

FOREST PRESERVE DISTRICT
of Cook County, Illinois

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Steven M. Bylina, Jr., GENERAL SUPERINTENDENT

October 20, 2009

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Board, good morning...

This year, our region has celebrated the centennial anniversary of the 1909 Plan of Chicago.

Its author, Daniel Burnham, has been rightly honored throughout the year for this visionary work...and we are all beneficiaries of his commitment and dedication to the preservation of open spaces throughout the Chicago region.

In fact, it was Burnham himself who urged the preservation of forest lands surrounding Chicago.

And while it took the hard work and diligence of Mr. Burnham to see the plan through to fruition, he did not do it alone.

He worked with many people and is famously known to have had good political instincts of his own, deftly working with elected officials, businesspersons and other architects, sharing ideas and doggedly moving forward.

On paper, the final plan spanned one-hundred and fifty pages, complete with illustrations, plans and maps that clearly outlined his vision.

We remain, even today, in his debt.

I ask you, however, to notice the parallels between his efforts then and what we do here today.

We, too, must work with others, from elected officials to volunteers and other concerned citizens, if we are to fulfill our fiduciary duty to our constituents and our forest preserves.

We, too, must consider many different ideas, viewpoints and perspectives to move the District forward.

And we, too, must consider a document that presents a vision for the future – a solid vision that provides both policy direction and the funding necessary to achieve our goals.

With that in mind, it is with great pride that I present to you my Executive Budget Recommendation for the Forest Preserve District of Cook County for fiscal year 2010.

This budget does not reduce a single existing service or program.

It does not increase fees of any kind.

And, most important, ladies and gentlemen of the Board, **this budget holds the line on property taxes in 2010.**

I wanted to restate, **emphatically**, that for the second straight year in a row, the Forest Preserve District of Cook County **will not raise its property tax levy.**

I repeat myself so that the record accurately reflects the fact that I am calling on my staff to redouble their efforts in the coming year without asking the taxpayers to make any further sacrifices.

As I ask Dr. Bylina and his staff to continue to move the District forward in the coming year, I need only look at 2009 for evidence that our forest preserves are in competent, capable and very good hands.

This year, the District was proud to host the Daniel Burnham Sustainability Conference – the first and only event of its kind to ever be held by any forest preserve district in the nation.

The conference began with an address by Dr. David Orr, a renowned sustainability expert who provided the nearly 200 attendees with a great deal of useful information, not only about the pitfalls of not making our world more sustainable, but, also, about what we must do as a forest preserve district to contribute to a healthier local and global ecology.

I was in attendance at the conference opening, as were a number of you, and I was proud to know that it was **our** forest preserve district that made this event possible; that the Forest Preserve District of Cook County remains **the** leader in open space conservation throughout all of our nation's forest preserves.

The second day of the conference included a workshop that was attended by representatives of more than 75 environmental organizations and government agencies. The workshop included a full day of sharing ideas and discussion regarding the direction we must take to achieve our sustainability goals.

On the third and final day, the facilitators of the conference – faculty and students from the University of Illinois, working in conjunction with Conservation Design Forum – presented a synopsis of the information that was collected the previous day and have since begun the task of developing a sustainability plan that will serve as a model for all other forest preserves districts.

I am reminded of Dr. Bylina's comments to this Board last year, where he noted our responsibility, as the first and largest forest preserve system in the nation, to always blaze new trails and always lead the way.

Clearly, we continue in that tradition.

In April, ours was the only forest preserve district in the state to host sectional bass fishing tournaments during the Illinois High School Association's bass fishing tournament. The events were held at Tampier Lake, Busse Lake and the Skokie Lagoons and were a resounding success.

It took unyielding effort on the part of our Resource Management department – particularly, our fisheries division – to make the tournament work smoothly and I applaud them for their efforts. We look forward to continuing to work with the Illinois High School Association to make this a tradition at our lakes.

Again – and we should not gloss over this fact – we were the first and only forest preserve district to participate.

This year, we completed the final phase of our ambitious and successful “So Close 2 You” public awareness campaign. This year's campaign, themed around our “68,000 Acres of Adventure” and the many recreational opportunities that we offer, was a resounding success.

