



**Conservation and Policy Council
of the Forest Preserves of Cook County**

2015 Annual Report

Submitted on October 28, 2015

**To President Preckwinkle and Members of the Board of Commissioners
Forest Preserves of Cook County**

By Wendy Paulson, Chair, Conservation and Policy Council

October 28, 2015

Dear President Preckwinkle:

It is my privilege to submit to you the first annual report of the Conservation and Policy Council. The report summarizes efforts to date to develop and implement the *Next Century Conservation Plan*; it also highlights key challenges and opportunities going forward.

Accompanying the report is the five-year implementation strategy designed to connect the high level goals of the *Next Century Conservation Plan* with the day-to-day operations of the Forest Preserves. As indicated in the plan, the success of this effort depends on strong partnerships. Thirty-eight organizations have agreed to partner on dozens of projects and programs, and several have offered to lead projects which the Forest Preserves does not have the capacity to take on at this time. As the Forest Preserves continue to implement the plan, it is our hope that many more partners will lead and support projects and programs.

As indicated in the report, successful implementation of the plan will require all of us – Forest Preserves' staff, contractors, advocates and other partners—to scale up our efforts significantly. The Council recognizes that this will take time and resources. While fiscal constraints will result in a flat budget for the Forest Preserves in 2016, all of us can still make progress. The Council has asked staff to leverage partnerships, to increase outreach and engagement, and to implement strategic improvements (such as better signage) which can greatly enhance the visitor's experience. The Council and Forest Preserve staff will also use 2016 to focus on using existing resources as effectively and efficiently as possible and to explore ways to leverage and to raise new resources through asset marketing, corporate sponsorships, and selective outsourcing.

I would like to acknowledge the commitment and work of the members of the Conservation and Policy Council throughout this year. Many civic commissions include knowledgeable and dedicated members, but the Conservation and Policy Council is exceptional; every member brings both expertise and a deep commitment to the work. Each member of this Council has devoted significant time and energy to absorb volumes of information so that we can guide implementation efforts and provide to you and the board an informed assessment of what it will take to succeed. It has been my pleasure to work with this highly engaged and deeply committed group, and we all anticipate a constructive and productive year ahead.

Sincerely,

Wendy Paulson, Chair
Conservation and Policy Council
Forest Preserves of Cook County

I. Where we are today and how we got here

Thanks to visionary civic leaders 100-years ago, every resident of, and visitor to, our region has access to nature in the Forest Preserves of Cook County. We canoe and fish in the lakes and streams, we bike and hike in the 300 miles of trails, we picnic with family and friends and we enjoy the relief that the woods and prairies give us from the concrete of our large metropolis.

But we have failed to do enough to care for land and to help nature, people and communities thrive. Over many decades, our natural lands have degraded. In most areas of the preserves, landscapes once graced with wildflowers, grasses and oak trees became impenetrable thorn thickets.

To address this situation, President Toni Preckwinkle appointed the *Next Century Conservation Commission* to produce a plan that would provide a 21st century vision for protecting nature and connecting people to this great and unique public asset. The *Next Century Conservation Plan* was completed in 2013 and adopted by the Board of Commissioners in February 2014. The Plan lays out a set of bold actions to make Cook County a national leader in urban conservation and calls for a massive commitment to restore habitat to robust ecological health, to acquire and to protect more land, and to make the preserves more inviting and accessible to all Cook County residents.

Brought to their full potential, the preserves can be one of Cook County's most important landmarks and the pride of scores of communities. They can help the Chicago region advance its leadership both in ecological restoration and adaptation to climate change. They can help us live healthier, happier lives. Most importantly, the preserves could be one of the best gifts this generation will ever pass on to the future residents of Cook County.

The Forest Preserves established four working committees (Nature, People, Economic, Leadership) in 2015 to design and to implement projects, programs and initiatives that advance the goals of the plan. These committees are comprised of representatives of diverse groups of federal, state, and local governments, as well as private partners and non-governmental organizations. A fifth committee, the Steering Committee, ensures implementation efforts are integrated across the four committees.

