



Forest Preserves of Cook County

2022 Referendum

**BUDGETS, INVESTMENTS AND IMPACTS:
2023–2025**



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Image by Laura Anchor

Executive Summary

Overwhelming passage of the Clean Air, Clean Water, and Wildlife Habitat Protection Referendum ballot initiative in November 2022 was a watershed moment in the history of the Forest Preserves of Cook County. The last public referendum for the Forest Preserves, for a bond issue, was nearly 100 years ago. The additional revenue provided from the property tax levy enlarged the total budget of the Forest Preserves by nearly a third for 2023, and more than \$41 million annually from the tax increase continues to provide a dependable source of revenue for the Forest Preserves.

In the years before the referendum, the Forest Preserves worked within a series of hold-steady budgets that required hard decisions stemming from a lack of resources for a sustainable fiscal future. These budgets continually deferred necessary maintenance, severely

limited progress toward core mission Next Century Conservation Plan goals and underfunded payments on long-term responsibilities. The tax-levy increase immediately provided the Forest Preserves with resources to help address these issues and reach a sustainable fiscal path.

This report covers 2023–2025—the first three years after the passage of the referendum—a period when the Forest Preserves was able to improve facilities and amenities and expand and launch programs, initiatives and processes at a level that simply was not possible before the referendum’s additional resources. The impacts on the Forest Preserves as an institution and out in the field are impressive and undeniable.

Executive summary continued on page 2.

Priorities and Increased Budgets

Voters across Cook County supported the 2022 Forest Preserves referendum because it presented a clear plan to invest in conservation, expand public access to nature, strengthen programming, and address long-standing financial and infrastructure needs. Before the election, the Forest Preserves outlined a set of its priority goals for the additional funds:

- Acquire and protect more natural open land for the enjoyment of generations to come.
- Protect and restore wildlife habitat that is home to native plants and animals, some of which are threatened or endangered.
- Increase programs and events for the public and schools, including more outreach to communities from every part of Cook County.
- Expand and maintain trails, improve signage and make amenities more energy efficient and accessible to all.
- Resolve the Forest Preserves' pension shortfall.
- Address the deferred capital needs of the Brookfield Zoo Chicago and Chicago Botanic Garden.

The referendum allowed a 0.025% increase to the Forest Preserves' property tax limiting rate to bring more resources to the district. Although that moderate change amounts to only approximately \$20 per year for the average homeowner, the adjustment generated an additional \$41.4 million for the 2023 budget.

To show the impact of the referendum, this report includes a timeline of all departmental, districtwide and other budget funds for 2000–2005, the three years before and three years after the referendum passed. Because the Forest Preserves had faced a structural budget deficit before the referendum passed, these budgets had stayed the same or risen only slightly from 2020–2022 and many years before.

For most budget lines, an immediate and then largely sustained increase in funding is clear starting in 2023, varying by budget due to allocation priorities. For example, the corporate budget for the Conservation and Experiential Program Department jumped from \$6 million in 2022 to \$8.4 million in 2023, then essentially held at \$8.2 million in 2024 and \$8.6 million in 2025.

A year-by-year comparison of budgets also shines a light on some unique circumstances over the first three years

after the referendum. For example, because the Forest Preserves could not by state law increase its annual contribution to its pension fund, the 2023 employee annuity and benefit fund level remained essentially the same and the extra funds were distributed across several other priorities, particularly to several construction and development funds. In 2024, with state law changed, the pension fund went from \$4 million to \$12.4 million, in line with expectations to address this underfunded fiscal liability, a level that has continued.

Key Investments and Impacts

Before the vote, when the Forest Preserves shared its priorities for the possible income from the referendum, it also projected how the expected increase in funding would be allocated in the first year. These priorities were grouped into ten categories.

- Ecological Restoration
- Land Acquisition
- Public Engagement and Programs
- Public Amenities
- Capital Maintenance and Support
- Public Safety and Landscape Maintenance
- Administrative
- Pension Obligation
- Brookfield Zoo Chicago Capital Maintenance
- Chicago Botanic Garden Capital Maintenance

It is not feasible to provide exact measurement of how the increase to the Forest Preserves' property tax limiting rate has been allocated and spent in these overarching categories with the Forest Preserves accounting system. Many of the projected categories are supported by several departments, or one department might have responsibilities for multiple categories. The funding from the tax-levy increase is not a separate revenue stream, it is simply an increase to the budget's existing property tax line, and expenses are not marked as covered by referendum funds. Even if that was the case, some initiatives of programs have been expanded or improved due to the referendum, and so only part of their cost could be considered supported because of referendum funding. Finally, over time, the specific impact of the referendum on the Forest Preserves budget becomes increasingly difficult to measure due to inflation, changes in personnel costs and more.



To provide real-world results of the referendum's impact from 2023–2025, this report puts a spotlight on key investments in programs, equipment, personnel, contracts and other expenses that would not have been possible without the increase in tax-levy funds.

It also highlights the impact of those changes, both direct and as indirect. From these examples, it is quite clear that the referendum has made a difference in the ten categories, to varying degrees.

Major changes include:

- Directly investing more than \$11 million in ecological restoration projects from 2023–2025 and greatly improving capacity for the Department of Resource Management to manage another \$6.3 million in grant funding by hiring for 32 new positions and purchasing more than \$4 million in new vehicles and equipment. Launching a Seed Amplification Program to supply locally adapted native plants for restoration projects, and providing \$2.4 million to support and expand Conservation Corps programs.

In 2022, the Forest Preserves had 15,369 acres under active restoration management. By 2025, that number had shot up to 18,322 acres, the largest figure in Forest Preserves history. Adding approximately 1,000 additional acres each year during this three-year span is also an unprecedented accomplishment.

- More than doubling the annual allocation to the Real Estate Fund, from \$5 million in 2022 to \$12.3 million in 2025. Directly acquiring an additional 11.5 acres with referendum funding and using the funding to make the initial purchase of more than 81 additional acres. The Forest Preserves added 558

acres to its holdings from 2023–2025, a 172% increase from the preceding three-year period.

- Building programming capacity with nearly 20 new hires at nature centers and throughout the Conservation and Experiential Programming Department, as well as additional funding for nearly 2,000 programs run by external partners to offer a greater diversity of events and build local connections. Providing free transportation to the Preserves, Zoo and Garden to thousands of people with community groups on the Nature Express bus program, and improving outreach to the public with increased resources for communications and marketing.

The number of people who joined a program or activity in the Preserves rose 22% from 2022 to 2025 (1.8 million to 2.2 million) and the number of times that the Forest Preserves connected with someone at a school, community event, or online jumped by 47% (3.6 million to 5.3 million).

- Addressing deferred maintenance and long-needed improvements for key public amenities and resources in the Preserves, including nearly \$4 million spent on improving conditions for 64 miles of trails on seven popular trail systems, \$2.5 million for repairs at 43 picnic sites, and \$1.2 million for repairs to more than a dozen public restroom buildings in sites across Cook County. Investments in improving public amenities also includes investing in accessibility improvements for people with disabilities, planting 815 trees at picnic groves, golf courses and campgrounds, and building capacity in the Planning and Development Department with new staff and equipment.

- More than doubling funding to replace a deeply aging fleet with new and greener vehicles. Annual expenditures for vehicles went from \$1 million annually to \$2.3 million, and the Preserves purchased more than 80 vehicles from 2023–2025 with referendum funding. Building a greener fleet not only includes purchasing alternative fuel vehicles—referendum funding was invested in electric vehicle charging infrastructure and in-house conversion and maintenance training.

- Launching a \$2 million Garbage Modernization Program to make the Preserves cleaner and refuse collection more efficient with four new and four retrofitted garbage trucks designed to pick up recycling and landfill trash in one run, along with replacing the open metal drums with nearly 2,000 new garbage receptacles that won't rust or dent and will keep animals out. More than a third of the new totes are for recycling, and the percentage of recyclable refuse rose by more than six-fold, from 2022 to 2025: from 3% to 18.5%.

- Improving the Department of Law Enforcement by addressing a wage gap with other local law enforcement agencies that has made it made it difficult to attract and retain sworn officers, and adding equipment and vehicles for public safety, trail patrols and search-and-rescue operations.

- Strengthening the administrative infrastructure of the Forest Preserves with new positions in the Finance, Legal and Human Resources departments. These changes both improved the capacity of these departments to support existing work in the field and ensured that referendum-funded increases in contracts, staff and initiatives could be adequately handled.

- Guaranteeing the long-term health of the Forest Preserves pension fund by meeting the actuarial requirements for the employer contribution, raising the annual contribution from \$4.2 million in 2022 to \$12.4 million in 2025. By addressing the ongoing shortfall, the Preserves was able to avoid consideration of budget cuts to restoration, public programs, land acquisition, maintenance and other fundamental activities that support healthy, vibrant preserves.

- Establishing the overarching changes due to the referendum with investments in the Forest Preserves' workforce. From 2023–2025, the equivalent of more than 85 full-time positions were added across all departments in the Preserves, a 14% increase in the number of employees from 2022. New funds gave departments the flexibility to not only add critical staff and provide equipment that improves the work, but reorganize as needed for new initiatives and more effective operations.

Referendum funding allowed the Preserves to raise wages to better match market conditions, handle rising health insurance costs without requiring cuts to public events, restoration work or other key initiatives, and improve Conservation Corps and Youth Outdoor Ambassador programs to provide a paid experience that can serve as an on-ramp to a career in conservation.

- Providing dedicated funding for critical infrastructure and facility improvements and long-term maintenance to Brookfield Zoo Chicago and the Chicago Botanic Garden, longstanding partners of the Forest Preserves that are located on Forest Preserves land. The annual funding from the Preserves increased by \$4.7 million for the Zoo from 2022 to 2025, and by \$2.8 million to the Garden.

Note that in addition to this direct support, the funding from the referendum gives the Forest Preserves a level of certainty of fiscal sustainability at a consistent level. Because the Forest Preserves is no longer in a structural deficit, leadership can operate a more nimble, proactive organization. More resources for internal infrastructure across departments has also expanded the Forest Preserves' capacity to handle projects funded with grants or with external partners. With all these changes, the Preserves are now an agency with the ability to take on a greater leadership role in conservation and nature-based programming in Cook County and the region.

Next Steps

The additional funding from the referendum is locked into the Forest Preserves budget, but a steady level of growth is not. The only year the Preserves saw an extraordinarily large funding increase was 2023, the year after the referendum passed. Subsequent budgets rose just 3.6% in 2024 and less than 0.5% in 2025.

During the first years after the tax-levy increase, the Forest Preserves planned, built new capacity and invested in programs, personnel and initiatives. These investments have expanded what the Forest Preserves offers the people of Cook County and will continue to support these endeavors. To stay on this fiscally sustainable path, though, the agency will remain at this fiscal plateau for the foreseeable future. Although there are opportunities for new growth, they will necessarily be at a smaller scale and require careful planning and thoughtful budget allocations.

Because extrapolating the impact of the referendum fiscally and operationally for the Forest Preserves is inexact, this report will be the last public accounting focused solely on the impact of the referendum on the Forest Preserves of Cook County. The changes from these funds in additional staffing, new procedures, investments in equipment and vehicles, and more are

now woven into the operations and organization of the Preserves. Similar to the Next Century Conservation Plan, the impact of the referendum is part of the DNA of the Preserves, not a separate fund or limited initiative.

The Forest Preserves will continue to be transparent in its allocation of funds and proposed outcomes through each annual budget, annual Key Performance Indicators and, beginning in 2027, an annual report that covers the previous fiscal year's spending, accomplishments and noteworthy changes in the Preserves.

Under this administration, the Forest Preserves of Cook County has become a more efficient and effective agency. That change is undoubtedly a part—perhaps the largest part—of why the tax-levy referendum was approved by 69% of Cook County voters. Forest Preserves leadership extends its deepest thanks to the voters and the coalition of advocates who helped support the passage of the referendum. The projected \$1.1 billion it will add to the Forest Preserves capacity over the next 25 years will have untold benefits to the residents, natural world, human health and long-term quality of life of Cook County.



Background:

The 2022 Clean Air, Clean Water, and Wildlife Habitat Protection Referendum

In November 2022, voters across Cook County were presented with an opportunity to approve the Clean Air, Clean Water, and Wildlife Habitat Protection Referendum, a 0.025% increase to the Forest Preserve District of Cook County's property tax limiting rate to bring more resources to the district. The measure was overwhelmingly approved, with roughly 69% voter support (75% in Chicago and 63% in suburbs), demonstrating broad public backing for protecting and investing in one of the region's most important natural resources.

The referendum authorized a moderate change that amounts to approximately \$20 per year for the average homeowner. This adjustment, however, generates more than \$41 million in additional funding annually, creating a reliable source of revenue for the Forest Preserves that totals a projected \$1.1 billion over the next 25 years.

As described in the ballot question, the additional funding supports a range of environmental and public benefits, including conserving and restoring natural

lands, protecting the water quality of rivers, lakes and streams, providing natural floodwater storage, protecting wildlife habitat, and safeguarding forests that help improve regional air quality. The funding also supports the improvement and maintenance of existing forest preserves, trails and public amenities.

This stable funding stream enables the Forest Preserves to address long-standing priorities: adding more public lands, expanding ecological restoration, better access and programming for residents, improving trails and amenities, and supporting key partner institutions. The funds also allow the Preserves to build a more capable agency to support these goals, including addressing critical financial obligations. These investments strengthen the Forest Preserves' ability to steward more than 70,000 acres of public land across Cook County while continuing to serve people, wildlife and communities for generations to come.

Key Priorities Supported by the Referendum

Prior to the vote for the referendum, the Forest Preserves of Cook County outlined specific goals for how the additional funding would be used to benefit residents, protect natural resources and ensure the long-term sustainability of the Forest Preserves.

- 1. Land Acquisition and Protection:** Securing the resources needed for acquiring and protecting additional natural open space throughout Cook County is one of the most important results from the referendum's success. By preserving land before it is lost to development, the Forest Preserves expands access to nature and ensures that future generations have opportunities to experience and enjoy natural areas. This effort also focuses on protecting land in parts of the county that historically have had less access to preserved open space, helping make the Forest Preserves a welcoming destination for all people.
- 2. Habitat Protection and Ecological Restoration:** Supporting efforts to protect and restore wildlife habitat across the Forest Preserves is also significant. Restoration initiatives improve the ecological health of prairies, woodlands, wetlands and waterways. These efforts help sustain native plant and animal communities, including species that are threatened or endangered in Illinois, while also improving biodiversity, water quality and environmental resilience.
- 3. Expanded Programs, Education and Community Outreach:** Expanding the reach of public programs,

events and educational opportunities requires additional resources. This includes expanding environmental education for schools, increasing nature-based programming for residents and strengthening outreach to communities throughout Cook County. The Forest Preserves is working to ensure that residents from every part of Cook County have opportunities to connect with nature and participate in recreational and educational activities.

4. Trail Expansion, Facility Improvements and

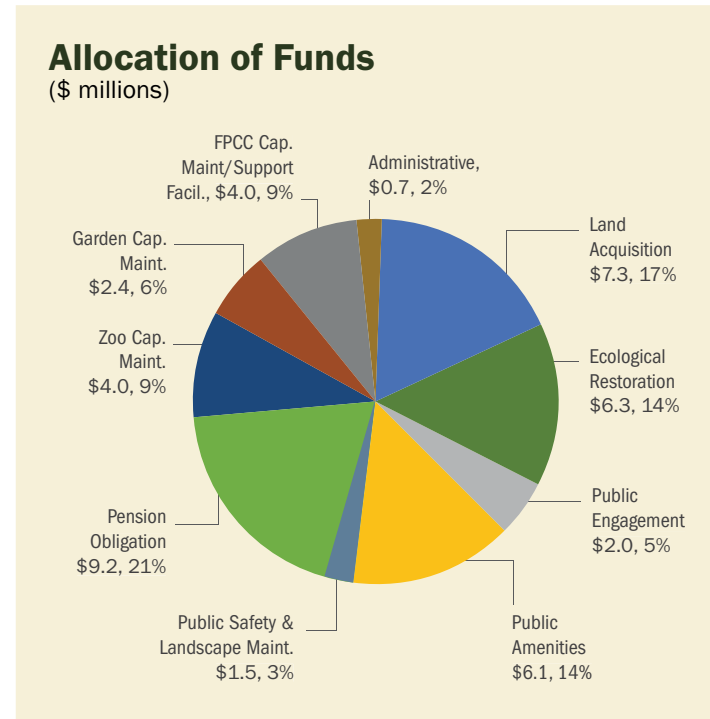
Accessibility: To improve visitor infrastructure, the funding supports expanding and maintaining trails, enhancing signage and wayfinding, and upgrading amenities to be more energy efficient and accessible. These improvements help ensure that visitors can safely and easily navigate the Forest Preserves and enjoy a more inclusive and comfortable outdoor experience.

