and safe."