On highway billboards, television commercials, and PACE and CTA transit advertising, the District created a campaign that simply could not be ignored. Largely praised throughout the summer, the District saw a spike in its online traffic and, for the second year, experienced increases in calls to the volunteer center and online volunteer registration.

As any successful modern advertising campaign requires, we also expanded our public relations outreach through social media and networking via Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.

Twitter allows the District to micro-blog about our programs and services. It has proven to be a very good way to communicate with users who may otherwise not go to our website regularly.

Through Facebook, we have created an online group with over 850 members. These individuals are provided with a great deal of District information through their membership in the group, but also have been the beneficiaries of several special promotions. We have found that this is a wonderful way to communicate to an extended audience in a non-traditional way.

Finally, our most successful social media endeavor has been YouTube. While the District began utilizing the tool in March 2008 as a standard part of its promotions efforts, it was last winter that it became popular among Cook County residents, with a video promoting the new Swallow Cliff sledding hill, which is currently approaching 10,000 views. In total, the videos on the District's YouTube channel have been seen more than 18,000 times.

While technology allows us to take our message directly to the people, we also must continue to establish new relationships through old fashioned, face-to-face outreach.

With that in mind, in June, we held our fifth annual "Live Healthy, Discover Nature" festival on Daley Plaza. Each year, this day allows us to bring together over 3,000 plaza visitors with District animals, exhibits and staff. We were also happy to be joined by 20 partner organizations, who join us in extolling our message of ecological preservation, environmental education and recreation compatible with the health and well-being of our open spaces.

It is also important, of course, to ensure that we go the extra mile and reach out to young people that may otherwise not interact with our lands or staff. The young people we touch today may well become the naturalists, ecologists and environmentalists of the future and we must do our part to help them begin that journey.

To achieve that end, the District served as a co-sponsor of the Fishin' Buddies Youth Conservation Conference.

The conference provided Cook County high school students with an intense, weeklong conservation "boot camp" that provided an understanding of what conservation is all about and why it is important. Students that completed the conference also received a six-week paid internship, many of whom worked at our facilities under the direction of District staff.

We also worked with Fishin' Buddies to present the second annual Forest Preserve District of Cook County/Fishin' Buddies Fishing Derby at Tampier Lake West in September. Over 120 children participated in a day filled with fishing instruction, giveaways and a fishing contest where some of the winners were actually a bit shorter than their trophies.

We have enjoyed a 20-year relationship with Mr. John Kidd and his Fishin' Buddies organization and look forward to continuing to work with them in the future.

As you are all aware, we opened the new Green Lake Family Aquatic Center this summer, with free admission through the swimming season. I was proud to attend the grand opening, joined by Commissioners Beavers and Murphy, and even prouder to learn that over the course of the summer, we served more than 40,000 visitors.

That's 40,000 children and adults who were able to enjoy an afternoon of safe family fun at our brand new aquatic center at no charge. The new facility was highly anticipated by the community and our Permits and Recreation department worked hard to serve them throughout the swimming season. I must also acknowledge the contributions of our Maintenance, Resource Management and Planning and Development departments to make that facility a reality.

Permits and Recreation also expanded the District's concessions offerings to include our first kayak rental operation at Skokie Lagoons. One goal we must continually seek to achieve is the expansion of our services in an effort to bring more visitors to our lands and I think this is a textbook example of how that can be done.

For all of this to work, however, and for every visitor to safely enjoy themselves, we must continue to make their safety our top priority. That is the mission of our Chief of Police, Richard Waszak, who leads our force to protect 68,000 acres of land and millions of visitors each day.

In 2009, the Cook County Forest Preserve Police Department continued to provide the highest level of training among any police force in the area. No department in northeast Illinois, outside of the State of Illinois' conservation police, requires every new officer to be trained in conservation policing except our own police department.

Our law enforcement department also completed the first full year of its Trail Watch program this year and it continues to exceed expectations. Nearly one-hundred visitors enrolled in the program have provided our law enforcement officials with hundreds of reports requiring the attention of both our maintenance and police departments.