5. Pension Stabilization: Providing a dedicated revenue stream to help address the long-standing challenge of stabilizing the pension fund helps ensure the long-term financial health of the Forest Preserves while maintaining the organization's ability to invest in conservation, operations and public services.

6. Deferred Capital Needs at Major Institutions:

Addressing deferred capital needs at two major institutions located on Forest Preserves land: Brookfield Zoo Chicago and the Chicago Botanic Garden support necessary infrastructure upgrades, facility improvements and modernization efforts that will allow these institutions to continue serving as leading centers for conservation, education and public engagement.

To accomplish these goals, the Forest Preserves projected how the expected increase in funding would be allocated in the first year of the increased tax-levy fund in 10 overarching categories. In total, the projection before the vote on the referendum in November 2022 was an increase of \$43.5 million.



This allocation model served as the guide for how the Forest Preserves invested the extra tax-levy funds after the referendum passed in terms of staffing, programming, equipment and initiatives from 2023–2025.

Budget Review

The impact of the referendum on the Forest Preserves of Cook County is clear when comparing the agency's overall budget for the three years preceding its passage in the fall of 2022 and the three subsequent years.

In 2023, the first year after the tax levy was increased due to the referendum, the Forest Preserves budget rose by \$45,257,424—a leap of 33%. Of that increase, the vast majority (\$41,449,398) was from the additional property tax revenue from the referendum. The remaining \$3,808,026 was from sources such as an increase in non-tax revenue, use of the Corporate Reserve Fund and personal property replacement taxes (PPRT). In 2024 and 2025, that same overall gain from 2023 was maintained, but the annual budget rose 3.6% in 2024 and less than 0.5% in 2025.

As part of this report's overview of how the Forest Preserves invested the additional funds from 2023–2025, this section provides a breakdown of the departmental, districtwide and other budget funds for the three years before and three years after the referendum passed. Similar to the total budget of the Forest Preserves, these funds had stayed the same or risen only slightly from 2020–2022 (and many years before). Post-referendum, note that the amount of increase is not uniform across funds, as some departments and funds received more resources in line with the goals and categories that the Forest Preserves prioritized prior to the referendum vote.

It is not feasible to provide an exact measurement of

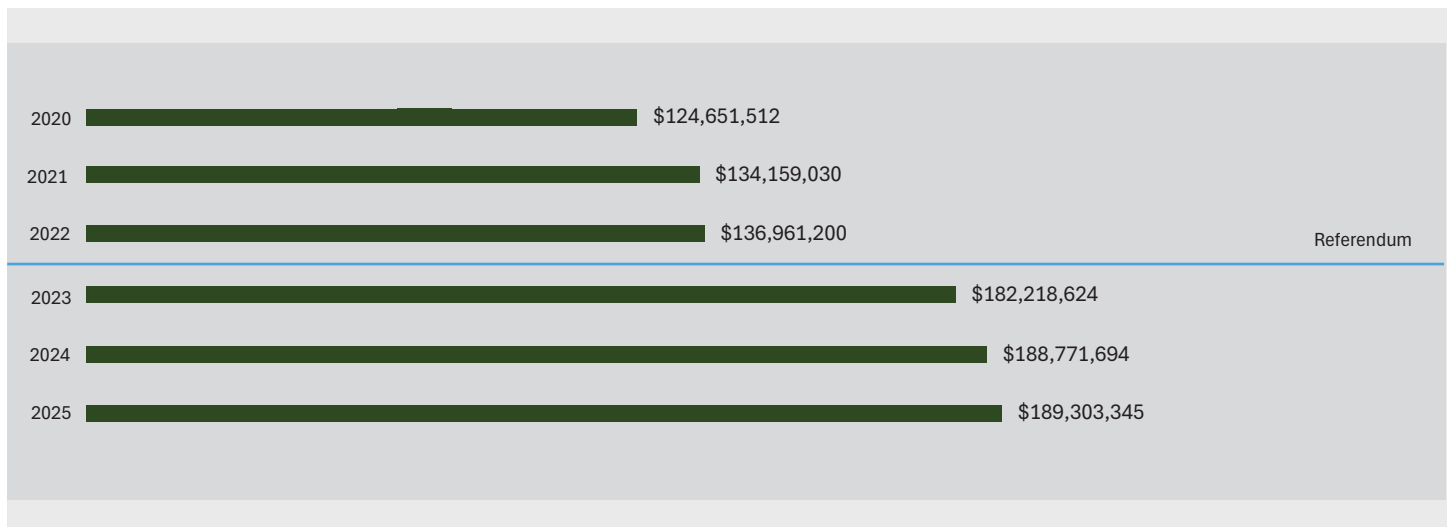
how the 0.025% increase to the Forest Preserves' property tax limiting rate has been spent to the dollar in the 10 overarching allocation categories outlined prior to the referendum vote by the Preserves. This is due to a number of overarching factors:

Most categories do not purely align to departmental budgets. In some cases, a category is the responsibility of multiple departments. Public engagement, for example, has been advanced with referendum funds by Conservation and Experiential Programming, the Office of the General Superintendent, and Permits, Rentals and Concessions.

In other instances, one department's budget might address several categories. Fleet and Facilities' expenditures include purchasing and maintaining vehicles that are used by Resource Management for ecological restoration, by Resource Management and Landscape Maintenance for capital maintenance of existing facilities, and by Law Enforcement for public safety. Planning and Development's capital budget and its staffing cover public amenities like picnic shelters and trails, as well as capital maintenance and facilities that are exclusively for staff like Landscape Maintenance garages.

The revenue provided to the Forest Preserves of Cook County due to the tax-levy increase is not measured in the agency's budget as a separate revenue stream. In the budget's list of appropriation sources, "referendum funds" are part of the property tax

Total Budget for the Forest Preserves of Cook County



revenue total, which is allocated into six funds, including corporate, construction and development, and zoological and botanic garden. In turn, other funds—including real estate and capital improvement—are supported through fund transfers, which include money available from property taxes.

The Forest Preserves Finance Department does not measure expenses in a separate line to denote a cost that is covered by referendum funds. The Forest Preserves does not have capacity to identify the mix of revenue sources that support an expense. For example, the extra resources available from referendum increases to the tax-levy to hire more staff in a department is allocated to the same corporate fund expense account for existing personnel, not a special “hired with referendum funds” account. In addition, other connected expenses, such as expense lines for all of a department’s personnel for health insurance, scheduled salary adjustments and training, cannot be parsed out as existing staff and staff available due to referendum funds.

Some existing programs, initiatives and projects have been expanded due to referendum funding, but aren’t new. With the additional resources from the tax-levy increase, the Forest Preserves has expanded and improved the quarterly guide that promotes seasonal events and other ways to enjoy the Forest Preserves, for example. The Forest Preserves has no standard and operable accounting methodology that would effectively parse out the additional cost of a contract into multiple line items.

Over time, the specific impact of the referendum on the Forest Preserves budget becomes increasingly difficult to measure. Changes are inevitable and varied in a budget from year to year: Typically, the tax-levy for the Forest Preserves grows annually to capture inflationary growth: by 2% in FY2024, which provided an additional \$2.7 million in income, and 2.4% in FY2025, adding an additional \$3.6 million. Each year, many staff are allowed a step increase in their salary and/or a COLA increase. Health care expenses vary annually, as well. As changes such as these modify the cost of any given investment, it becomes less clear how much of the program, staff salary or contract can be said to be fully covered by referendum funding.

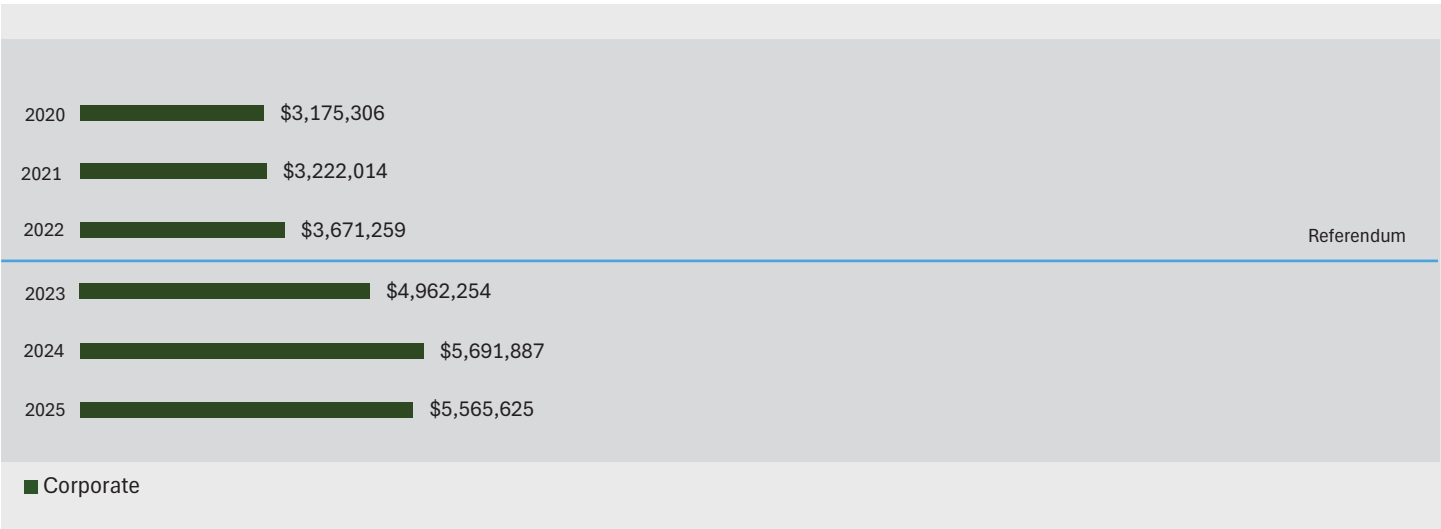
Section 3 provides highlights of primary investments from 2023-2025 for each of the ten allocation categories, identifying increased or new investments that would not have been possible without referendum funding. Each category also includes key outcomes attributable to referendum-enabled tax-levy funds. Between the changes in budgeting outlined below, and the key investments and impacts spotlighted in Section 3, the impact of the referendum can clearly be seen.

Office of the General Superintendent

The Office of the General Superintendent (OGS), comprised of the Executive Office, Communications, Compliance and Volunteer Resources teams, ensures all Forest Preserves services, programs, policies and department work plans are aligned with the Preserves’ mission. OGS secures public and private resources

to advance the Forest Preserves’ mission, oversees communications and marketing to the public, facilitates volunteer stewardship of the preserves, and cultivates partnerships with a wide range of institutions that support conservation, environmental education and outdoor recreation.

Budget for the Office of the General Superintendent

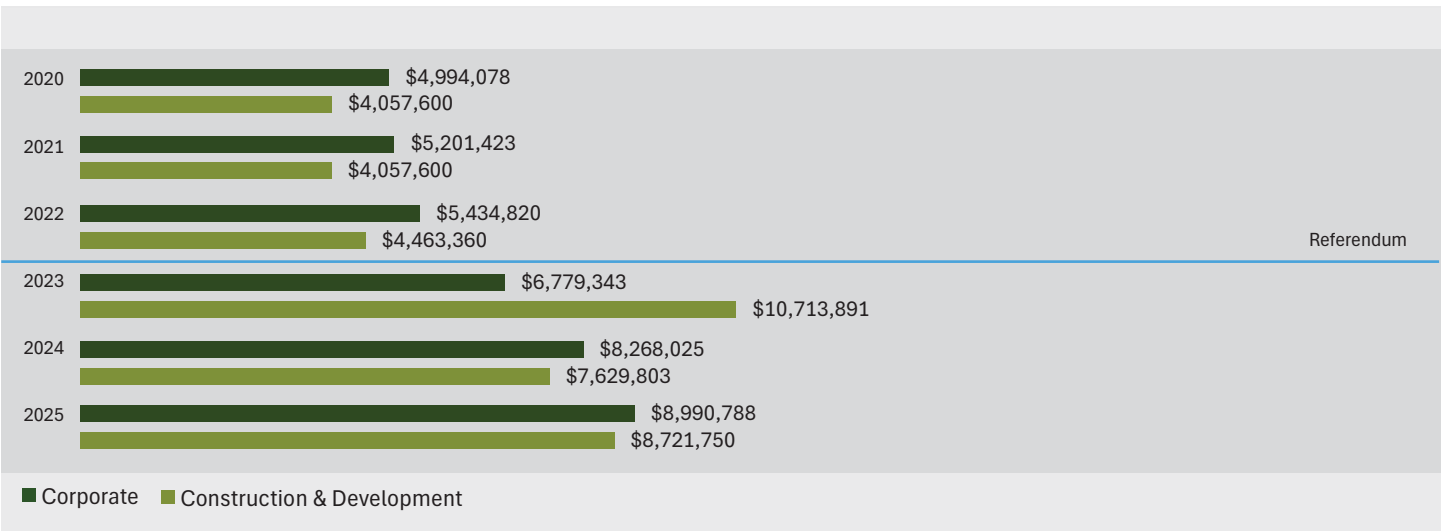


Resource Management

The Department of Resource Management preserves, restores and protects the natural areas and public open spaces of the Forest Preserves, providing an environment where native plants and wildlife can thrive in an urban landscape. Through ecological restoration, fisheries and wildlife management, conservation programming, habitat restoration, trail maintenance and scientific monitoring, the department works to improve

the ecosystem health of the Preserves. In the first year after the referendum, due to the inability in 2023 to increase pension funding, an extra allocation of funding was allocated to RM construction and development funds, which is for expenditures for maintenance, restoration and rehabilitation of wildlife habitats and natural landscapes.

Budgets for the Department of Resource Management

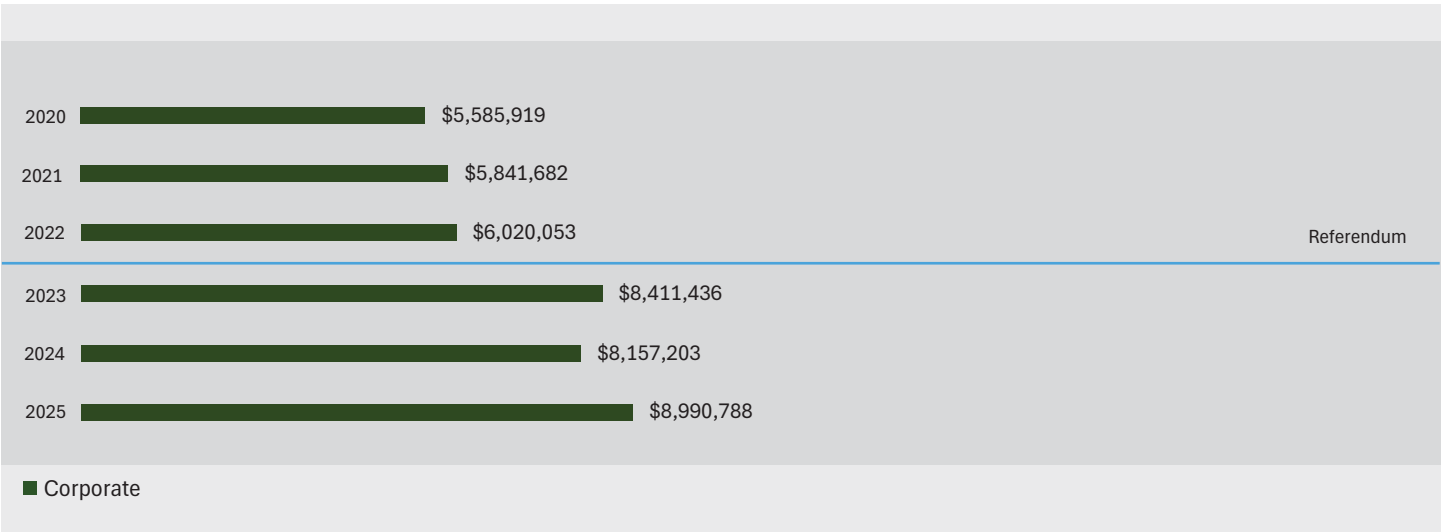


Conservation and Experiential Programming

The Conservation & Experiential Programming (CEP) Department connects diverse audiences to nature through educational programs, outdoor recreation and community engagement across the Forest Preserves.

