

February 15, 2023

Written testimony for HB0503 - Natural Resources - Greenspace Equity Program - Establishment¹

Position: Favorable

Submitted by: Denisse Guitarra, MD Conservation Advocate, Nature Forward



Dear House Environment and Transportation Committee,

Nature Forward (formerly Audubon Naturalist Society) is the oldest independent environmental organization protecting nature in the DC metro region. Our mission is to inspire residents of the greater Washington, DC, region to appreciate, understand, and protect their natural environment through outdoor experiences, education, and advocacy. We thank the House Environment and Transportation Committee for the opportunity to provide testimony on HB0503 - Natural Resources - Greenspace Equity Program - Establishment.

Nature Forward supports HB0503 in particular because it would direct funding for acquisition and stewardship of green space to underserved communities with the greatest need, where the benefits would also be the greatest. This new grant program will directly support projects to protect and steward greenspaces in underserved and overburdened communities across Maryland. This new grant program is a statewide program, and there are communities across the state that would benefit.

This bill will support a variety of greenspace uses, including pocket parks, community gardens, urban farms, trail connections, woodlands, and other community greenspace areas. This would not only support projects to protect new greenspaces, but it would also support projects to help steward existing greenspaces. These are the exact areas where Nature Forward has worked with largely Latinx families in around the Long Branch stream valley park located in Silver Spring, MD. The community members have constantly expressed the need to see more urban canopy and access to greenspaces as a need for health, wellbeing, and outdoor activities/recreation.² Furthermore, the Long Branch community has expressed these same ideas to Montgomery Parks as they undergo their Long Branch Park Initiative which will

¹ HB0503 - Natural Resources - Greenspace Equity Program - Establishment. Available at: <https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/mgawebsite/Legislation/Details/hb0503>

² Nature Forward - Long Branch community outreach. Available at: <https://natureforward.org/program/long-branch-community-outreach/>



renovate 9 parks along the Long Branch trail in the next few years.^{3,4} We work with other communities in Maryland who share many similar concerns.

Time in nature has especially significant impacts on children's physical and cognitive development. A 2018 report by the US Forest Service and US Department of Agriculture⁵ found that access to greenspaces and forests reduces pollution, increases active lifestyles, improves mental health, reduces stress, increases academic success in children, and builds social and equitable communities. Furthermore, Nature Based / Forest Schools⁶ are an increasing type of outdoor based learning and educational programs which allow children (and adults) to learn, take risks, and use nature as their playground and research lab. Nature Forward has seen the benefits in kids of all ages in creating outdoor based programs.⁷

The Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has recognized that access to green space is important for people at all stages of life—children, teens, adults, and seniors—and creates a sense of community and well-being. DNR has created an interactive Maryland park equity map which shows lower park equity in the underserved census tracts shown in the National Capital Region of Maryland.⁸ This map shows a correlation of the urgent need to fund and create more greenspace for underserved communities in Maryland, especially those near highly urbanized areas. These are the same areas Nature Forward has been working with majority Latinx community members via our watershed education programs in Long Branch, Langley Park, Riverdale Park, and Edmonston, MD.

³ Long Branch Parks Initiative. Montgomery Parks. 2023. Available at: <https://montgomeryparks.org/long-branch-parks-initiative/>

