

West Baltimore needs a state park, and a partnership is the right way to do it | GUEST COMMENTARY



A woman walks her dog on the old fort trail of Leakin Park on a snowy day in 2021. (Karl Merton Ferron/The Baltimore Sun)

By [Malcolm Ruff](#) and [Mike Cross-Barnet](#)

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State parks are more than just beautiful places; they provide recreational, economic and cultural benefits to their host communities. Baltimore City is one of just two jurisdictions in Maryland without the advantages of a state park. But we can change this, elevating both the city and the region, thanks to a special opportunity under Maryland law.

Our legislation, [House Bill 1358](#), establishes an innovative state-city partnership for the support and management of Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park, Baltimore's largest park. With

its mature forest, diverse wildlife, scenic trails and historic structures covering more than 1,000 acres, Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park is one of the largest urban forest parks on the East Coast. It should be the envy of other Mid-Atlantic cities. Instead, the park has an unsavory reputation, and most city residents avoid it.

It's well past time for Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park to fulfill its potential as the pride of West Baltimore and a true regional destination. Baltimore has many fine parks, but GFLP is unique. With its large size, diverse topography and proximity to several nearby counties, it already resembles a state park in many ways, making it ideally situated for transformative investment.

No one can doubt that the park needs serious help. Signs of neglect are everywhere: missing or broken gates, dumped trash that reappears as soon as it is removed, dilapidated trails and bridges. All this disrepair sends a message that bad actors hear loud and clear. Although the park's reputation for danger is exaggerated, the [sexual assault](#) of a 71-year-old woman in November played into the worst stereotypes about GFLP, while also spurring residents to demand action.

Sadly, the park's current condition reflects more than a century of disinvestment and racist policies affecting West Baltimore. The city's underfunded Department of Recreation and Parks oversees a massive system of more than 250 parks and nearly 5,000 acres, and it simply can't provide the resources that a complex landscape like GFLP needs.

After November's outcry, the city hired a small number of rangers and increased trash removal and police patrols in the park. These are positive, necessary and welcome steps. However, to thrive, GFLP needs its own robust ranger team assisting visitors, reporting problems, running family programming, and signaling that this park is cared for and protected. It also deserves a permanent, dedicated funding stream for repairs, trash removal, trail maintenance and general upkeep.

The 2022 Great Maryland Outdoors Act defines a partnership park as "a unit of the state park system managed by the Department of Natural Resources in partnership with a local government or a nonprofit organization." GFLP should be jointly managed by the DNR and the city's Department of Recreation and Parks, with support from the Friends

of Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park, volunteer custodians and protectors of the park for the past 40 years.

We could unlock state funds already appropriated under Program Open Space to assign a permanent force of park rangers, managers, foresters and technicians to GFLP. In the spirit of partnership, the city could earmark a small portion of the yearly “direct grant” it receives from DNR, which increased last year from \$6 million to \$10 million.

A partnership park at GFLP will be a huge force for good in a part of the city that has long been underserved. With a Governor’s Service Year Option in the park for 18- to 22-year-olds and a Conservation Job Corps site for high schoolers, we can provide young Baltimoreans with invaluable skills and work experience while exposing them to the natural world.

The City Council unanimously approved a resolution of support for this proposal, demonstrating broad citywide support. But the city would not be the only beneficiary. GFLP touches Baltimore County and is a short drive from Howard and Anne Arundel counties. A new state park would serve an area with well over 1 million people, relieving pressure on nearby state parks that have seen huge increases in demand since the pandemic.

Sometimes an idea comes along that is both the right thing and the smart thing to do. A partnership park at Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park will have benefits for the city, state, and region, which is why Audubon Mid-Atlantic has named this bill as one of its priorities. Fairness and equity demand it, community leaders near the park have told us they need it, and the funding is available. The time is now.

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