Through six nature centers, three aquatic centers, five campgrounds and preserves throughout the county, CEP offers year-round opportunities to explore, learn and play while building lasting relationships with communities.

Budget for Conservation & Experiential Programming

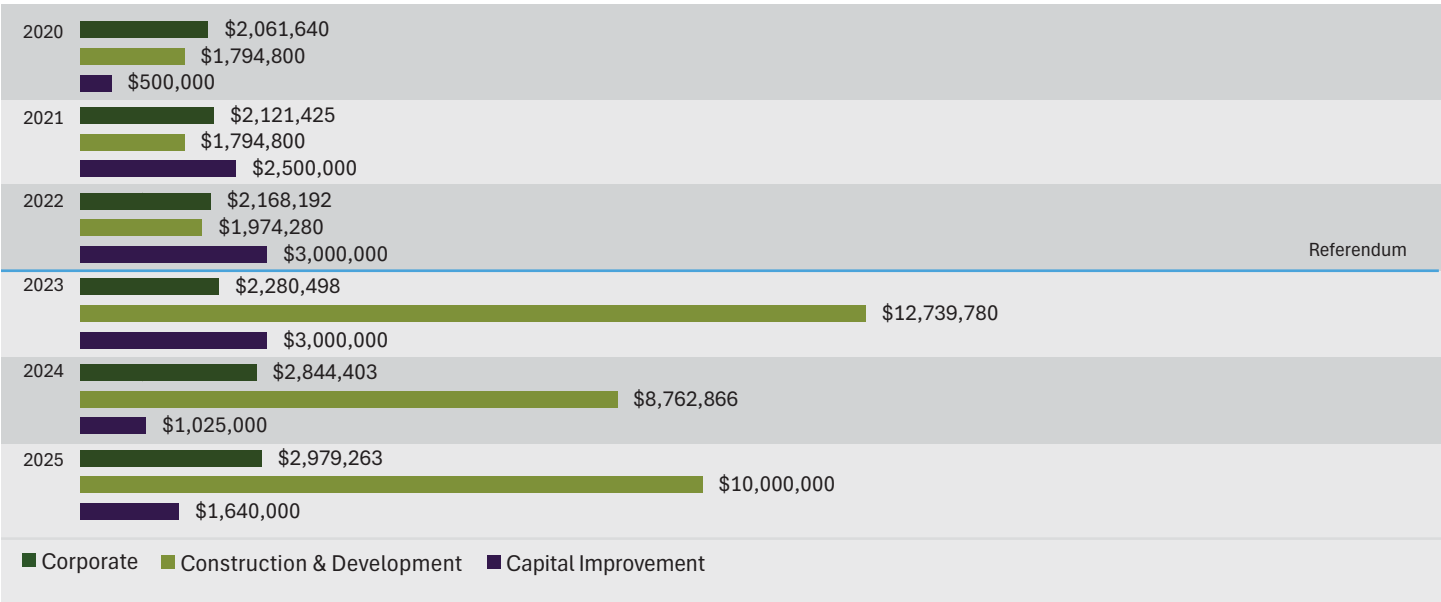


Planning and Development

The Planning & Development Department plans, designs and manages capital improvement projects that make the Forest Preserves more welcoming, accessible and enjoyable for visitors. Guided by the agency’s five-year Capital Improvement Plan, the department oversees investments in trails, campgrounds, recreation sites, buildings and infrastructure. It also leads land

acquisition and land-use planning, maintains maps and real estate records, and develops design standards that support the long-term stewardship and improvement of the preserves. In the first year after the referendum, an extra allocation of funding was allocated to P&D construction and development funds due to inability in 2023 to increase pension funding.

Budgets for Planning and Development

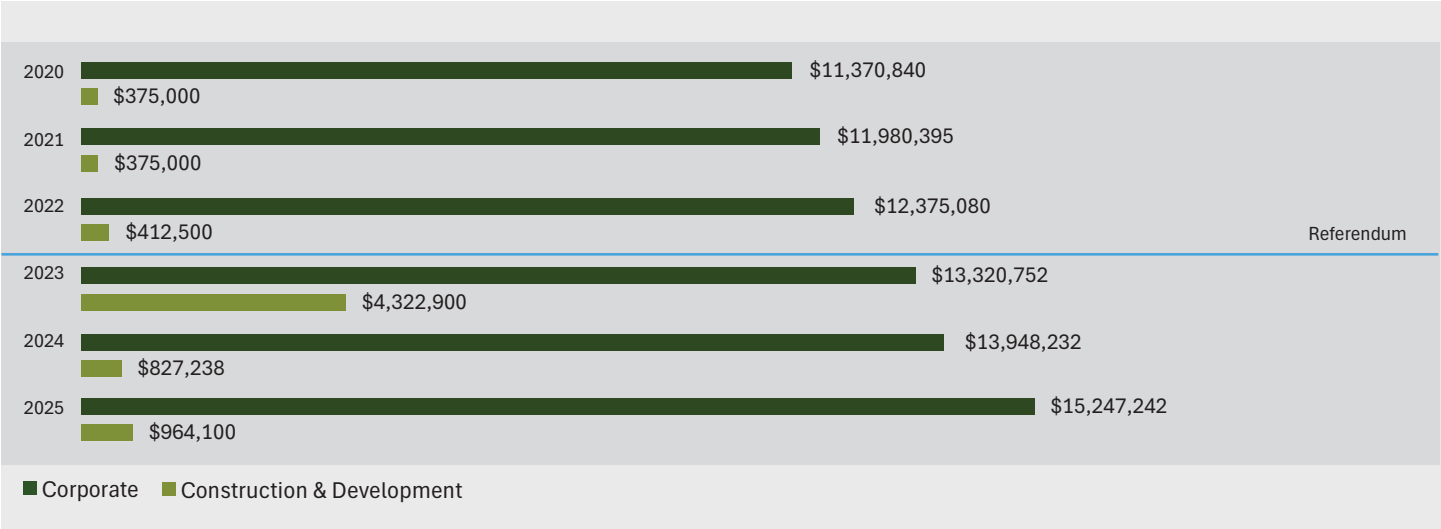


Landscape Maintenance

The Landscape Maintenance Department provides a safe, clean and aesthetically inviting environment for users of the Forest Preserves by maintaining picnic groves, mowing the grounds, repairing asphalt, removing refuse, plowing parking lots and more. To launch a

Garbage Modernization Program, \$4.3 million was budgeted to the LM construction and development fund in 2023 from funds that were allocated to the pension fund in subsequent years.

Budgets for Landscape Maintenance

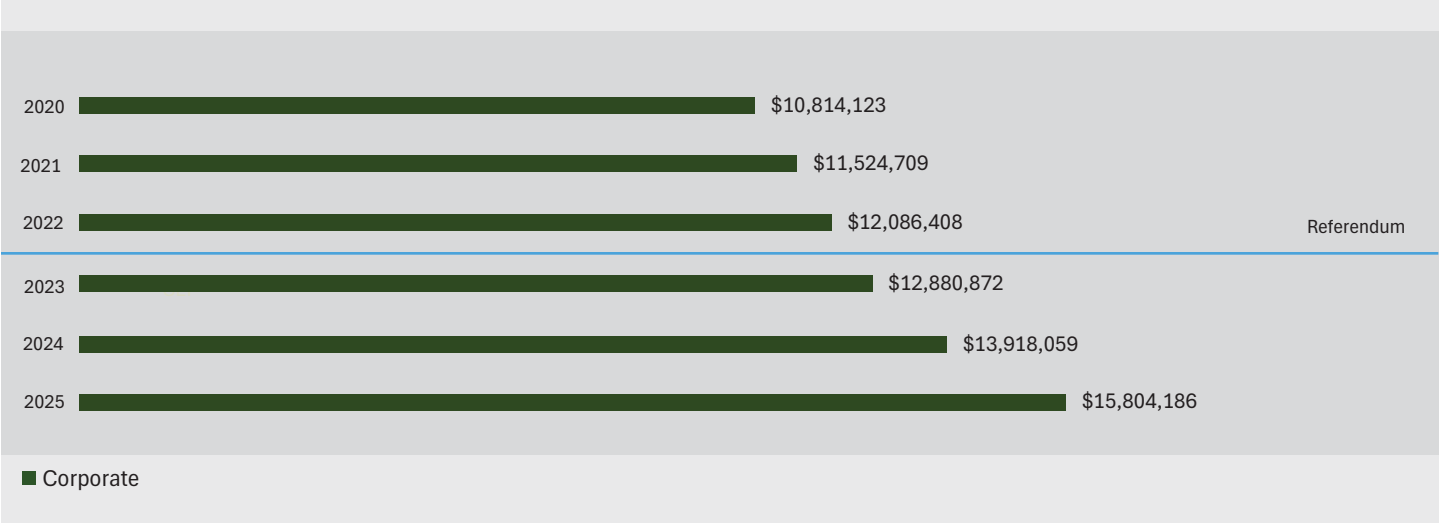


Law Enforcement

The Forest Preserves Law Enforcement Department serves and protects people visiting the preserves and protects the Forest Preserves’ natural lands and property by upholding and enforcing all state, county

and Forest Preserves laws and ordinances. Forest Preserves officers perform a dual role: Both the conventional duties of a police officer and tasks and duties performed by conservation officers.

Budget for Law Enforcement

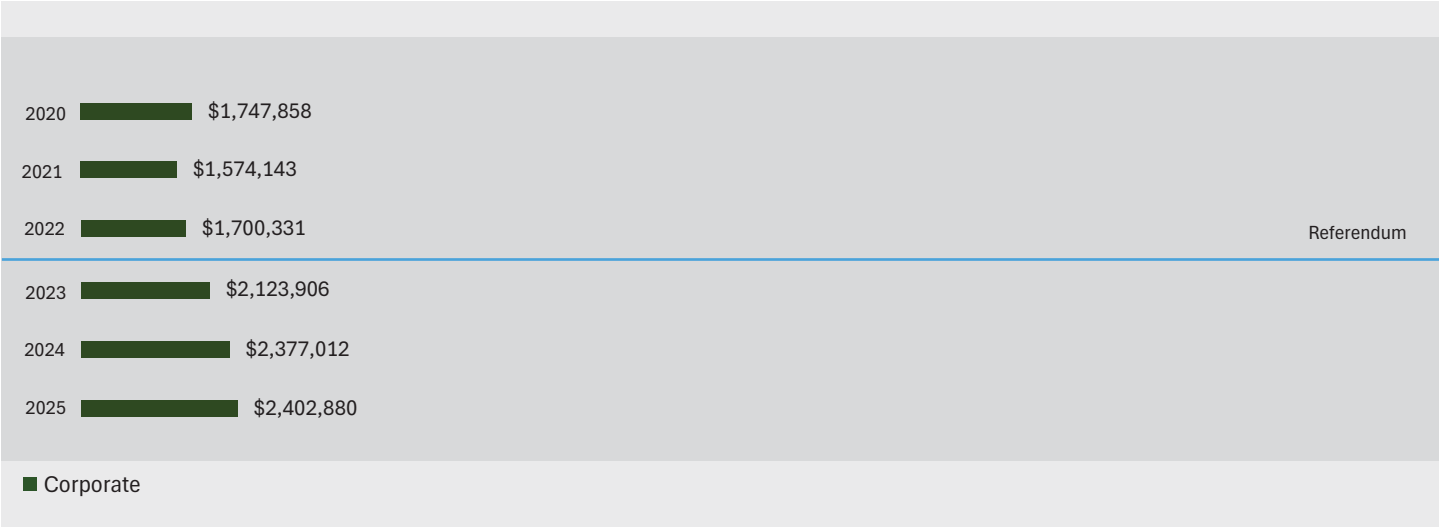


Permits, Rentals and Concessions

The Permits, Rentals and Concessions (PRC) Department provides permits for picnics, special events and recreational activities and oversees the Preserves’ golf courses, boat rentals, food and beverage concessions, and a treetop adventure

course. The department also administers membership programs for off-leash dog areas and equestrian and snowmobile licenses, and oversees concessionaire revenue-generating opportunities that enhance visitor experiences.

Budget for Permits, Rentals and Concessions

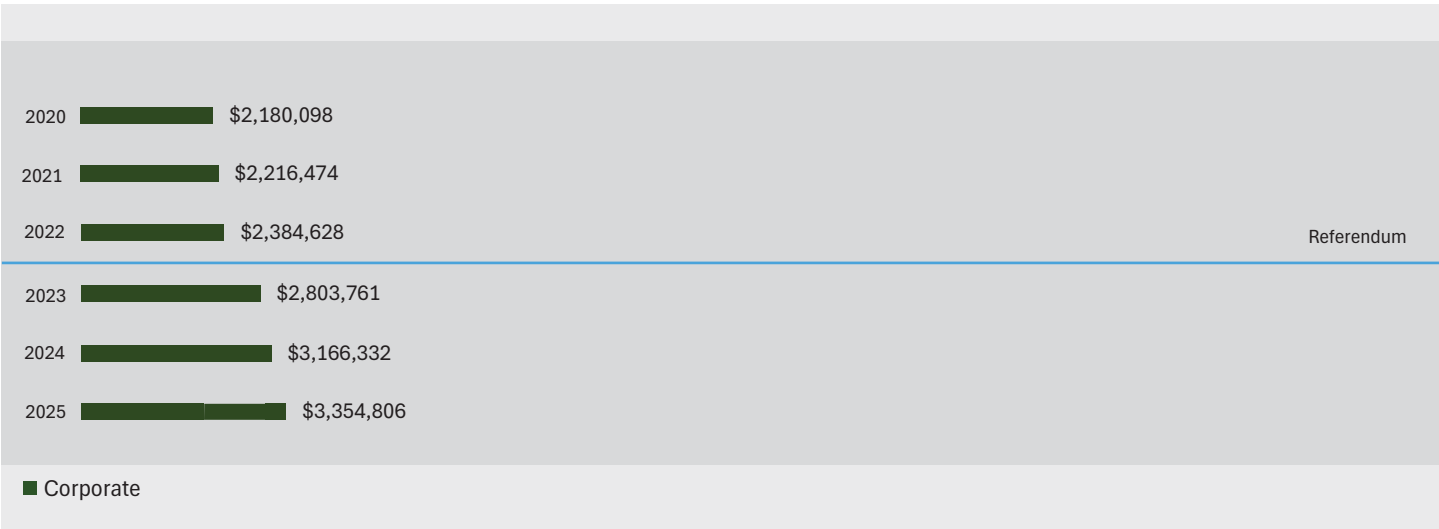


Finance & Administration

The Finance & Administration (F&A) Department is responsible for the financial management and fiscal stewardship of the Forest Preserves. F&A implements sound financial management principles through annual budgeting, accurate financial record

keeping, payroll, competitively procured goods and services, and timely payment to vendors. The F&A Information Technology team provides hardware, software, telecommunication and other technological tools to all staff across the Preserves.