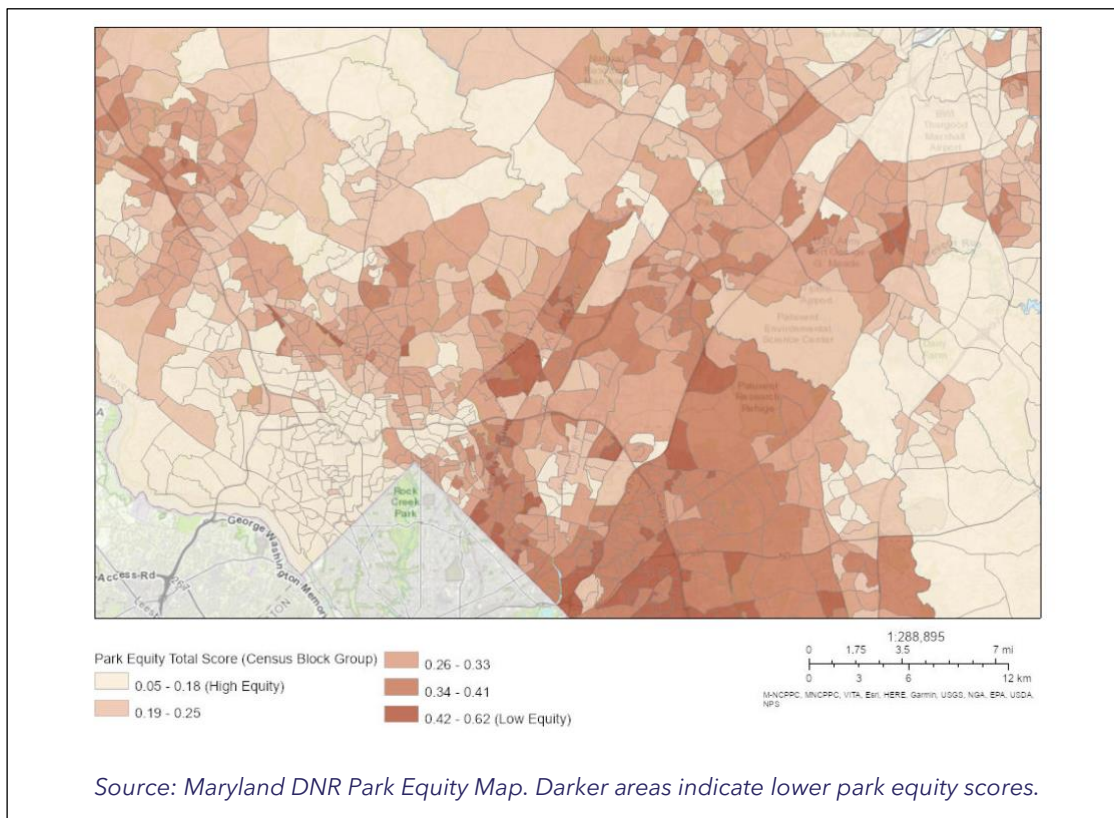
⁴ Long Branch - Garland Neighborhood Park Renovation. Montgomery Parks. 2021. Available at: <https://montgomeryparks.org/projects/directory/long-branch-garland-neighborhood-park-renovation/>

⁵ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. 2018. Urban nature for human health and well-being: a research summary for communicating the health benefits of urban trees and green space. FS-1096. Washington, DC. 24 p. Available at: https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/fs_media/fs_document/urbannatureforhumanhealthandwellbeing_508_01_30_18.pdf

⁶ Spencer-Milnes, Xenia. 2021. Forest School: What Is It and What Are the Benefits? Available at: <https://www.highspeedtraining.co.uk/hub/what-is-a-forest-school/>

⁷ See all of Nature Forward's adult and children's programs at: <https://natureforward.org/programs/>

⁸ Maryland Department of Natural Resources Park Equity web page, <https://dnr.maryland.gov/pages/parkequity.aspx>.



In addition to local governments, eligible grant recipients could include small community land trusts and other nonprofit organizations, which currently have difficulty accessing funding to acquire land when it becomes available or to maintain existing green spaces. HB0503 provides for a Greenspace Advisory Board with representatives who are residents of underserved or overburdened communities and reflect Maryland's diversity, to encourage continuing community involvement and participation.

The passage of this bill would help ensure access to nature for Marylanders increase access and promote the health of their communities. Nature Forward and our 28,000 members and supporters recommend that the House Environment and Transportation Committee support the passage of HB0503.

Sincerely,

Denisse Guitarra, Nature Forward Maryland Conservation Advocate

Anne DeNovo, Nature Forward Conservation Volunteer