



# Retirement News Highlights

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## Former Gunpowder Falls State Park manager facing rape charges retires, will get \$94,500 annual pension

*Maryland state employees are eligible to collect pensions even if they have been indicted or convicted of a crime, according to a state pension system official*

By Julie Scharper

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Michael J. Browning, the former Gunpowder Falls State Park manager who remains jailed on charges that he raped two former employees, has retired from the Maryland Park Service and will soon begin collecting a \$94,500 annual pension, state employees said.

A state Department of Natural Resources spokesman confirmed that Browning's last day with the park service was Nov. 30. Spokesman Gregg Bortz declined to provide the terms by which Browning had left state government, but officials, speaking anonymously because they are not authorized to talk with the media, said that Browning was allowed to retire.

Browning, a longtime ranger who carried a state-issued gun and badge, had worked for the park service since 1972 and served as manager of 18,000-acre Gunpowder Falls State Park since 1991.

As a 50-year employee and law enforcement officer, he was entitled to collect 65% of the average of his three highest years of compensation, or approximately \$94,500 a year. His salary at retirement was \$153,893 a year. He earned \$138,374 in 2020 and \$143,909 in 2021, Bortz said.

Browning's retirement comes two months after being charged by Baltimore County Police with raping and sexually assaulting a young woman who worked at the park when he was manager. In October, a Baltimore County grand jury indicted Browning on 27 counts stemming from the alleged rapes of the young woman and a second Gunpowder employee. Browning has denied the charges through his attorney and remains in the county jail awaiting trial in March.

Michael Golden, director of external affairs for the Maryland State Retirement and Pension System, said state employees are eligible to collect pensions even if they have been indicted for or convicted of a crime. The only exceptions are state legislators and high-ranking officials, he said, such as the governor and lieutenant governor.

"Any state employee other than those two groups would continue to receive pension benefits while in jail," Golden said. "There are no forfeiture provisions for employees."

Even if Browning had been fired, he would still be eligible for a pension based on the number of years he had worked in state government. “People who get fired are still eligible for a pension,” Golden said.

It is unclear why Browning was not fired. Three other state officials were terminated from the department in the wake of Browning’s arrest and a Baltimore Banner investigation into a toxic culture at Gunpowder, Maryland’s largest state park.

Unlike the other three, Browning was a law enforcement officer and as such had special protections under the Law Enforcement Officers’ Bill of Rights. The department suspended Browning without pay and revoked his police powers after his arrest in late September, said Bortz, the DNR spokesman.

“DNR personnel decisions are made in accordance with applicable State laws and regulations, including the State Personnel and Pensions Article, Public Safety Article, and Department of Budget and Management guidelines,” Bortz wrote in an email. “The department continues to act accordingly following state law, guidance of the Attorney General’s office, and with deference to ongoing legal proceedings, investigations, and the rights of all involved.”

The Banner interviewed 15 current and former DNR employees and reviewed eight complaints that had been sent by Gunpowder workers in 2015 to state park officials. Together, they created a portrait of a park run with little regard for policy, where employees were routinely harassed and then retaliated against for voicing complaints.

Browning, 71, was arrested by Baltimore County Police in late September on charges that he had violently raped a young female employee between 10 and 15 times over a six-year period. According to police, Browning met the woman when she was a teenager taking part in a 4-H program run by his wife in their state-owned home in the Sweet Air section of the park in northern Baltimore County.

A few years later, Browning hired the woman as a seasonal employee, began a consensual relationship with her, and moved her into a house in a remote section of the park at Days Cove, near White Marsh, police alleged in court documents. The house is sandwiched between two landfills and a body of water; it can only be accessed by unlocking a gate and traveling down a mile-long gravel path. Browning had keys to the gate and house and would arrive there several times a day seeking sex, including in the early morning hours before the woman had awakened, police alleged.

When the young woman on multiple occasions declined to have sex, Browning forcibly raped her, according to charging documents.

Browning’s assistant manager, Dean Hughes, was fired last month following accusations that he had sexually harassed a former park employee. Lindley Austin, who Hughes had previously dated, said he harassed her for months, including cornering her in her truck and screaming profanities at her — an account corroborated by numerous other former Gunpowder workers. Austin said her complaints weren’t acted on, and Hughes was later promoted to assistant park manager. Another park employee, Nita Beanland, who supported Austin, said Browning then retaliated by taking away her state vehicle and kicking her out of park housing.

Also terminated in November was Nita Settina, who had served as the park system's highest-ranking official since 2008. Former Gunpowder employees said their complaints had reached Settina, but that she appeared to do little to remedy the problems. Both Browning and Hughes remained in their management roles until this fall.

In addition, Steve McCoy, the regional manager whose territory included Gunpowder Falls State Park, was also fired last month. He and Settina were both political appointees whose jobs could be terminated without cause.

The Maryland Department of Natural Resources Secretary, Jeannie Haddaway-Riccio, last month resisted calls for an independent investigation of the events at Gunpowder and the apparent lack of response to years of complaints by high-ranking state park officials. But Haddaway-Riccio, a former Republican lawmaker and onetime deputy chief of staff to outgoing Gov. Larry Hogan, stressed that bullying, harassment, or abuse of power would not be tolerated, and that DNR and the Maryland attorney general were investigating.

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