To provide continuity and enduring conservation leadership, and to guide efforts to implement the plan, the inaugural members of the Forest Preserves' Conservation and Policy Council were convened early in 2015. During the year, Council members met quarterly to review and guide the ongoing work of staff and the many partners working together to put the plan in operation. As part of ongoing education to better understand the breadth and character of preserves and associated activities, members toured sites both in association with meetings and between them, including Trailside Nature Center, Sagawau Canyon, Spring Creek, Poplar Creek, and the

Powderhorn Lake Nature Preserve. Council members also participated in various workshops, programs, and committee meetings, absorbing information as quickly as possible in order to understand both the opportunities and the very real challenges related to implementing the *Next Century Conservation Plan*.

Council members approach this work in a true spirit of collaboration. We understand the fiscal constraints facing the Forest Preserves today, and it is our goal to work with staff and partners to develop creative solutions to use limited resources as effectively and efficiently as possible, leverage new resources, and position the Forest Preserves so we are ready and able to seize new opportunities that may arise. For example, in a year where revenues are projected to be relatively flat, Council members have asked staff to identify promising models and to launch new pilots in 2016, to document their impact, and to develop strategies for replicating and scaling up these programs and initiatives over time. We also acknowledge the need to develop better cost estimates for fully implementing the plan; this will be a key task for the upcoming year.

Each year we will prepare an updated implementation strategy to connect the broad, long-term goals of the *Next Century Conservation Plan* to on-going operations of the Forest Preserves.

This report represents our first submittal.

II. Where we need to go and how we will get there

The Forest Preserves has 54,000-acres that are in a natural state. Of these, 5,000-acres are considered to be in healthy condition, based upon Nature Preserve quality.

The *Next Century Conservation Plan* calls for the Forest Preserves to restore a total of 30,000 acres to ecological health—a six-fold increase over the next twenty-five years. In addition, the plan calls for the acquisition of 21,000 acres to expand the preserves to 90,000 acres, and a wide range of site improvements and programs to make the preserves accessible and welcoming to all the people of Cook County.

Implementing these ambitious goals will require a new and very different approach. As outlined in the attached 5-year strategic plan, we will focus on seven operational priorities:

1. **Scaling up.** The Forest Preserves and its partners have launched many successful programs and projects which address priority goals, but to achieve the level of impact envisioned by the plan, massive replication and scaling up is required. A major focus of the first five years will be to evaluate existing promising programs and explore the potential for replication and scaling up.

2. **Using Resources Effectively and Efficiently.** We expect it to take at least five years to scale up the capacity and resources required for successful implementation. However, it is critical that the Forest Preserves position itself during these start-up years so that it is able to move quickly to respond to opportunities that may be presented.
3. **Building and Strengthening Partnerships and Leveraging Resources.** Success will require strong partnerships, and it is critical for the Forest Preserves to figure out how to best leverage partner investment of time, talent and financial resources. We will continually ask, “Is this activity something the Forest Preserves is uniquely qualified to do, or is it something a partner could/should do?”
4. **Changing Organizational Culture.** The challenges we face require new and creative approaches. We must be open to new ideas and willing to try new things. We must measure the results and be frank about what is working and what isn’t. Changing the culture of an organization is difficult, but substantial changes are being made and the Forest Preserves will continue to evolve.
5. **Communicating.** Building the community of support needed to back the ambitious *Next Century Conservation Plan* will require an expanded investment in outreach, education, and marketing. Partners like the Chicago Zoological Society and the Chicago Botanic Garden can help spread the word via their large networks, and social media can activate the networks of advocates and other partners. Market research now underway will help us better understand the attitudes and behaviors of those most likely to visit and/or support the Forest Preserves, what messages are important, and the best methods for delivering those messages. The Forest Preserves will use this information to develop an integrated, comprehensive marketing campaign to build support for the *Next Century Conservation Plan*.
6. **Raising New Resources.** As we assess the gap between resources we need and resources available to implement the plan, the Forest Preserves will seek to fill the gap through non-tax revenues including public-private partnerships, corporate sponsorships, expanded concessions, outsourcing and other operational efficiencies. It is highly likely that increased contributions from the Forest Preserves, partners, volunteers, and others would be necessary as well to provide the resources needed to achieve the plan.
7. **Ensuring Continuity.** The level of change envisioned in this plan cannot occur without a long term, sustained effort over many years and multiple administrations. The Conservation and Policy Council, advocates, and partners will each play a key role in guiding efforts and ensuring continuity over time.

