

Department of Legislative Services
 Maryland General Assembly
 2026 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE
 First Reader

House Bill 959 (Delegate Ruff, *et al.*)
 Environment and Transportation

Natural Resources - Establishment of Gwynns Falls State Park

This bill requires (1) the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to establish Gwynns Falls State Park as a partnership park between the department and Baltimore City; (2) the use, in fiscal 2028, of \$4.0 million from the Park System Capital Improvements and Acquisition Fund for renovation to establish a park office and visitor center; and (3) inclusion in the annual budget bill, for fiscal 2028, appropriations of \$2,880,354, for the establishment and operation costs of the park, and \$280,000, for an independent consultant to complete a comprehensive park master plan. **The bill takes effect June 1, 2026.**

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: No effect in FY 2027. General fund expenditures increase by at least \$3.2 million in FY 2028, with lesser, but ongoing, minimum costs in future years. Revenues are not directly affected. **This bill establishes mandated appropriations for FY 2028.**

(\$ in millions)	FY 2027	FY 2028	FY 2029	FY 2030	FY 2031
Revenues	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
GF Expenditure	0	3.2	1.5	1.6	1.6
Net Effect	\$0.0	(\$3.2)	(\$1.5)	(\$1.6)	(\$1.6)

Note: () = decrease; GF = general funds; FF = federal funds; SF = special funds; - = indeterminate increase; (-) = indeterminate decrease

Local Effect: Baltimore City finances may be affected, as discussed below.

Small Business Effect: Potential meaningful.

Analysis

Bill Summary: DNR must establish Gwynns Falls State Park as a partnership park between the department and Baltimore City that seeks to provide visitors with accessible outdoor, nature-based recreation and learning opportunities. Gwynns Falls State Park must be held by the State as a State park under the protection and administration of DNR. The department may not charge any entrance fee to Gwynns Falls State Park. The park must consist of the area of land identified under Section 7 of Baltimore City's [Gwynns Falls State Park Report](#).

DNR, in consultation with Baltimore City, must hire an independent consultant to complete a comprehensive park master plan for Gwynns Falls State Park that (1) defines the exact boundaries of the park and (2) includes engagement of citizens in the planning of the park.

In fiscal 2028, \$4.0 million from the Park System Capital Improvements and Acquisition Fund must be used for renovation of the trail headquarters office in Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park in order to serve as a joint partnership park office and visitor center for Gwynns Falls State Park. In addition, for fiscal 2028, the Governor must include in the annual budget bill appropriations of (1) \$2,880,354 for the establishment and operation costs of Gwynns Falls State Park and (2) \$280,000 for the hiring of the independent consultant.

The memorandum of understanding establishing Gwynns Falls State Park must define (1) the roles and responsibilities, including financial responsibilities, of DNR and Baltimore City in maintaining and operating the park and (2) a partnership role for the Friends of Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park in support of the park's mission and volunteers.

The Gwynns Falls State Park stakeholder advisory committee must meet quarterly and advise DNR on the scope, management, and improvements to Gwynns Falls State Park.

Current Law:

Chapter 965 of 2024

Chapter 965 of 2024 required DNR and Baltimore City to (1) convene focus group meetings on the establishment of Gwynns Falls State Park with community members and stakeholders that reside or operate in the vicinity of the proposed State park; (2) develop a list of priority needs and associated cost assessments for park operations and improvements, as specified; and (3) establish a specified stakeholder advisory committee to advise DNR and Baltimore City on the scope and management of the park.

Chapter 965 required DNR to submit a report to the General Assembly, by December 1, 2025, on (1) property owned by the State in Baltimore City that is suitable for

inclusion in Gwynns Falls State Park; (2) property owned by Baltimore City or a nonprofit organization in Baltimore City that is suitable for inclusion in the park and for which the landowners are willing to enter into a partnership agreement; and (3) the funding needed to establish and promote the park.

State Park System and Partnership Parks

Pursuant to DNR regulations, the State park system is administered under the jurisdiction of the Maryland Park Service to preserve and protect the best of Maryland's natural and historic places for the enjoyment and appreciation of its citizens. The parks are managed to provide public benefits, including (1) natural resource conservation; (2) cultural and historic preservation; (3) watershed protection; (4) education and interpretation; and (5) nature-based outdoor recreation, including trails, picnicking, boating, camping, cabins, hunting, fishing, and swimming.

DNR is authorized to enter into a memorandum of understanding with a local government, bicounty agency, or nonprofit organization to establish a "partnership park" in the State and to enter into a partnership agreement with a local government, bicounty agency, or nonprofit organization to manage a partnership park in the State. "Partnership park" means a unit of the State park system managed by DNR in partnership with a local government, a bicounty agency, or a nonprofit organization.

