

*From the Baltimore Sun*

# Candidates are urged to back park funds

## Baltimore County Digest

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Environmental and conservation activists gathered yesterday in Towson to call on candidates for governor and the General Assembly to pledge not to divert state funding from parks and recreation.

At a news conference at Towson Manor Park, activists said public opinion polls show that Maryland voters overwhelmingly support Program Open Space, the state program that since 1969 has financed park and recreation land purchases around the state with tax revenues from real estate sales.

About 20 percent of the state's land has been preserved for playing ball, picnicking, hiking or just enjoying nature, about the amount that has been developed, said Jennifer Bevan-Dangel, staff attorney for Environment Maryland. The remainder of the state "hangs in the balance," she said, with 1.5 million more people expected to move to Maryland over the next 25 years.

Marcia Verploegen Lewis, executive director of Partners for Open Space, representing 140 community and conservation groups, said Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. and lawmakers removed hundreds of millions of dollars from the program over the past four years to help balance the state budget. Though officials restored funding levels last year, she warned that the program's future is uncertain because the state faces a long-term structural budget deficit that might tempt them to tap the land conservation fund again.

Nine candidates from both parties appeared at the rally, most of them from Baltimore County but including hopefuls from Harford County and Baltimore. All pledged their support for open-space funding, though some incumbents -- including Sen. James Brochin, a Baltimore County Democrat, and Del. Adrienne A. Jones, a Baltimore County Democrat and House speaker pro tem - emphasized that the governor controls the budget far more than the legislature does.