I thank our Trail Watchers for their efforts and urge Chief Waszak and his officers to continue their good work.

A safe forest preserve must also be a clean forest preserve...and our Maintenance department has received resounding praise this year for the outstanding condition of our lands. I have heard from those outside the District, time after time, that our picnic groves and other highly-frequented areas are as clean and attractive as they have ever been.

Beyond basic cleanliness, however, maintenance also oversees recycling and, in 2009, the District made great strides in its recycling efforts.

This year, we expanded the number of recycling bins that we offer to the public. With the addition of 30 more bins, we now have a total of 42 District-owned recycling receptacles throughout our holdings.

We have placed large, colorful posters detailing the locations of these receptacles throughout all District buildings and field locations to ensure that public recognizes our ongoing commitment to recycling in the forest preserves.

We were also proud to partner with the City of Chicago for the placement of four additional recycling drop-off bins at various District locations within the city. This partnership is exemplary of the type of joint endeavor in which I want our District to continue to engage in an effort to improve our environment.

With such a focus on recycling, it came as no surprise when the District was awarded the Recycling Hall of Fame award last month by Keep Chicago Beautiful.

While we have done much towards our recycling goals, we will continue to do more. Recycling, by taking refuse out of our County's trash stream, is a perfect way for all citizens to make their donation towards a cleaner environment and we are happy to do our part.

Our Planning and Development department has spent the year completing one of the largest and most ambitious capital improvement plans our District has ever seen.

Whether constructing new buildings, renovating parking lots or taking on any of the myriad projects they have completed or overseen, our P&D staff has worked diligently every day to improve and restore our holdings.

One great example I would like to focus on are our new corner signs. I am sure you've all seen them.

These 105 large, attractive signs are replacing those that have been in the field for decades. They also provide the new opportunity to promote district events through interchangeable slots right there on the signs.

While this may seem to be a small thing, I ask you all to reflect on the tremendous difference something as basic as the aesthetics of a sign can create on your perception of an organization.

There is simply no end to the vital work being done by this department and I would implore each of you to go through your budget books and examine the dozens of projects this department has undertaken.

As a sports fan, I am intrigued by the momentum of the football team. No matter what side of the ball you are on, to be successful, the team must move downfield as a unit. And, on offense, it is the front line that provides protection for the quarterback, making the plays possible.

In an analogous sense, it is our Resource Management department that serves as our front line – always engaging the public, always working in the field and always taking our environmental message forward.

By the end of this year, our nature centers will have served more than a half-million people, from children who will come face-to-face with a red-tailed hawk for the first time at the Hal Tyrell Trailside Museum...to grandparents who stroll the grounds of Sand Ridge Nature Center with their grandchildren.

Our naturalists also continued their work with the Mighty Acorns program. This year, thirty schools and over 2,700 students have participated in the program and we could not be more excited about our continued relationship with that wonderful organization

In 2008, the District's volunteers set a new standard that is certain to be the envy of all other Illinois forest preserve districts. This year, our volunteers provided more than 93,000 total hours of donated labor.

I want to pause here for a moment and examine that number: 93,000 hours worth of work and sweat and time that our volunteers are giving to the District – solely to advance our mission.

That is no small thing...and neither is the next number.

Their hours of volunteer time – at a rate of \$21.91 per hour – equal a donation to the District of just over \$2 million dollars.

There are times when words of thanks seem a bit inadequate. This is one of those times.

To all who've given up an hour, an afternoon or whole days throughout the year to work in support of their forest preserves, please know that I, on behalf of this Board, extend to you my deepest thanks for your incredible contributions.

And as we examine the numbers, I am reminded that in our effort to provide a high level of service to our visitors, we look to our Finance department to keep our books in balance.

This has been a particularly good year for the District's finance team and I am proud to acknowledge the work of Mr. Marlo Kemp, our Chief Financial Officer, and his team.

In May, we learned that the Finance and Administration department had been recognized by the Government Finance Officers Association for excellence in financial reporting. While I believe every such achievement deserves recognition, it may have been a bit diminished, if only because it came as no surprise – I already know that our team is top-notch.