Budget for Finance and Administration

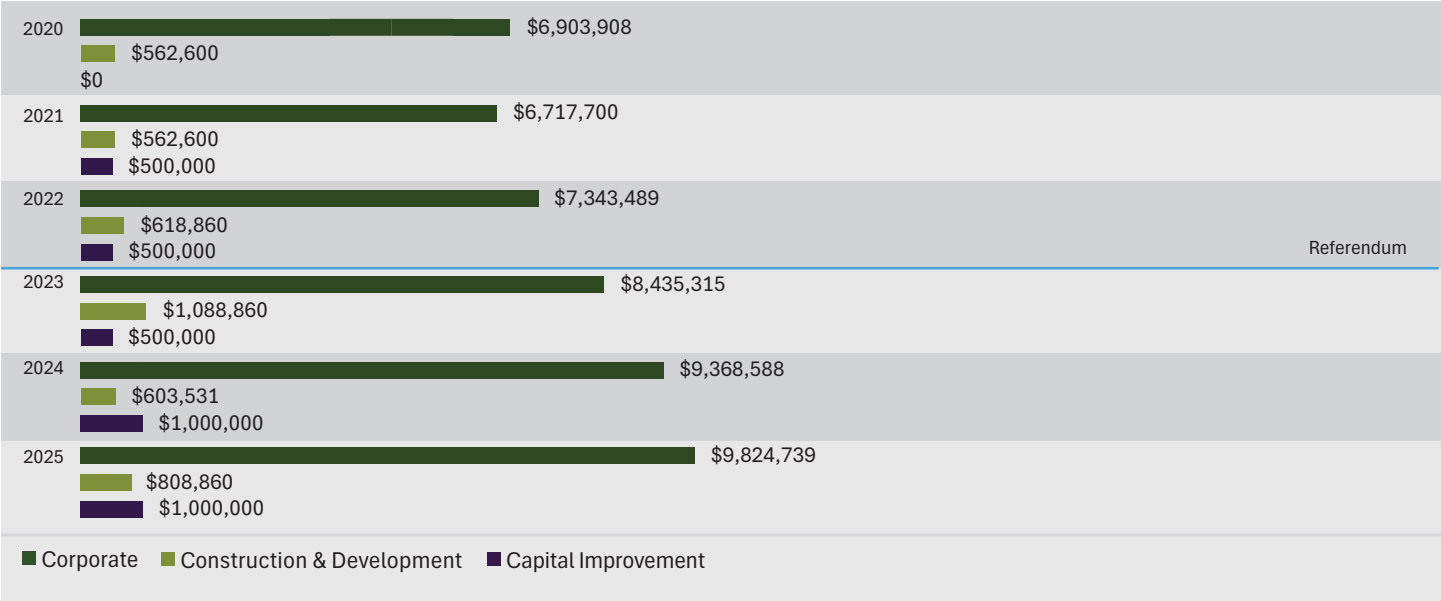


Facilities and Fleet

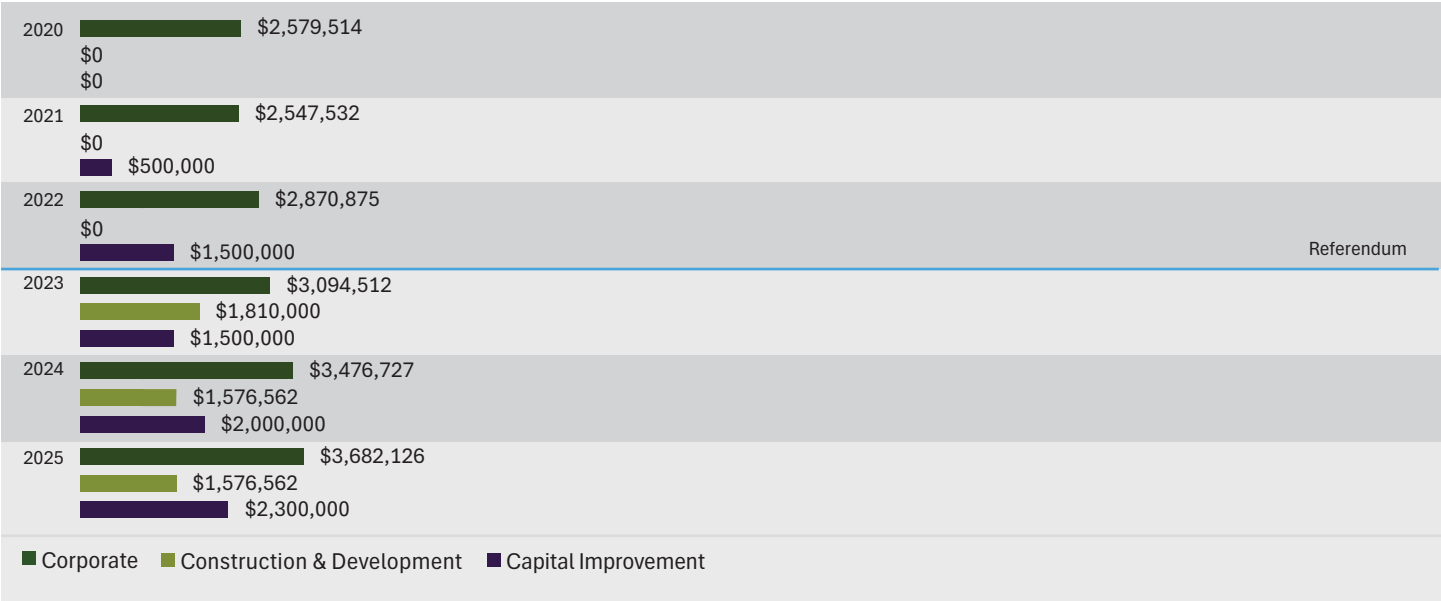
The Facilities & Fleet Department purchases, maintains and repairs all of the Forest Preserves fleet of more than 430 vehicles and mechanical equipment, and maintains and repairs the Preserves' more than 500 structures, as well as sewers and basins. The department researches and tests products, vehicles and equipment that help

the Forest Preserves achieve its vision for a greener and cleaner organization—green initiatives include propane conversions, green cleaning solutions and LED lighting replacement. The Fleet construction and development fund was established in 2023 for expanded vehicle purchasing.

Budgets for Facilities



Budgets for Fleet

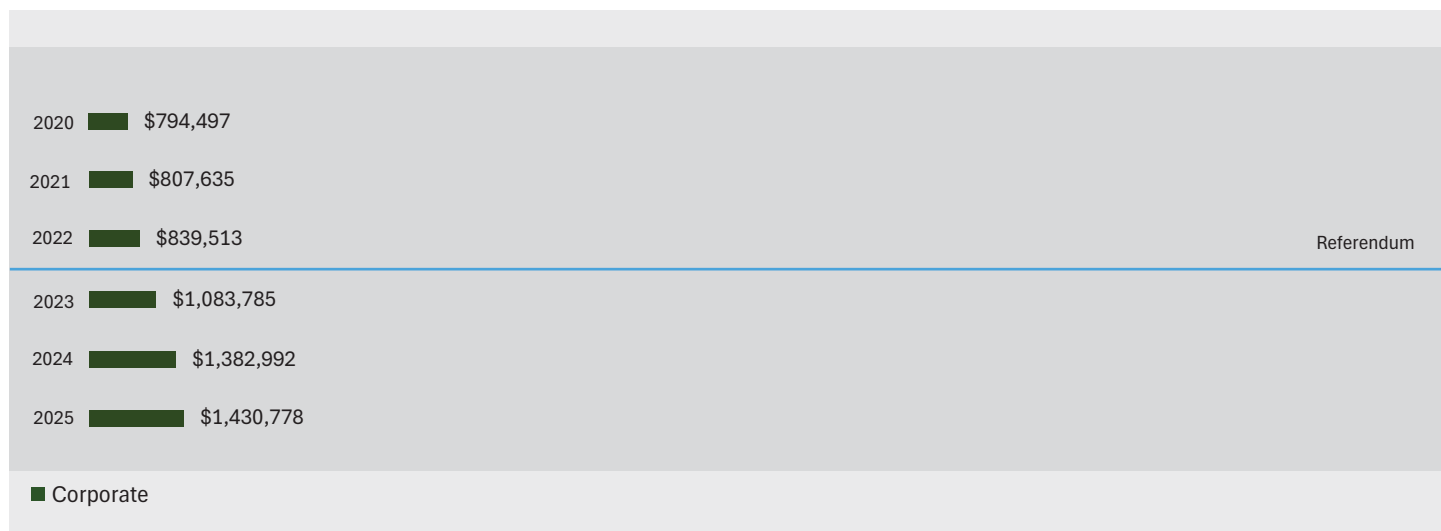


Human Resources

The Human Resources Department is responsible for the Forest Preserves' hiring, employee relations, change management, conflict resolution, performance management and employee recognition. Personnel Services establishes human resources policies and procedures, recommends staffing levels

and recruitment options, and implements equal employment opportunity practices, administers disciplinary procedures and assists with internal investigations and compliance reviews. Employee/Staff Support assesses organizational goals and individual development needs.

Budget for Human Resources

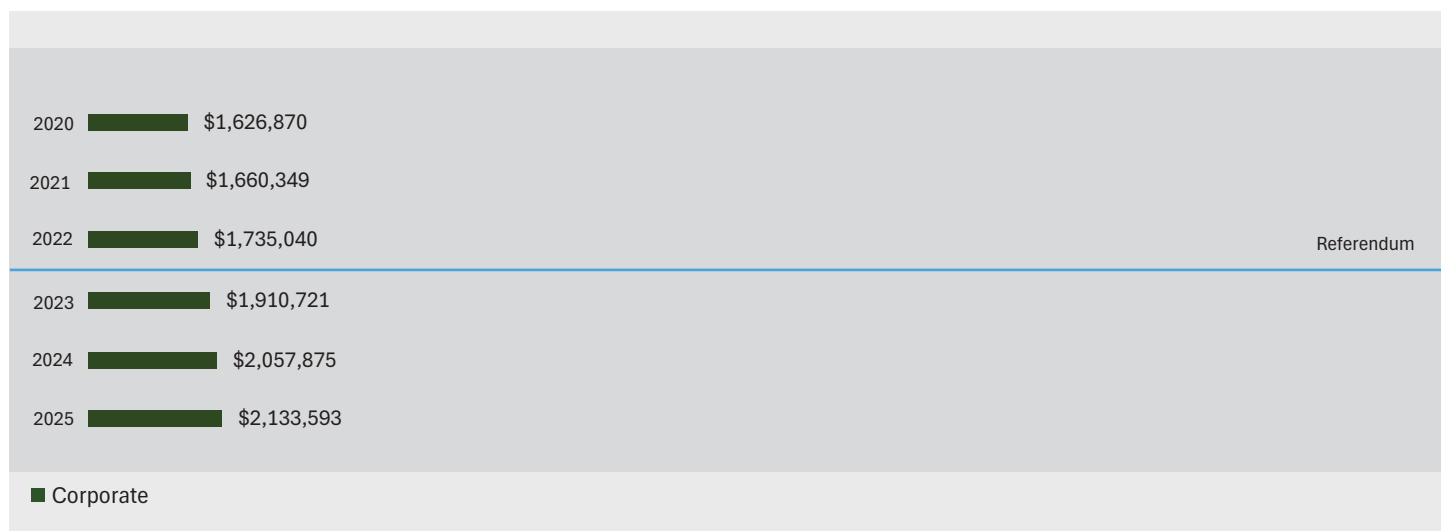


Legal

The Legal Department provides legal counsel and representation for the Forest Preserves, helping protect the agency's interests while supporting its operations and mission. The department manages litigation, drafts and enforces ordinances, reviews and negotiates

contracts and intergovernmental agreements, oversees real estate transactions, responds to Freedom of Information Act requests, and advises on employment, labor and employee relations matters.

Budget for Legal Department



Districtwide

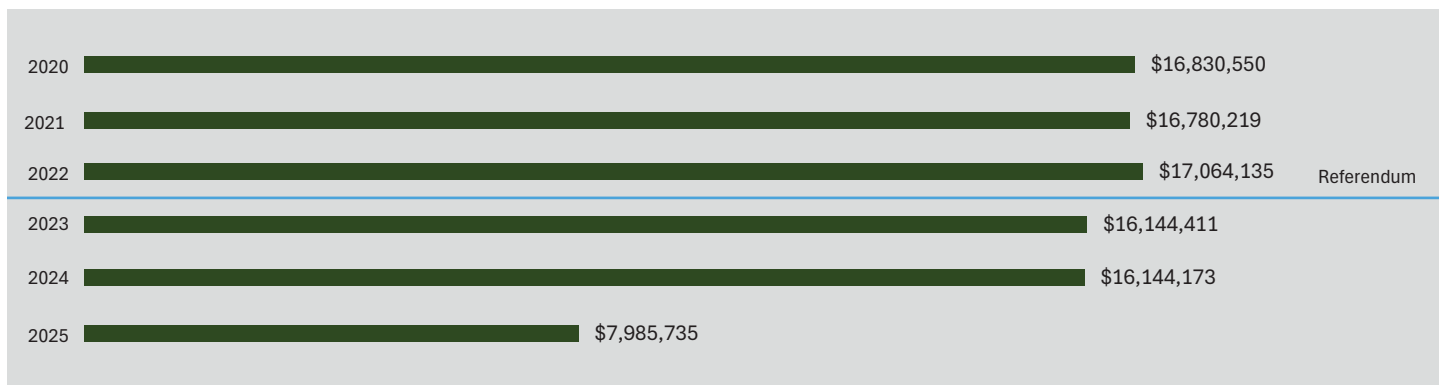
Several funds are available in the Forest Preserves budget for districtwide expenses such as anticipated cost of living increases, telecommunications, operations of campgrounds and aquatic centers, and systemwide computer software. Other budget items that are expensed at the district level, rather than by departments, include debt service funding, self-insurance and the resident watchman program. None

of these are notably impacted by the referendum, but are included to fully reflect the Forest Preserves annual expenses. Increased labor costs in 2024 that included COLA wage increases and a one-time charge for back wages are reflected in the \$5.3 million increase from 2023 levels in the Districtwide corporate budget. The retirement of two bond series in 2024 lowered the budget for debt service the following year.