Park System Capital Improvements and Acquisition Fund

Chapter 39 of 2022 (Great Maryland Outdoors Act) established the Park System Capital Improvements and Acquisition Fund for capital improvements on DNR-managed State park lands and land acquisition for State parks. Chapter 39 required a \$36.9 million general fund appropriation to the fund in fiscal 2024 and authorized the Governor, on or before June 30, 2022, to transfer \$43.1 million of the funds for Program Open Space State land acquisition in the transfer tax special fund to the Park System Capital Improvements and Acquisition Fund (the authorized transfer of \$43.1 million plus the required general fund appropriation of \$36.9 million totaled \$80.0 million). The fiscal 2024 budget bill (Chapter 101 of 2023) included the \$36.9 million general fund appropriation.

Chapter 39 requires the first \$70.0 million received by the fund to be allocated in a specified manner: (1) \$5.0 million for climate change mitigation infrastructure projects; (2) \$5.0 million for historic preservation; (3) \$20.0 million for transportation improvements; (4) \$10.0 million for increasing water access; and (5) \$30.0 million for land acquisition. If the fund receives more than \$70.0 million, Chapter 39 authorizes DNR to use up to \$10.0 million for any of the purposes identified for the first \$70.0 million.

State Fiscal Effect: General fund expenditures increase by at least \$3.2 million in fiscal 2028 to fund the establishment and operation of Gwynns Falls State Park, consistent with the appropriations mandated by the bill in fiscal 2028 (\$2,880,354 and \$280,000), as shown in **Exhibit 1**. Lesser, but ongoing, minimum costs are incurred in future years. This estimate is based on the following assumptions:

- the park begins operating in fiscal 2028, despite the renovation of the park office and visitor center, and the development of a park master plan, occurring in the same fiscal year (according to the timing of the funding for the renovation and master plan under the bill);
- the mandated appropriation of \$2,880,354 is sufficient to cover the minimum establishment and operation costs of the park in fiscal 2028 (that amount is enough to cover the first-year staff and operations costs estimated in the Gwynns Falls State Park Report);
- the mandated appropriation of \$280,000 is sufficient to cover the cost of hiring an independent consultant to complete a comprehensive park master plan (that amount is the amount estimated to be needed to hire a planning consultant to develop a master plan in the Gwynns Falls State Park Report);
- because the bill does not specify a funding source for the mandated appropriations, general funds are appropriated; and
- the designation of \$4.0 million of funding in the Park System Capital Improvements and Acquisition Fund for renovation of the trail headquarters office in Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park does not affect State finances because it designates existing, previously-budgeted funding to be used for that purpose (as mentioned above, under Current Law, the fund was capitalized with \$80.0 million under Chapter 39 of 2022 and the fiscal 2024 budget bill, which is now being spent, over several fiscal years, in accordance with the fund's purposes – the bill establishes/designates the specific use, in fiscal 2028, of \$4.0 million of the \$80.0 million).

It should be noted that the costs shown in Exhibit 1 are largely operating costs (along with planning, equipment, and other one-time costs in fiscal 2028). While the bill designates \$4.0 million from the Park System Capital Improvements and Acquisition Fund for capital improvements for the park (renovations to establish the park office and welcome center), the Gwynns Falls State Park Report identifies significant additional capital costs (and DNR indicates that capital costs may be higher than identified in the report) that are not accounted for in Exhibit 1 – the reason the fiscal effect is identified as a minimum.

Exhibit 1
Minimum Fiscal Effect of the Bill
(in \$ Millions)

Description	Type	FY 2027	FY 2028	FY 2029	FY 2030	FY 2031
Establish and Operate Gwynns Falls State Park (and Develop a Master Plan in FY 2028)	GF Exp	\$0.0	\$3.2	\$1.5	\$1.6	\$1.6
	<i>GF Pos's (New)</i>		<i>8.0</i>			
	<i>GF Pos's (New) (contractual)</i>		<i>4.0</i>			

Exp: Expenditures
Pos's: Positions

Source: Department of Natural Resources; Department of Legislative Services

Local Fiscal Effect: Baltimore City finances are assumed to be affected by DNR's establishment of Gwynns Falls State Park pursuant to the bill. The bill indicates that the memorandum of understanding establishing the park will define the roles and responsibilities, including financial responsibilities, of DNR and Baltimore City in maintaining and operating the park. Therefore, while this analysis reflects the State incurring the operating and capital costs of the park (both in fiscal 2028, pursuant to the mandated appropriations, and in future years) the city may be responsible for some portion of the costs discussed above.

Small Business Effect: Small businesses involved in, or otherwise providing goods or services for, capital improvement projects for the park may meaningfully benefit from the bill.

Additional Information

Recent Prior Introductions: Similar legislation has not been introduced within the last three years.

Designated Cross File: SB 971 (Senator Hayes) - Rules.

Information Source(s): Department of Budget and Management; Department of Natural Resources; Department of Legislative Services

Fiscal Note History: First Reader - February 24, 2026
jg/sdk

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