The five-year strategic plan addresses these operational priorities in a deliberate and balanced manner. The four working committees—each co-chaired by a Forest Preserves employee and a key partner—met monthly to translate the broad goals outlined in the *Next Century Conservation Plan* into specific actions to be taken over the next several years. Recognizing current fiscal and capacity constraints, more than forty partners worked with Forest Preserves' staff to prioritize projects and to identify programs and initiatives which could be led by partners, rather than staff. Over time, the number of partners leading specific initiatives is expected to grow.

The committees estimated total resources needed in 2016 and identified which resources will come from the Forest Preserves and which resources can be leveraged from other sources. Most of the 2016 costs identified in the five-year strategic plan have been incorporated into the 2016 budget. As indicated, in some cases funding is not currently available and other funding sources must be identified or projects will be deferred to later years. When possible, the committees also identified total resources needed over the next five years.

Finally, to assess our progress over time, the committees identified mileposts and measures of success. These are incorporated into the five-year implementation plan and will be updated annually.

III. Review of 2016 Budget

In addition to presenting a five-year implementation strategy and our annual report, the President and Board charged the Conservation and Policy Council with the responsibility to review the Forest Preserves' annual budget and to make recommendations to the General Superintendent, the President, and the Board of Commissioners about the budget and its alignment with the strategic implementation plan.

The *Next Century Conservation Plan* estimated it would cost \$1 billion to \$2 billion over 25 years to achieve the restoration and acquisition goals outlined in the plan. This includes all resources applied to implementation—staff time, equipment, money spent on contractors, volunteer hours, partner contributions, etc. However this does not include the cost to achieve other goals outlined in the plan such as expanding the Conservation Corps, improving communication and outreach, increasing programs, or making ADA improvements and other capital improvements.

The preliminary cost estimates must be expanded and refined. In addition, we need a system to measure and document the many resources being leveraged (such as partner investments and volunteer hours), and to monitor growth in these resources over time. This will be a primary focus of the Council in 2016.

Because Council members need more time and more information to understand fully the potential costs, revenue sources and contributions from partners, it is premature to include a detailed budget recommendation in this report. Instead, we will use 2016 to work with Forest Preserves' staff and partners to define and refine cost estimates so we can provide a more thorough budget review and recommendations in our 2016 annual report.

IV. Conclusion

While many challenges remain, significant progress has been made. The district has made a strong commitment to transparency, and there is a new willingness to collaborate with the Council and partners to find effective solutions to a wide range of challenges. Staff have completely restructured the Forest Preserves' budget to align with the goals of the *Next Century Conservation Plan* and are in the process of modifying department performance metrics to also align with the plan so that we can measure progress over time. Partners are exploring how they can incorporate key elements of the plan into their organizations' operations, and staff and partners are developing a system to document and measure the important investments partners are making to support the plan.

In the year ahead, we must continue to search for efficiencies and cost reductions, and to explore the potential for new or increased revenues from various sources such as new concessions, leveraged investment from matching grants, corporate sponsorships, increased volunteer hours, and increased partner contributions. And we must build the broad community of support needed to implement the ambitious goals of the plan.

This effort remains a work in progress, and the Council will continue to explore how we can be most helpful to the President and Board.

Sincerely,

Wendy Paulson, Chairman of the
Conservation and Policy Council

Falona Joy, Vice Chairman of the
Conservation and Policy Council

Mark N. Templeton, Secretary of the
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Cook County Commissioner Robert Steele,
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