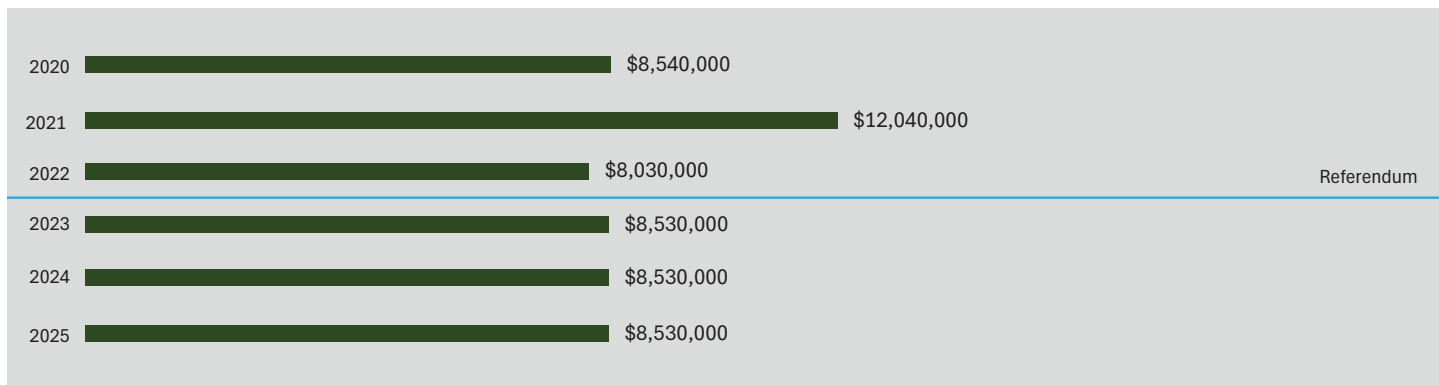
Budgets for Districtwide category



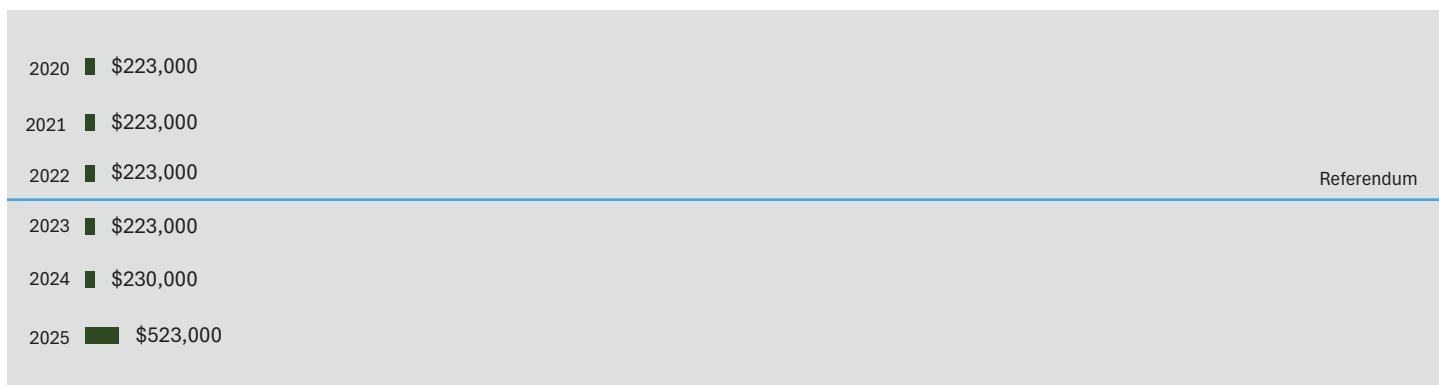
Budget for Debt Service



Budget for Self-Insurance



Budget for Resident Watchman

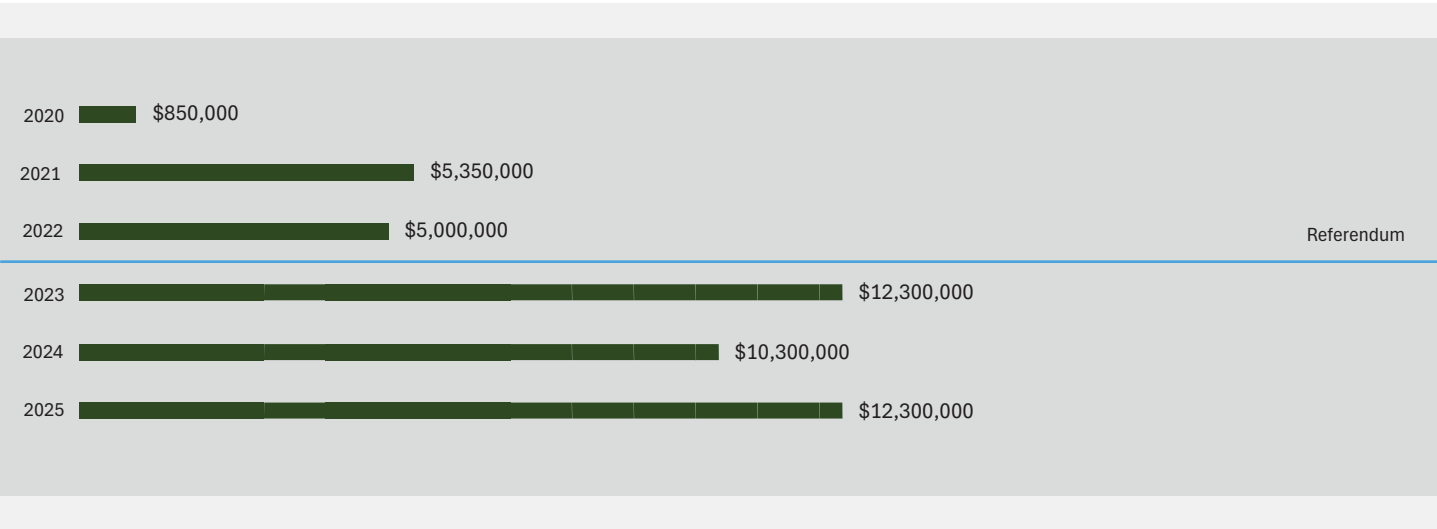


Real Estate

The Real Estate Acquisition Fund is the annual budget for the Forest Preserves’ land acquisition program and at times is augmented with grant funding. The Forest Preserves does not directly levy taxes for land acquisition.

Funds, including from the tax levy, are allocated to the Real Estate Fund through the corporate fund reserve balance. Only expenses directly related to the acquisition of land are charged to the Real Estate Fund.

Budget for Real Estate Acquisition

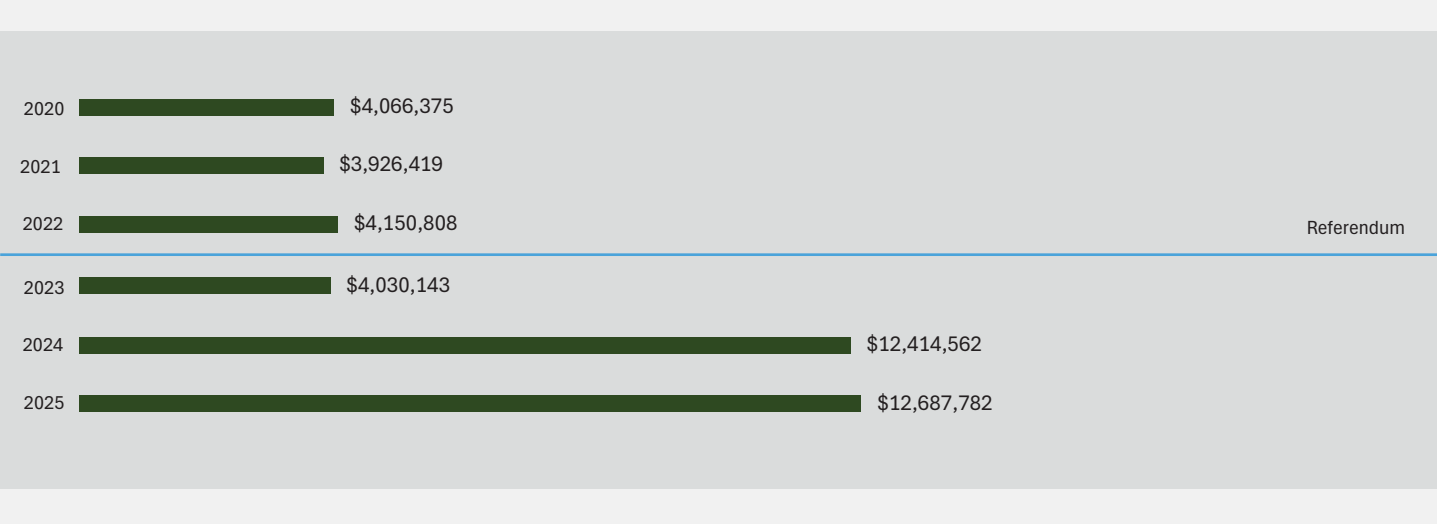


Pension

The Employee Annuity and Benefit Fund provides the Forest Preserves’ annual contribution to meet the employer pension obligations to the Forest Preserve District Employees’ Annuity and Benefit Fund. Prior to the referendum, the Forest Preserves could not meet

the contribution that was estimated by a third-party consultant to ensure the pension fund would be fully funded by 2054. In the first year after the referendum, additional funding could not be allocated to the pension due to state law.

Budget for Pension Fund

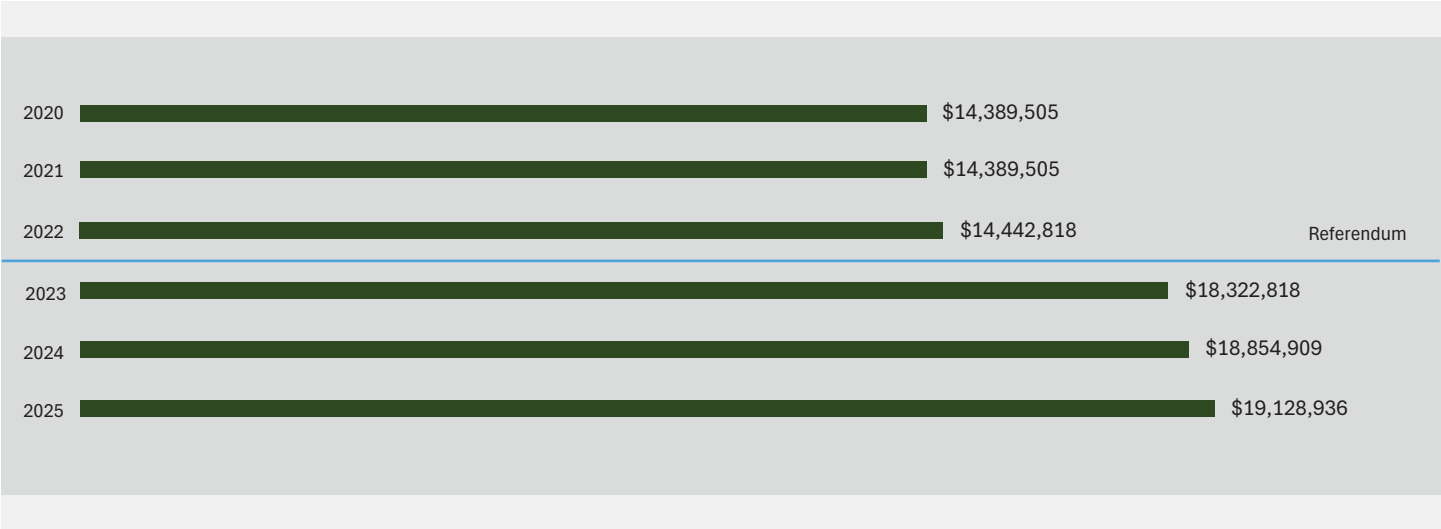


Brookfield Zoo Chicago

The Forest Preserves partners with Brookfield Zoo Chicago through one of the nation’s longest-running public-private partnerships to inspire conservation, education and a deeper connection to wildlife. Located on Forest Preserves land, the Zoo

provides world-class animal care, conservation science, research and educational experiences while working alongside the Forest Preserves to protect native wildlife, restore habitats and engage communities in conservation efforts throughout Cook County.

Budget for Brookfield Zoo Chicago

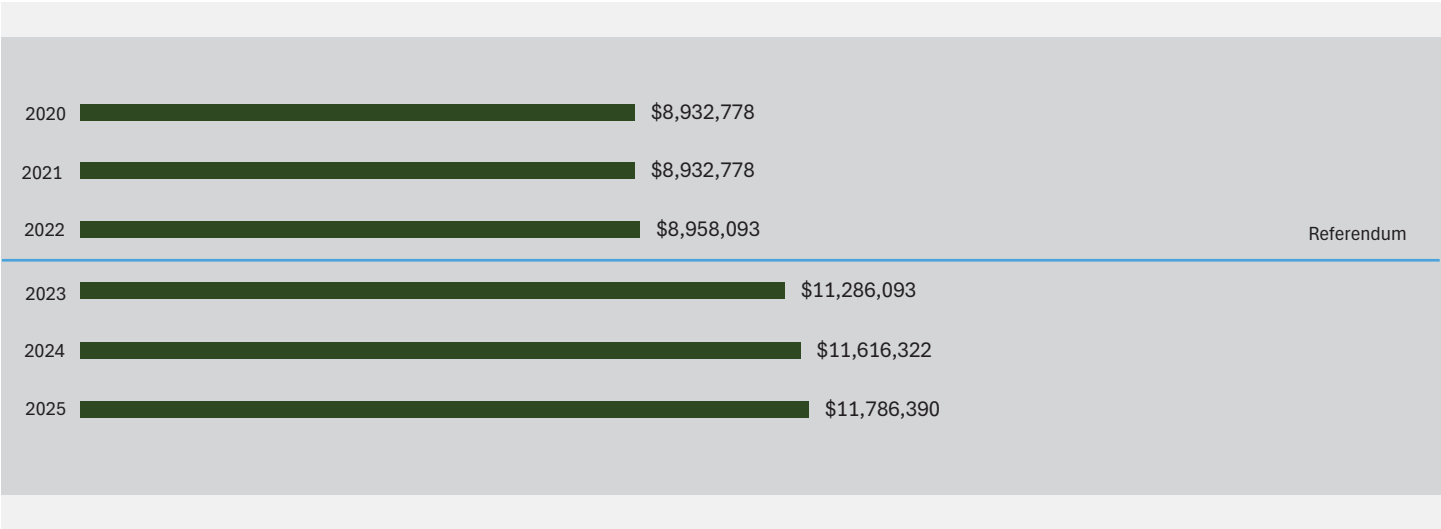


Chicago Botanic Garden

The Forest Preserves partners with the Chicago Botanic Garden through a longstanding public-private partnership that advances horticulture, conservation, education and scientific research. Located on Forest Preserves land,

the Garden connects millions of visitors with the beauty and importance of plants while leading research, habitat restoration and community-based programs that promote biodiversity and environmental stewardship.

Budget for Chicago Botanic Garden



Funding Investments and Impacts

Prior to the vote on the Clean Air, Clean Water, and Wildlife Protection Referendum in 2022, the Forest Preserves of Cook County outlined how it would expand and improve the benefits provided to local residents: protecting open land, restoring nature to ecological health, providing a home to wildlife, helping cleaning the air, improving the trail system, adding better amenities in more places, bringing jobs to communities, resolving a pension shortfall and support for improvements to Brookfield Zoo Chicago and the Chicago Botanic Garden.

To meet these goals, the Forest Preserves also provided an estimate for the first year of spending into ten categories, from land acquisition to pension obligation to ecological restoration. This section spotlights key investments and their impact for each of these allocation categories, marking how the referendum funded significant changes to the work of the Forest Preserves and highlighting the consequences of those changes.

The key investments for each category are notable personnel, programs, equipment, contracts and other expenses that would not have been possible without the increase to the Forest Preserves' budget due to the referendum. They do not include ongoing expenses

from the years before the referendum or planned expenses that would have been incurred whether or not the referendum passed. The listed impacts are either directly due to one or more of the key investments, or are changes that were clearly fueled in part by the investments.

In addition to direct support of initiatives outlined across the ten categories, the steady funding stream provided by the referendum created a certainty of fiscal sustainability at a consistent level. That guaranteed capacity has allowed a variety of programs and departments to make a wider variety of commitments. The Forest Preserves is a more nimble, proactive organization because of this, which has also allowed the Preserves to take on a greater leadership role in conservation and nature-based programming in Cook County and the region.

Note as well that in other instances, referendum-enabled funds allowed the Forest Preserves to better leverage grant funding and partnerships. In these ways, the referendum funds also attract other investments in the health of the Preserves and what they offer the people of Cook County.



Ecological Restoration

The Forest Preserves of Cook County is charged with protecting and restoring more than 70,000 acres of natural land that provide habitat for native plants and animals while improving air quality, water quality and climate resilience throughout Cook County. Restoration includes a variety of strategies to create and maintain healthy prairies, woodlands, wetlands and waterways, managing wildlife and fisheries, conducting scientific research, supporting volunteer stewardship and maintaining the ecological health of the preserves for future generations.

Changes in ecological restoration made possible through referendum funding focused on adding the personnel, equipment, scientific expertise and infrastructure needed to manage grants, staff and contractors to sustain the work over the long term. Standout initiatives include widening habitat restoration, establishing an in-house native seed amplification program, strengthening wildlife research, and growing the next generation of conservation professionals through expanded Conservation Corps programs. The results include public lands that are a better home to wildlife, more resilient to climate change and support cleaner air and water.

Key Investments

Expanded habitat restoration efforts across Cook County. With a large addition of construction and development funds earmarked for the Department of Resource Management from the referendum, the Forest Preserves spent more than \$11 million in ecological restoration projects from 2023-2025 to restore prairies, woodlands, wetlands and waterways across the Forest Preserves. In addition, increases in staff and equipment allowed the Preserves to leverage and effectively manage an additional \$6.3 million in grant funding.

Greatly added to expertise and capacity of Department of Resource Management staff. From 2023–2025, the department added 32 new positions, including field crews, supervisors, technicians and operational support staff. These positions expanded the department’s capacity to restore and maintain additional acreage, monitor ecological conditions, address storm damage and invasive pests, oversee restoration contractors, and collect and interpret data that leads to more targeted and effective land management practices.

Established the Resource Management Thorn Creek field crew in southeastern Cook County. Additional staff and equipment allowed the Forest Preserves to add a nine-person crew dedicated to covering southeastern Cook County, a large region that had been the responsibility of a crew that had to drive more than half an hour to respond to any issues or emergencies. Housed at the new Resource Management facility in the Thorn Creek region, the sixth Resource Management crew is dedicated to local restoration work, vegetation management, prescribed burns, trail maintenance, and habitat stewardship in locations such as Wampum Lake Nature Preserve, Thornton-Lansing Road Nature Preserve and Jurgensen Nature Preserve. With a focus on the area, the crew can work more effectively and consistently in these locations, leading to increased knowledge of the preserves within their responsibility, improving local stewardship and expanding restoration work.

