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Committee: Budget and Taxation; Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs

Testimony on: SB541 “Natural Resources - Maryland Park Service and State Parks - Alterations (Great Maryland Outdoors Act)”

Position: Support

Hearing Date: February 16, 2022

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club strongly supports the Maryland Great Outdoor Act, which will provide better parks and recreation experiences for Marylanders by increasing the number of parks, park amenities, and park employees; improving transportation options to parks; creating a strategic planning process to direct increased funding; mitigating climate change through green infrastructure; and improving park equity.

Founded on high quality research provided by the State Parks Investment Commission led by former Governor Glendenning, this bill is built on science and the needs and voices of the people. The first helpful feature is an organizational upgrade that would establish a Parks and Recreation Commission to provide ongoing support and oversight of the Maryland Park Service. Effective use of state monies is promoted by the improved data collection, tracking, and evaluation of programs over time that is proposed by this legislation. The comprehensive strategic plan will help the programs to adjust over time to new challenges. Upgrades to online access to information about park availability and amenities available are also a beneficial aspect.

The bill also directly addresses overcrowding and access issues. The funding for acquisition of land for new parks in underserved areas, for more beach access, and for more historical parks will help alleviate the need for more outdoors activity options. During outings promoted by our Chapter to parks during the pandemic, members reported crowding, transportation issues, and maintenance problems. We particularly noted this in Prince George’s and Montgomery counties. The plan to survey, track, and fund park infrastructure, critical maintenance needs, and historical and cultural resources will lessen these problems. The funds to provide increased access to recreational bodies of water will increase the access to aquatic recreational areas statewide.

Another essential component of the Act is the funding of green infrastructure improvements to mitigate climate change. The strengthening of natural systems such as forest and buffer preservation, support for natural wetlands, and stormwater infrastructure such as rain gardens, permeable surfaces, and native plants will contribute to the long-term health of the parks and all of Maryland.

Founded in 1892, the Sierra Club is America’s oldest and largest grassroots environmental organization. The Maryland Chapter has over 70,000 members and supporters, and the Sierra Club nationwide has over 800,000 members and nearly four million supporters.

The bill also proposes increased agency collaboration to promote transportation options, and better public access through improved bike trails and walkability measures.

The increased availability of parks afforded by this legislation will require more park staff. This bill will increase the number of employees by 100 and improve salary equity and benefits for park employees. The improved working conditions for park employees will also enhance park experiences for visitors.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of this bill is the increased access to parks everyone will have in Maryland. The adoption of Universal Design principles will ensure people with disabilities and seniors will have more access to facilities. The use of a Park Equity Mapping Tool will help ensure that new parks are placed in areas where the population and park distribution merit them. The establishment of the Freedman's State Historical Park will share an untold part of Maryland history.

The Maryland Great Outdoors Act has a whole-system approach to improving our park system. It will bring jobs and other economic benefits across the state. Its data-driven, accountable package of improvements promises broadly shared benefits for Marylanders. The Sierra Club strongly urges a favorable report for this bill.

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