Launched a seed program to address the Forest Preserves’ need for long-term capacity to grow and preserve locally adapted native plants. The Seed Amplification Program, an in-house native seed and nursery program, was started in 2022 in collaboration with the Chicago Botanic Garden and used referendum funds to invest in infrastructure and staffing. New hires for a Nursery Manager and Nursery Technician allowed the program to get the program off the ground, including constructing 65 raised seed beds and planting native seeds in the beds, as well as wild seed gardens. Native seeds are the foundation of healthy ecosystems: the plants they produce sustain wildlife, restore soil and water health, and make landscapes more resilient to climate change.

Strengthened Resource Management operations with new vehicles and specialized equipment. The department purchased more than \$3.7 million in new or replacement of aging aerial bucket trucks, utility vehicles, pickup trucks and other vehicles, as well as skid steers and tractors. These investments equipped field crews with tools for trail maintenance, hydrological repairs, tree trimming, hazardous tree removal operations and more, speeding up response time and avoiding overtime work or contractual expenses.

Expanded the Forest Preserves' scientific research capacity and improved its ability to detect and respond to emerging wildlife health issues. The Forest Preserves invested \$300,000 to establish the Illinois Zoological and Wildlife Health Management Residency Program in partnership with Brookfield Zoo Chicago and the University of Illinois. Three residents have participated in the program, which expands knowledge about the health of wildlife in the Preserves—which in turn informs the Preserves about the efficacy of its restoration efforts—and provides hands-on expertise in wildlife health management and disease surveillance. The Forest Preserves also invested in specialized research equipment to provide vital information to wildlife staff when examining animals, such as detecting broken bones, ingested foreign bodies, and evidence of negative interactions with humans.

Strengthened Conservation Corps programs for youth and adults. An increase of \$2.4 million of investment in Conservation Corps programs raised participant wages by an average of 9.3% to match increasing labor costs, which ensured the programs remain accessible to participants, many of which are high-school aged youth. Programs were diversified through the addition of new partners, Openlands and the American Fisheries Society, with a focus on engaging young people who aspire to careers in forestry and fisheries management.

Improved recreational fishing and the health of ponds, lakes and streams. The Preserves used additional resources to expand aquatic weed management to improve fish populations, water quality and recreational fishing opportunities, supplement its fish stocking program, repair the Forest Preserves' fish rearing pond and increasing in-house fisheries management capacity. Benefits include remote water quality sampling and monitoring of the severity and possible public health impact of blue-green algae events.

Impact

In 2022, the Forest Preserves had 15,369 acres under active restoration management. By 2025, that number had shot up to 18,322 acres, the largest figure in Forest Preserves history. Adding approximately 1,000 acres of restoration and long-term management annually during this three-year span is also an unprecedented accomplishment, clearly connected to the additional managerial and field staff, new equipment and vehicles, and construction and development funds provided by the tax-levy increase.

These projects include the completion of ecological restoration work at priority sites like Schubert's Woods, Jurgensen Woods, Busse Woods, Red Gate Woods and King's Grove, as well as ongoing maintenance of restored sites with clearing and prescribed fire on more than 2,800 acres at Orland Grassland, Deer Grove, Country Lane Woods and other preserves. With more staff and equipment, Forest Preserves field crews were able to spend 9% more time dedicated to restoration work, contributing to the management of an additional 510 acres.

Restoration work in the southeast section of Cook County has become more efficient and effective with the addition of a Thorn Creek crew. Work order requests for Tinley Creek region have been reduced by around 50% following the opening of the facility, freeing the team to focus on more restoration, trail maintenance and other tasks within their local region.

The Seed Amplification Program has significantly expanded the Forest Preserves' ability to supply locally adapted native plants for restoration projects. Seed collection has grown year-by-year since the inception

of the program, starting with 29 pounds in 2023, 159 pounds in 2024, and 321 pounds in 2025. In 2025 alone, more than 14,700 native plugs representing 44 species were planted throughout restoration sites, including the Salt Creek Resource Management site as well as the wild seed garden at Marley Creek, Red Gate Woods and Chipilly Woods.

Advances to the Forest Preserves' long-standing research into the health of wild animal populations in urban environments includes new information to researchers and health agencies, such as identifying a previously unknown virus in endangered Blanding's turtles, confirming coyotes are not carriers of canine influenza and documenting a novel adenovirus in Illinois wood duck populations. Having a better understanding of wildlife health allows the Forest Preserves' research partners to find cures and solutions so that animals can thrive.

More than 60 acres of recreational lakes have received aquatic vegetation management, and improvements to the fish rearing pond have increased fish survival rates. Rainbow trout stocking has expanded by 37.5 percent

Investments in Conservation Corps allows the programs to continue and thrive, helping to build the next generation of conservation professionals. Today, more than 42 percent of Resource Management staff are Corps alumni, while more than half of surveyed alumni are employed in green careers.



Land Acquisition

In order to protect more natural open land in Cook County for future generations, the Forest Preserves seeks to expand and buffer its holdings to protect remnant ecologically valuable and sensitive land. Protecting and expanding public lands in Cook County is critical for preserving Illinois' natural and cultural heritage, improving air and water quality, building climate resilience, and providing outdoor recreation activities. Expanding the Forest Preserves' holdings is aligned with goals set forth in the Forest Preserves' Land Acquisition Plan, Next Century Conservation Plan, Southeast Cook County Land Acquisition Plan, and Acquisition and Disposition of Land Position Paper.

In some instances from 2023–2025, grants for land acquisition from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and the federal ARPA program provided the Forest Preserves with alternative funding options to the expanded Real Estate Fund. However, a larger and consistent stream of referendum funds—and the liquidity that provides—lets the Forest Preserves plan and move forward with acquisitions that were out of reach before or are unable to be supported by grants.

Key Investments

Used \$5.15 million from the Real Estate Fund to make the initial purchase of more than 81 acres. In 2025 the Forest Preserves purchased four parcels of property near Deer Creek and Third Creek in southeastern Cook County, a region that has less public conservation and recreation land than other sections of the county. Protecting these tributaries of the Little Calumet River system improves water quality and habitat for the fish, amphibians, birds and mammals that inhabit the floodplain and reduces impacts to the larger watershed. Subsequent to the purchase, ARPA funding from Cook County reimbursed the Forest Preserves for these parcels, allowing the funds to return to the Forest Preserves Real Estate Acquisition Fund.

Directly acquired an additional 11.5 acres. In 2024 the Forest Preserves purchased 11.25 acres of land in Orland Park, connected to the preserves of the Tinley Creek Trail system and in 2025 purchased 0.14 acres of property in the flood plain of the oxbow in the Des Plaines River in Riverside. In total, \$600,000 was spent from the Real Estate Acquisition Fund for these purchases.

More than doubled the annual allocation to the Real Estate Fund, from \$5 million in 2022 to \$12.3 million in 2025. With the additional resources, the Forest Preserves is positioned to plan for land acquisitions and enter into agreements with the certainty that sufficient capital is available for completing the planned acquisitions. The confidence of steady, predictable funding also allows the District to identify, evaluate and potentially acquire higher cost parcels that it previously could not pursue. Land at this scale or in specific locations can be valuable to Forest Preserves' goals such as protecting wetlands or waterways, providing outdoor recreation to the public and saving rare or ecologically valuable land.

Impact

The Forest Preserves of Cook County added 558 acres to its holdings in the first three years after the referendum passed, going from 69,601 acres at the end of 2022 to 70,159 in 2025. In comparison, the Preserves added 205 acres in the three years preceding the referendum. Many factors are in play for the amount of land the Forest Preserves can acquire in any given year, including available land for sale that meets the Preserves' criteria. It is also true, though, that the enormous expansion of the Preserves' real estate fund with referendum funding was a key factor in this growth.

The larger funding in the Real Estate Fund has changed the strategies and possibilities for land acquisition, particularly important as ARPA funding that was generously supplied by Cook County to add to Forest Preserves holdings is ending. The Forest Preserves can proceed with acquisitions without relying so heavily on grants funding, with its inherent limitations in the amount that can be spent and the timing in the market, or passing up opportunities in order to save limited funds for the possibility of future higher priority acquisition targets.



Public Engagement & Programming

Fulfilling the Forest Preserves' mission to “acquire, restore and manage lands for the purpose of protecting and preserving public open space... in a natural state for the education, pleasure and recreation of the public now and in the future” includes programming that connects individuals, families, community groups and schools to nature. It also encompasses outreach to bring more people out into the preserves, particularly people who have never visited before, both by meeting with Cook County residents in person and through marketing, advertising and the media. These investments help the Forest Preserves create more welcoming, accessible and meaningful experiences for residents.

The Forest Preserves made targeted investments with the additional resources from the referendum to remove barriers to participation and meet residents where they are. That includes strengthening the ways the Forest Preserves connects with its patrons, from the people who rent picnic groves to campers to participants in events. Many of the commitments made in the referendum depend on staff who plan, deliver, and support programs, partnerships and services across Cook County.

Key Investments

Added capacity that expanded the number and depth of events and programs available to the public. The Conservation and Experiential Programming Department added five laborers to nature center maintenance staff to ensure that facilities are clean, safe and welcoming. These new roles, plus new administrative assistants, also freed up programming and engagement staff across the nature centers, zones, campgrounds and outreach teams to focus on delivering programs and interacting with visitors. The responsibility of six new programming assistants in the department includes building the relationship between the Forest Preserves and the communities it serves, including adding programs that create inviting pathways into nature so people feel comfortable and inspired to explore the preserves. To support all this work, the Preserves added five new vehicles for CEP staff from 2023–2025.

Improved animal care in the Ambassador Animal program. The Forest Preserves added five ambassador animal specialists, new positions dedicated to ensuring high-quality care for the animals that serve an important role in educating the public about native wildlife. A seasonal dedicated Youth Outdoor Ambassadors (YOA) ambassador animal position was added as well, and is now actively mentored within the program. Increased staff led to several significant improvements from 2023–2025, including an expanded open-air enclosure for the coyote at River Trail Nature Center, digital record keeping software for animal care, new policies and procedures for consistency amongst centers, annual, routine species-based welfare assessments on every ambassador animal, and more.

Added positions for customer service to picnic permit holders and to support the safe and organized use of picnic groves. Five new Permit Field Monitors positions are seasonal, part-time staff who are on site for patrons at events, serving as a concierge from the Permits, Rentals and Concessions Department to assist with day of event needs and help ensure smooth operations. In addition to improving visitor support, this role helps better align staffing needs and allows the Forest Preserves' Law Enforcement Department to focus their attention on larger events and public safety priorities.

Increased free transportation to community groups to visit the Forest Preserves, Zoo and Garden. Expanded funding allowed for additional free opportunities for community groups to utilize the Forest Preserves Nature Express bus program, adding more than 50 community groups and more than 2,000 people to travel to programs and events annually, providing a way to help keep access to nature from being limited by transportation.

To better position the preserves as a neighborhood resource, increased partnerships with local communities to offer expanded and diversified programming. The Forest Preserves added an additional \$250,000 annually for partnership agreements with local groups to increase public participation and attendance at events in the Preserves while expanding and deepening relationships with communities across Cook County. These partnerships allow the Forest Preserves to connect with established networks, reach new audiences and offer more culturally relevant programming. In addition, the Preserves is piloting ways to provide space for community groups to use Forest Preserves locations—including at the newly renovated Caldwell Woods Wellness Center—which brings new visitors to the Preserves and reduces barriers to participation. Together, these efforts expand programming capacity and create more

inclusive and accessible opportunities that strengthen connections between people and nature.

Strengthened relationships with Native American communities. A tribal liaison fellow hired in 2024 supported the creation of Native American guidance documents, increased collaboration with tribal nations and Native-led organizations, and created new opportunities for cultural programming and stewardship.

Ensured the continuation of the Beaubien Woods Youth Outdoor Ambassador program. Originally launched with grant funding from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources Coastal Management Program, the program offers paid, hands-on outdoor experiences for teens at Beaubien Woods. Each summer, 10 youth from communities on the South Side of Chicago work at the local preserve with a focus on restoration, trail work and sharing the story of the African-American Water Trail, which starts at the Beaubien Boat Launch. The program, which offers meaningful pathways for youth development, economic opportunity, and long-term stewardship of the Forest Preserves, has been sustained only due to continued resources through the referendum.

Added language access services to help all residents fully engage with and benefit from the Forest Preserves. LanguageLine Solutions translation services provides on-demand access to trained interpreters in hundreds of languages. Primarily used by the Permits, Rentals and Concessions and Law Enforcement Departments to date, the service supports equitable access to Forest Preserves resources, improves customer service, enhances public safety interactions and helps build trust with residents. In addition to real-time interpretation, important documents have been translated into Korean, Arabic, Polish, Mandarin Chinese, and Ojibwe.

Increased the reach of advertising and marketing to Cook County residents. Referendum funds doubled the annual budget for advertising for the Forest Preserves, an additional investment of \$450,000 over three years. Advertising outlets were roughly split between countywide, geographically targeted advertising and media that reaches diverse audiences. Funds were also allocated to increase the number of pages in the quarterly guide and expand the number of sites where this free resource is distributed. The print run for the Preserves' free annual wall calendar was also increased, adding additional distribution points, including Federally Qualified Health Centers.

Added expertise and capacity to the Communications Department in the Office of the General Superintendent. The addition of a Communications Specialist and a Graphic Design Associate allow the Forest Preserves to create and distribute more marketing and promotional materials, including flyers, social media posts and video content, and to produce content that is more deeply informative and connects to audiences.

Impact

In 2022, the Preserves measured 1.8 million people attending scheduled nature center programs, holding a picnic, golfing, camping and more. In 2025 that figure had risen to 2.2 million, an increase of 22%. In 2022 the total measurements of school visits, online events, and communications via social media, fpdcc.com and a monthly newsletter was 3.6 million engagements. By 2025 it had risen by 47% to 5.3 million.

New capacity in the Conservation and Experiential Programming allowed the department to build internal processes around communication, decision-making and staff development. In 2025, more than 890,000 patrons participated in a program run by CEP, an increase of 42% since 2022. CEP staff also connected with nearly 23,000 residents of Cook County in their communities, an increase of 372% since 2022. Programs that celebrate the diversity of Cook County, built with community relationships, include an Arab American Heritage Celebration, a variety of programs that open a better understanding of nature through a Jewish cultural lens, and programs to highlight the intersection of Native and Black Americans with the support of American Indian Center.

From 2023–2025, the Forest Preserves offered 1,949 programs run by community partners, including musical performances, youth programs, cultural celebrations,

educational hikes, historic tours and more. In 2025 alone, more than 23,000 patrons participated in an event that was led or supported by a partner. These groups have included the Midwest Underground Railroad Network, Wilderness Inquiry, Friends of the Chicago River, Latin Street Dance, the Midwest Society of Ecological Acoustics, Light of Loving Kindness, Adaptive Adventures and Mandela Arts Group. This has allowed the Preserves to both expand the type of programming available to visitors and create deeper connections to those communities.

Enhanced care and habitat modifications for ambassador animals have resulted in observable animal welfare improvements, including in the snapping turtle habitat, where enclosure upgrades and the addition of a basking area have increased natural activity and visible behavioral engagement. In 2025, the program was able to acquire new animal ambassadors that are unable to survive in the wild—including a great horned owl, a Virginia opossum, a broad-winged hawk and two Dekay's brown snakes—further expanding interpretive and educational opportunities for the public. In 2024, the Forest Preserves received American Humane Society certification, a benchmark of science-based standards for humane animal welfare, care and oversight.



Public Amenities

More than 350 miles of trails, 286 parking lots, 197 picnic shelters, 6 nature centers, 11 golf courses, 5 campgrounds, 3 aquatic centers and other public amenities play an integral role in making the Forest Preserves a welcoming destination for the public, enjoyed by tens of thousands of people who visit the Forest Preserves every day of the year. Numerous departments work together on maintaining and improving this infrastructure, with the Planning and Development Department staff leading the charge.

Referendum funding focused on repairing and improving popular and beloved amenities, including trails, picnic shelters and water recreation, as well as strengthening internal infrastructure including the addition of much needed staff and equipment to ensure that this public infrastructure can continue to serve future generations of Cook County residents and visitors.

Key Investments

Invested nearly \$4 million on improving trails throughout Cook County. This included parts of the Des Plaines River Trail, Bemis Woods-South, Spring Lake, the North Branch Trail and Poplar Creek Trail systems. Many of these trails serve as alternative transportation opportunities and help to connect communities. Referendum funding allowed the Forest Preserves to address erosion and drainage problems to better maintain the health of the landscape and to extend the long-term life of the trails. Signs and pavement striping have been added and obstructions such as drop gates were removed. These enhancements reduce the risk of bike accidents and bring these trails into conformity with updated federal trail standards.

Conducted long overdue repairs at 43 picnic site locations throughout the County. Picnicking is one of the key ways that people are introduced to the Forest Preserves. More than 700,000 people attended events through a formal permitted picnic event in 2025, with untold more using the groves informally. By investing \$2.5 million in maintenance—from fresh paint to roof and other structural repairs—the Preserves extended the life of these shelters by another 20 years. Additionally, accessibility improvements have been made to 20 of these picnic shelters, bringing the total number of accessible picnic groves to 56.

Installed more than 20 trail counters on looped and regional trail systems to better understand how residents use trails. These counters provide consistent, year-round data on visitor use, allowing staff to identify trends, monitor changes over time, and better understand which locations experience the highest levels of activity. This data informs the Forest Preserves' planning decisions by helping to prioritize trail maintenance, infrastructure improvements, visitor amenities, and future investments where they can have the greatest impact. Trail use data also provides valuable information for evaluating programs and initiatives, supporting grant applications, and demonstrating the public value and use of Forest Preserves facilities and trail system.

Added more than two dozen public restroom buildings to a repair project at preserves across Cook County. Plans to address long-standing needs for repairs to many of the restroom buildings in the Forest Preserves added \$1.2 million for 14 heavily used restrooms at Busse Woods and Dan Ryan Woods for replacement of old plumbing, flooring, electric service and lighting, new water bottle filling stations and improved accessibility. The Preserves also completed design and permitting for renovation of 11 more buildings in sites across Cook County.

Built capacity for staff to be able to respond quickly and efficiently to maintenance and repair issues. Investments include an additional electric striping machine that more than doubles staff capacity to paint and stripe trails and parking lots; purchased three new vehicles for staff; replacing outdated sign-making equipment with newer, more efficient and environmentally friendly machines; and having fiscal liquidity to purchase items like restroom replacement pumps for the warehouse, drastically reducing the amount of time public restrooms are closed.

Added six new positions that play an active role in maintaining and improving public amenities and infrastructure. The Planning and Development Department has added architects, landscape architects and surveyors to expedite and better prepare projects that address new amenities and maintenance such as the renovation of 60

restroom buildings. The addition of staff also allows the Forest Preserves to maintain momentum on complex projects including the Des Plaines River Trail Enhancement, particularly Segments 5 and 6 (Irving Park Road to Fullerton Avenue) that will require the addition of bridges and boardwalks to improve users' safety and experience.

Invested in accessibility for people with disabilities to allow more people to enjoy nature in the preserves. Referendum funding allowed the Forest Preserves to hire its first accessibility coordinator, who advises on and monitors facility additions and upgrades and staff trainings to enhance accessibility conditions. The adaptive gear library has been expanded to include equipment to make climbing and paddling activities accessible, and referendum funds enabled training for staff for 12 all-terrain wheelchairs available at all nature centers and several campgrounds, which had been purchased with grant funds from the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity.

Planted hundreds of trees at public amenities in the Forest Preserves. Since 2023, 815 trees have been planted in Forest Preserves picnic groves, golf courses and campgrounds to help replace a regional tree canopy impacted by invasive pests, disease and aging trees. In addition to improving recreational spaces by providing shade, natural beauty and habitat for wildlife, these trees strengthen local ecosystems and contribute to the region's overall climate resilience.

Allowed projects to move forward that required financial support. Referendum funds provided \$400,000 that helped leverage other funds for new multi-panel informational kiosks at Caldwell Woods and at Eggers Grove that highlight the natural and cultural history of these sites and help orient visitors. More than \$200,000 was spent on a roof replacement for the George Dunne Golf Course Clubhouse, helping to preserve an existing popular building that serves thousands of golfers each year. An exterior renovation and HVAC upgrade for the Camp Reinberg office and dining hall began in 2025, a \$1.7 million project funded with referendum resources.

Impact

Referendum funds helped the Forest Preserves take significant strides in advancing key promises made to voters: to expand and maintain trails, improve signage, and make amenities more energy efficient and accessible to all. In the last three years, the Forest Preserves has improved 64 miles of 370 miles of bicycle trails, repaired 43 of 203 picnic shelters, and created a premiere accessible canoe and kayak launch at Beaubien Woods.

The Forest Preserves conducts annual picnic surveys to ensure that users' expectations are being met and exceeded. The additional staff and equipment that referendum funds supported across departments—including the Landscape Maintenance and Fleets and Facilities departments—has contributed to a steady uptick in customer satisfaction. Permit holders gave the condition of the lawns in the Preserves an average rating of 4.07 out of 5 in July 2022, rising to 4.48 in July 2025.



Capital Maintenance and Support

The Forest Preserves' extensive portfolio of facilities, utilities, vehicles and equipment must be maintained to allow staff to maintain public-facing amenities. The capital maintenance and facilities category covers investments in the buildings, equipment, vehicles and

personnel that support this work. Referendum funding has allowed the Forest Preserves to replace aging equipment, modernize its maintenance operations, improve efficiency, and advance sustainability goals.

Key Investments

Replaced aging and dated equipment, strengthening day-to-day operations and improving facilities and services. Investments in specialized tools, building systems and safety equipment include approximately \$250,000 for a new compact track loader machine to improve maintenance work in preserves; new tools to clear pipes, test water safety systems and detect gas leaks, electrical issues, and heat loss in buildings; and a contract to more safely and quickly remove hazardous and electronic waste that has been dumped in the Forest Preserves. These upgrades reduce downtime, extend the useful life of infrastructure, and improve the function of Forest Preserves' amenities, including restrooms, trails and maintenance operations.

Added and replaced badly aging vehicles for Facilities and Fleet Department staff.

The department purchased more than a dozen pickup trucks and utility vehicles for painters, carpenters, plumbers, engineers, laborers and others who keep the more than 500 structures and other amenities in the Forest Preserves operational, safe and available for staff and the public. The department also replaced a bucket truck used for building and electrical repairs. In total the vehicle purchases totaled nearly \$500,000 over the three year span.

Made strides to build a greener fleet by transitioning to cleaner energy. More than \$2.4 million was invested in alternative fuel vehicles, electric vehicle charging infrastructure, and in-house conversion and maintenance training. This includes converting 30 new vehicles purchased for Facilities and Fleet and other departments to propane—with new training for staff to do this work in-house—as well as installation of 19 electric vehicle charging stations for staff to support the growing electric fleet across departments. Together, these efforts are allowing the Forest Preserves to operate a more sustainable fleet while maintaining reliable services across its holdings.

Advanced projects that modernize and reduce operating costs for maintenance and support facilities. Funds available due to the referendum provided \$3.3 million for HVAC, electric and other work at the McGinnis Fisheries field station, a project that began in 2023 and is now substantially complete, as well as approximately \$1.5 million in gap funding for the new “net zero” Salt Creek Landscape Maintenance Headquarters. In addition to improving working conditions for staff, these project help implement the Forest Preserves' 2023 Clean Energy Action Plan, focusing on building envelope and energy efficiency upgrades as well as large-scale LED lighting replacements to reduce operating costs and the Forest Preserves' carbon footprint.

Built information technology capacity to better support Forest Preserves' staff.

The IT staff added a fourth member with referendum funding, allowing the team to support the significant increase in employees resulting from the referendum and position IT staff more strategically across the Forest Preserves' far-flung locations. The Preserves also purchased approximately \$150,000 in new equipment, including laptop computers and 5G mobile-network signal boosting technology, as well as Teams and Zoom capacity for conference rooms at Landscape Maintenance locations throughout Cook County.

Impact

The additional Planning and Development Department staff referenced in the Key Investments for Public Amenities also provide expertise and capacity to manage projects that support Capital Maintenance and Support. Coupled with more stable annual construction and development funds, the department has been able to enter into multi-year architectural and engineering design contracts and procure work more efficiently through task orders. Planning began during 2023–2025 for more than \$10 million for construction contracts to reduce energy use and cost and other maintenance and support buildings in the next two years.

In 2022, the Facilities and Fleet Department faced a backlog of vehicle repairs that filled two of the Maintenance Facility’s parking lots, primarily due to the need to fix cars, trucks, tractors and other vehicles with mechanical limitations due to their advanced age. Today, the list for vehicles waiting for repairs covers only half a lot, and most vehicles are checked in for relatively minor and proactive service, rather than reactive repairs.



Public Safety and Landscape Maintenance

The experience of visitors while in the Forest Preserves is directly impacted by an environment that is well-maintained and feels safe. The police who serve in the Law Enforcement Department perform a dual role: Both the conventional duties of a police officer and tasks and duties performed by conservation officers. The Landscape Maintenance Department is responsible for maintaining picnic groves, mowing the grounds, repairing asphalt, landscape beautification, removing refuse, plowing parking lots, installing signage, and supporting programming, activities, rentals and special events.

Changes in public safety and landscape maintenance due to the referendum were primarily focused on helping the Forest Preserves reach baseline standards that had long been out of reach, including replacing badly aging equipment and establishing salary levels in line with industry norms. Standout new initiatives include improved tools for police work and a districtwide garbage collection system.

Key Investments

Addressed a wage gap with other local law enforcement agencies that has made it difficult to attract and retain officers, sergeants and command staff. A new contract increased the starting annual salary of Forest Police officers more closely in line with Cook County Sheriff's Police and local municipalities. Other positions within the department had similar increases. To be able to process a subsequent rise in the number of applicants, the Law Enforcement Department expanded the hiring infrastructure required for sworn officers, including vendors who handle applicant background checks and testing.

Added resources for law enforcement, trail patrols and search-and-rescue operations. Prior to the referendum, the Forest Preserves had been able to address only a fraction of the backlog of deeply deferred replacements for patrol cars that are past their standard wear date. With the additional resources, the Preserves more than doubled the number of new cars—approximately \$1 million for more than 20 additional vehicles—providing safer, more efficient and more effective law enforcement vehicles to cover the more than 70,000 acres of preserves across Cook County.

The Forest Preserves completed a full rebuild and modernization of the Law Enforcement Command Center at Police Headquarters to meet modern operational and public-safety standards. In addition, new equipment purchased included MDT computers for patrol vehicles so officers can gather information and communicate more effectively during a possible criminal or emergency incident and a drone that trained officers can use to cover wilderness areas when a member of the public is reported missing or injured in the preserves. Three new gators and five ATVs are also utilized in search-and-rescue operations, as well as for on-trail patrols to interact with the public and provide a public safety presence deeper into the preserves.

Launched a Garbage Modernization Program to make the Preserves cleaner and refuse collection more efficient. Nearly 2,000 new landfill and recycling garbage receptacles were purchased to replace the metal drums that have served as garbage cans. The new recyclable composite plastic totes have an expected lifespan of ten years, won't rust or dent, and have lids to keep garbage in and animals out. With wheels and handles designed to be lifted by mechanical tipper arms on the trucks during pick up, they are easier to move, reducing workplace injuries and making garbage runs more cost efficient by reducing staff from three to two. More than a third of the new receptacles in picnic groves are blue recycling totes, allowing visitors to separate their waste to improve sustainability.

Upgraded garbage truck fleet for more efficient and sustainable refuse collection. As part of the \$2 million Garbage Modernization Program, four new trucks have been purchased to upgrade a badly aging fleet: two propane-powered trucks and two electric-powered trucks, replacing trucks with diesel engines to grow the Preserves' green fleet. The new trucks are split-bed—one side garbage and one side recycling—allowing all refuse to be picked up at once on site, rather than two truck runs. In addition, four existing garbage trucks were retrofitted with tippers.

Purchased a variety of mowers to keep picnic groves, fields and other grassy property well-maintained. To replace unreliable equipment that was 10 to more than 30 years old, three new Jacobsen and three John Deere wide-area mowers were

purchased to cut large areas and handle thicker vegetation, as well as nine propane-powered and 10 electric Gravelly mowers that handle tight turns, leave a manicured cut and are easier to transport.

Increased efficiency by purchasing new and replacing failing vehicles and maintenance equipment. The Landscape Maintenance Department purchased an additional seven pickup trucks and a dump truck for operations; eight Darley fire pumpers to assist with forest fires and cleaning picnic shelters; and four Hydro-Tech pressure washers, giving crews a new tool to wash down shelters, picnic tables, restrooms and garages, as well as graffiti removal. The department upgraded to modern battery-powered equipment with 30 line-trimmers and 18 hand-held blowers, replacing older equipment often in the main garage waiting for replacement parts. Five new John Deere gators were added to help carry equipment, materials and supplies and move picnic tables. In total, more than \$350,000 was invested in vehicles and \$700,000 in new equipment.

Expanded capacity to handle repairs and other relatively minor improvements in the preserves more quickly and efficiently. Referendum funds supported adding positions for a paving and maintenance project manager and five paving technicians in 2024. With new equipment available, the Landscape Maintenance Department can handle installation of concrete pads, crack-sealing and caulking on trails, catch basin repairs and other maintenance more quickly and efficiently. To date, the impact is relatively minor, as positions are filled and procedures are put into place.

Improved native landscaping at key public amenities. The Preserves expanded the Landscape Maintenance Department's Beautification Team, and purchased a mini-skidsteer for their work. The crew creates and maintains new landscaping projects at Miller Meadow, Tampier Lake, Maple Lake, Caldwell Wellness Center and Whealan Pool, and also assists with storm damage clean-up, maintains nature play areas and bioswales, and provides support for the Seed Amplification Program.

Impact

The number of open positions for the Forest Preserves Police Department has not notably changed since 2022. Hiring requirements and the academy training for sworn officers are rigorous and time consuming. However, with the pay raise and additional capacity of the Human Resources Department due to referendum funding, a pipeline of new officers has begun. In 2022, 19 new employees joined the Police Department and in 2025, 32 employees joined the force.

The percentage of the refuse in bins that was separated as recyclable rose by more than six-fold from 2022 to 2025: from 3% to 18.5%. In the first half of 2025, 87 tons of waste was recycled. During this same period, the number of worker compensation cases in the Landscape Maintenance Department fell nearly 20%, and while this does measure a small sample size, it is an encouraging trend.



Administrative

The “back office” of the Forest Preserves is the administrative infrastructure that allows the public-facing programs and all district operational and programmatic

work to function. That primarily is the work of the Finance and Administrative, Legal and Human Relations departments.

Investments

Added capacity to handle budgeting, purchasing and other financial responsibilities.

The Forest Preserves hired a Finance Coordinator, Accountant IV and Assistant to the Purchasing Agent to expand capacity to support departments across the organization. The additional staff help manage purchasing requests, coordinate solicitations for goods and services, and provide timelier support as the Forest Preserves programs and projects grow due to referendum funding.

Added capacity to attract, hire and support a growing staff across the agency. The Human Resources Department hired a Senior HR Analyst and Recruitment Manager to support the Forest Preserves’ growing workforce and organizational needs due to new referendum-funded initiatives. A new Equity Operations Manager position provides a dedicated staff member to provide leadership and support for departments and the Racial Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (REDI) committee to integrate an equity lens into policies, processes and daily operations while serving as a resource for managers and employees.

Brought more resources to the Legal Department. Added a Senior Attorney position to help with the work to advise departments on legal matters and support referendum-funded projects across the Forest Preserves.

Impact

As the Forest Preserves expanded its work with funding from the referendum, the demand for hiring and procurement increased. From 2020–2022, the Forest Preserves hired a total of 323 full-time, part-time and seasonal employees. From 2023–2025, that number jumped to 562. The Preserves fully executed 739 contracts between 2023–2025, compared to 642 between 2020–2022, a 15% increase. Changes during this time also included improvements such as the launch of a procurement dashboard that allows public access to Forest Preserve awarded contracts.

Internal programs strengthened workplace culture and collaboration across the Forest Preserves, encouraging greater collaboration, increasing employee engagement

and helping ensure the Forest Preserves' values are reflected in how employees work together and serve the diverse residents of Cook County.

The Legal Department fully executed 739 contracts between 2023–2025, compared to 642 between 2020–2022, a 15% increase.

Strengthened workplace culture and collaboration across the Forest Preserves. The Equity Operations Manager provides dedicated support for REDI initiatives, encouraged greater collaboration, increased employee engagement and helped ensure the Forest Preserves' values are reflected in how employees work together and serve the diverse residents of Cook County.



Pension Obligation

Before the passage of the referendum, the Forest Preserves of Cook County was unable to fulfill the District's responsibility to fully fund the Forest Preserve District Employees' Annuity and Benefit Fund of Cook County. In 2022, the Forest Preserves noted that without more funding available than was currently available, the fund would be depleted by 2041. Forest Preserves leadership recognized the contractual and ethical responsibility to provide the necessary funding to allow retirees to receive the pension they had earned.

With this in mind, regardless of the success of the referendum, the Forest Preserves was clear that it would need to fully close the employer contribution funding gap. Restoration, public programs, land acquisition, maintenance and other fundamental activities for a healthy, vibrant preserves would have been considered for budget cuts without the extra resources the referendum provided, a massive step back from the forward momentum the Preserves had made in the last decade plus.

Key Investments

Worked with lawmakers in Springfield to address limitations on the Forest

Preserves annual contribution. Even with funds available from the referendum, a long-standing state law did not allow the Forest Preserves to provide sufficient funds to meet current actuarial requirements. Because of this, the Forest Preserves pension funding line did not increase in fiscal year 2023. Forest Preserves and Cook County representatives worked with the state legislators to amend Public Act 102–1131, effective June 1, 2023, to allow for the increase of the annual contribution to the Forest Preserves.

Increased the annual contribution by the District to fully match a third-party

calculation of actuarial requirements. The employer budget line rose from \$4 million in 2024 to \$12.4 million in 2025 and \$12.6 million in 2026. These amounts were based on the entry-age normal cost method, a 5-year smoothed actuarial value of assets, and a 30-year layered amortization of unfunded actuarial accrued liability with payments increasing 2% per year. By continuing to follow these guidelines, the Forest Preserve District Employees' Annuity and Benefit Fund of Cook County is estimated by a third-party consultant to meet the needs of the District and be fully funded by 2054.

Impact

In 2022, the average pension payment to a Forest Preserves retiree was \$34,487 per year, and most former employees did not receive Social Security. With the full funding mechanism—both employer and member contributions—in place for the Forest Preserve District Employees' Annuity and Benefit Fund of Cook County, retirees and their families dependent on the fund will

be fully compensated per their employment contract with the Preserves. And with the funding gap covered, the Forest Preserves was able to move forward with work central to the mission, rather than cutting back on those programs and initiatives to achieve cost savings to fund the pension.

Zoo and Garden

As longstanding partners of the Forest Preserves of Cook County, Brookfield Zoo Chicago and the Chicago Botanic Garden play important roles in advancing conservation, education, research and public engagement with nature throughout Cook County. The referendum allowed the

Forest Preserves to provide increased funding to both institutions dedicated to support critical infrastructure and facility improvements and long-term maintenance of these important community resources.



Brookfield Zoo Chicago

In the 2022 budget, the Forest Preserves provided Brookfield Zoo Chicago with \$14.4 million in support. In 2023 that figure rose to \$18.3 million. After the referendum, the Forest Preserves also began providing the Zoo with annual increase to match inflation. By 2025 the Zoo support by the Preserves was at \$19.1 million.

The Zoo has used these funds to support a range of capital improvements and deferred maintenance projects, including infrastructure upgrades, facility renovations, equipment replacement, accessibility improvements and enhancements to animal care facilities. Additional details are provided in Appendix 2: Brookfield Zoo Chicago referendum spending report.

Chicago Botanic Garden

In the 2022 budget, the Forest Preserves provided the Chicago Botanic Garden with \$8.9 million in support. In 2023 that figure rose to \$11.2 million. After the referendum, the Forest Preserves also began providing the Garden with annual increase to match inflation. By 2025 the Garden support by the Preserves was at \$11.8 million.

The Garden has used these funds to support capital projects across its campus, including improvements to pathways, bridges, roads, visitor facilities, accessibility features, building systems and operational equipment. Additional details are provided in the Appendix 3: Chicago Botanic Garden capital projects report.



Conclusion: Next Steps

The passage of the referendum has changed the trajectory of the Forest Preserves of Cook County. In the years before the referendum, the Preserves had a series of hold-steady budgets that required hard decisions stemming from a lack of resources for a sustainable fiscal future. These budgets continually deferred necessary maintenance, severely limited progress toward Next Century Conservation Plan goals and underfunded payments on long-term responsibilities.

With the newly available resources, the Forest Preserves has been able to protect more land, increase its ecological restoration work, improve programs and outreach to the public, address deferred maintenance at the Preserves, Brookfield Zoo Chicago and the Chicago Botanic Garden, resolve the pension shortfall, and establish capacity to continue to more effectively address these issues in the years to come.

The additional funding from referendum of more than \$41 million annually is locked into the Forest Preserves budget. But a steady level of extraordinary growth is not. After a jump the first year after the referendum tax-levy increase of \$45 million in FY2023, the total budget of the Forest Preserves of Cook County rose \$6.6 million in FY24. In FY25 it barely moved, rising by \$0.5 million. In 2023 and 2024, to prepare for new referendum initiatives, the Forest Preserves added a total of 88 full-time-equivalent employees in the largest increase of staffing under the current administration. In FY2025, however, the number of FTE actually decreased by 1.5 positions, and in the FY2026 budget it lowered again by that same number.

Thanks to the referendum and years of careful stewardship of fiscal resources, the Forest Preserves is in a solid fiscal position. That also means that for the foreseeable future the Forest Preserves is once again in a position of building hold-steady budgets, but this time the goal is to stay on what is now a fiscally sustainable path. Decisions on new investments and initiatives must allow the Preserves to continue to live within its means.

There are opportunities within this framework for new initiatives and expansion of successful programs. However, this will require careful planning and the right

opportunities: thoughtful budgetary allocations, waiting until one large-scale initiative ends before launching something new, finding new funding streams and working with partner organizations. The Forest Preserves must also strictly evaluate whether all additional projects would inevitably incur ongoing annual outlays for maintenance, staffing, administrative or other expenses that would weigh future budgets.

As explained in this report, extrapolating the impact of the referendum fiscally and operationally for the Forest Preserves is inexact: The additional funds are in the annual budget as income as an organic part of the property-tax revenue appropriation and as expenses in many existing budget categories. In addition, the specific impact of the referendum on the Forest Preserves budget becomes increasingly difficult to measure over time.

For these reasons, this report will be the last public accounting focused solely on the impact of the referendum on the Forest Preserves of Cook County. The changes from these funds in additional staffing, new procedures, investments in equipment and vehicles, and more are now woven into the operations and organization of the Preserves. Similar to the Next Century Conservation Plan, the impact of the referendum is part of the DNA of the Preserves, not a separate fund or initiative.

The Forest Preserves will continue to be transparent in its allocation of funds with each annual budget, and continue to strive for ways to improve the presentation of the budget to explain the fiscal and programming aspects. The Next Century Conservation Plan web page at fpdcc.com provides the public with annual Key Performance Indicators with an overview of progress in restoration management, acres acquired, engagement in onsite programs, events and activities, and offsite programs and outreach.

In addition, beginning with FY2026 the Preserves will produce an annual report that covers spending, accomplishments and changes from the previous year. Together and in conjunction with other ongoing communications about the Forest Preserves, we will explain and highlight how we are striving to meet our mission.

Appendices

Appendix 1:

Positions Added with Referendum Funds 2023–2025

From 2023–2025, the Forest Preserves of Cook County added a total of 86.5 FTE positions to the agency’s 11 departments. Most but not all were new staff capacity made available because of the extra resources from the referendum’s tax-levy increase. The list below represents only positions added because of the referendum. In some cases, seasonal or part-time positions were closed as a department reorganized to better accomplish its work because of its changes from the referendum.

Office of the General Superintendent

FY23

- Equity Operations Coordinator
- Sustainability Coordinator
- Legislative Fellow

FY24

- Design Associate
- Communications Specialist
- Volunteer Program Aide
- Laborer

Resource Management

FY23

- Resource Crew Apprentice (10)
- Conservation Corps Assistant
- Assistant Senior Wildlife Biologist
- Assistant Resource Project Manager
- Wildlife Lab Technician

FY24

- Restoration Hydrologist
- Administrative Operation Manager
- Assistant Resource Operations Manager
- Ecology Field Supervisor
- Wildlife Field Biologist
- Resource Crew Aide (2)
- Resource Supervisor
- Senior Resource Technician (7)
- Resource Technician (2)

Conservation and Experiential Programming

FY23

- Laborer (5)
- Administrative Assistant II

FY24

- Engagement Assistant (6)
- Animal Specialist (5)

Planning & Development

FY24

- Associate Civil Engineer (2)
- Associate Building Engineer
- Planner/Project Manager
- Survey Technician
- Senior Building Architect

Landscape Maintenance

FY24

- Landscape Maintenance Operations Specialist (6)

Law Enforcement

FY24

- Assistant Operations Manager
- Administrative Assistant II
- Commander
- Deputy Commander



Permits, Rentals and Concessions

FY23

- Permit Field Monitor, part-time (6)
- Seasonal Permit Aides (6)

Finance and Administration

FY23

- Assistant to Purchasing Agent

FY24

- Accountant IV
- Finance Coordinator

Facilities and Fleet

FY24

- Sign Maker
- Painter
- Heavy Equipment Technician
- Parts Counterman

Human Resources

FY24

- Senior HR Analyst
- HR Operations Manager
- Recruitment Manager

Legal

FY24

- Senior Attorney

Appendix 2:

Brookfield Zoo Chicago Referendum Spending Report

Brookfield Zoo Chicago Referendum Report FY24 – FY26

Brookfield Zoo Chicago is deeply grateful to the Forest Preserves of Cook County and to the county voters whose support made possible the success of the Clear Air, Clean Water, and Wildlife Habitat Protection Referendum in 2022. This successful outcome has resulted in an annual allocation of nearly \$4 million to the Zoo, providing critical resources to address deferred capital needs and support ongoing infrastructure improvements.

This investment enables the Zoo to thoughtfully modernize aging facilities, some of which date back to the Zoo's opening in 1934, while advancing our standards of animal care, guest experience, and operational sustainability. These investments encompass essential deferred capital maintenance projects - critical improvements that, while foundational to the Zoo's operations, do not attract the same level of private philanthropic interest as new and highly visible initiatives.

Brookfield Zoo Chicago leverages this public tax levy funding many times over, providing organizational support for the park's capital infrastructure and enabling the investment of over \$90 million in the Zoo's buildings and grounds over the past three years. The support from the Forest Preserves, along with Brookfield Zoo Chicago's enduring capital commitment, ensures that the Zoo will continue to serve as a vital community resource for generations to come.

From Fiscal Year 2024 through Fiscal Year 2026 (April 2023 - March, 2026), the Zoo received \$3,880,000 in annual capital funding, which supported the following capital investments.

BZC FY24 - FY26 Referendum Spending	
Capital Item Description	Amount
Exhibit Infrastructure	\$4,416,025
HVAC	\$1,653,712
Equipment and Vehicles	\$1,210,173
Fire Alarm and Security	\$920,313
Office and Building Renovations	\$849,009
Fencing / Painting / Building Facades	\$535,598
Paving	\$534,489
Network / Technology	\$461,426
Electrical	\$417,376
Landscaping and Grounds Improvements	\$353,295
Roofing	\$297,977
Total	\$11,649,394

Appendix 2: continued

This \$11,649,394 in investment was allocated across a broad range of infrastructure areas. Representative examples of projects completed with referendum funding are outlined below.

Exhibit Infrastructure: The referendum funding supported portions of the design work, HVAC installation, rockwork and ozone generator replacement that occurred during the renovation of the 37-year-old Seven Seas/Dolphin Bay habitat. This renovation aimed to enhance both animal wellbeing and guest experience by adding a variety of dynamic elements to the dolphins' habitat to enrich their daily lives. Paired with the Zoo's investments, the updated Seven Seas/Dolphin Bay continues to inspire millions of guests to learn about dolphins and how they can help protect them, while offering a window into the Zoo's work to care for and conserve dolphin populations, including its long-standing Sarasota Dolphin Research Program.



This funding also supported the reengineering and construction of Tropic World's animal shift and holding system. The new construction of Tropical Forests required modifications to existing back-of-house animal holding areas, ensuring better animal welfare as well as access into new outdoor habitats for orangutans and South American primates. These updates enhanced primate well-being by providing access to immersive, dynamic, multi-level outdoor environments that mirror natural habitat conditions and encourage climbing, exploration, and social interaction.



HVAC/Paving/Fencing/Roofing: HVAC systems were replaced on buildings parkwide as many neared or surpassed end of life. These included updates to boilers, furnaces and AC units at Habitat Africa! The Forest, BZ Red Hots, Tropic World, and other locations. Parkwide paving repairs, including repaving of the South Parking Lot, were undergone to ensure guests have accessible access to the Zoo's grounds and facilities. Fencing was replaced around the park to address corrosion and ensure appropriate containment in accordance with accreditation standards. The Zoo's roundhouse facility, which supports zoo operations and storage, received a new roof to address infrastructure that was well past its useful life and subject to persistent leaking.



Equipment and Vehicles/Fire Alarm and Security: Referendum funding helped to replace the Zoo's Garbage truck and commercial mower, among other equipment across the park. The Zoo's single garbage truck services nearly 2 million guests a year, and with over 235 acres of land to manage, both pieces of equipment were well past their useful life. The Zoo also underwent a complete Fire alarm panel migration and device upgrade, to ensure the continued safety of all staff, guests and animals in the park.



Office and Building Renovations: The Zoo completed a full refresh of the public South Gate restrooms, including new flooring, walls and water utility systems to address plumbing issues and equipment that was no longer operational. The restrooms were also upgraded with adult changing tables and other accessibility considerations to facilitate an improved, inclusive guest experience.



Appendix 3: Chicago Botanic Garden Referendum Spending Report

Funded by the 2022 Forest Preserves Referendum 2025 Capital Items

Accessibility-related Improvements

Converted crushed stone paths to hard surface (Learning and Visitor Center); installed automatic doors (Visitor Center) and auto-assist doors (Regenstein Center)
Subtotal: \$259,500

Building Infrastructure

Replaced building automation system (Plant Conservation Science Center) and fire alarm (Visitor Center) system, replaced HVAC and chiller replacements
Subtotal: \$888,700

Facilities Equipment

Washer/dryer, floor scrubbers, GPS equipment for infrastructure mapping, 2-way radio replacements, air compressor
Subtotal: \$92,100

Garden Equipment

Electric utility vehicles (2), root pruner attachment for loader
Subtotal: \$38,400

Garden Infrastructure

Re-decked Bridge, replaced pergola, re-roofed garden structure, repaired irrigation water main (Evening Island), replaced pump (Heritage Garden pool), replaced tent incl/new drainage, and entry and side wall panels
Subtotal: \$715,400

Science Equipment

Electric utility vehicle (2), flail mower, renovated trailer (Aquatics team), laboratory equipment (Plant Conservation Science Center)
Subtotal: \$250,500

Total 2025 capital Items: \$2,244,600

2024 Capital Items

East Road Reconstruction

Subtotal: \$826,000

Visitor Centr Lakeside Decks

Subtotal: \$750,000

West Collection Path Reconstruction

Subtotal: \$334,000

Appendix 3 continued

Marsh island Boardwalk Reconstruction

Subtotal: \$265,000

McDonald Woods Bridges

Subtotal: \$250,000

Aquatic Weed Harvest Ramp Relocation

Subtotal: \$240,000

Total 2024 capital items: \$2,665,000

2023 Capital Items

Equipment

Snowplow, articulated power hauler utility vehicle and sidewalk snow vehicle, stump grinder and tractor

Subtotal: \$487,629

Circle Garden Brick Replacement

Subtotal: \$270,000

Serpentine & Arched bridges replace decking:

Subtotal: \$150,000

Gatehouse accessibility improvements:

Subtotal: \$85,000

Regenstein Center, switch replacement

Subtotal: \$78,000

Esplanade, Boardwalk, & Terrace Repairs

Subtotal: \$65,000

McGinley Pavilion & Enabling Garden paving stones

Subtotal: \$40,000

Cellular Boost project

Subtotal: \$30,000

Regenstein Center, carpet replacement

Subtotal: \$44,000

Burnstein Hall, AV project

Subtotal: \$28,000

Total 2023 capital items: \$1,277,629