But there was more to come.

In September, Fitch Ratings upgraded our bond rating to double-A-minus from A-plus based on a number of factors, including improved financial performance, management initiatives and low direct debt levels. In short, the District has acted – and will continue to act – as a responsible steward of the public's tax dollars and, by extension, of the public's trust.

This year, we also launched the District's new internet-based procurement system. This new tool, created in conjunction between our purchasing staff and Cook County's MIS department, provides a whole new level of transparency to our purchasing efforts. Vendors can sign up online to receive bid notifications, view current postings and learn about the District's procurement processes and procedures.

With that, ladies and gentlemen, I suggest to you that the document before you will provide for the tools necessary for 2010 to be every bit as productive as 2009.

My recommendation includes a total appropriation of \$160.1 million dollars, with an operating budget to the District of \$58.3 million dollars.

This budget also provides contributions to the Brookfield Zoo and Chicago Botanic Garden of \$14.8 and \$9.3 million dollars, respectively.

In 2010, the District will add only two naturalist positions to our Resource Management department, bringing our total staffing level to 538 full-time equivalent positions.

We are adding these positions to our ranks in anticipation of expanded programming at our two new nature centers. Our naturalists serve on the front lines of extending our mission to our visiting public and I am proud to provide for growth in their numbers.

The budget provides \$3.5 million dollars towards our land management and restoration efforts – a modest increase over last year’s appropriation and a contribution of \$3 million dollars to the land acquisition fund to ensure that, when possible, we are able to continue to procure land in our effort to reach our legislative limit of 75,000 acres.

I present this budget to you today, ladies and gentlemen, in an effort to look forward; to envision a new year filled with new opportunities.

In 2010, the District will continue its effort to integrate technology into its operations.

We will create a new Iphone application that will allow users to search their Cook County forest preserves by utilizing their Iphone. No smartphone in the marketplace has enjoyed the growing market share over the past year that the Iphone has and we believe this app will be groundbreaking among forest preserves.

Our application will not only allow users to find forest preserves on their Iphone, but to search amenities, photos and highlights regarding District holdings. This project will require a massive effort on the part of District staff, but I believe it will be worth it.

We will also completely redesign our existing website and add new features, like a search engine and enhanced video capabilities. Our existing web site has served the public well for nearly 10 years, however, as technology has changed, so, too, must our online wilderness grow.

We also considering introducing a new “green fleet” into the forest preserves.

The District is currently in discussions regarding the possibility of installing propane fuel conversion systems in a number of District vehicles as part of a pilot effort. I should note that propane costs only a third of what gasoline costs and that, in every way possible, this move represents the best of how the District should move forward: cleaner energy, lower costs and a strict adherence to practices that reflect our mission.

In 2010, the Cook County Forest Preserve Police will be the first law enforcement agency in northeastern Illinois to introduce the PocketCop into its operations.

The PocketCop is the first handheld, fully-integrated mobile data system for law enforcement. It will make criminal database queries, alarm capabilities and text messaging available to our officers, who will now have immediate access to federal, state and local criminal databases.

These smartphone devices will take the place of computers in police cars, allowing the District to realize significant cost savings. This measure will not only result in enhanced technology and

equipment for our officers while they patrol trails and picnic groves, but will also improve safety for both our patrons and officers.

In 2010, we will host the grand openings of the new Little Red Schoolhouse Nature Center and Camp Sagawau environmental education center. For years, our nature centers have served as gateways to environmental education and I look forward providing our visiting public with modern and exciting facilities, just as we did for the addition at River Trail Nature Center last September.

In 2010, we will extend a new offer to families in search of a respite from the summer heat: the Forest Preserve District of Cook County Family Swim Pass. The pass will be available for purchase throughout the swimming season and will allow up to five individuals per family to swim at any of the District's three pools at a significant discount.

Next year, we will also increase the number of handicap-accessible picnic tables and comfort stations available to the public. We began expanding our inventory of these facilities this year and look forward to continuing to serve our visitors who require them.

In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, as the President and Commissioners of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, let us continue to make our forest preserves the best in the nation.

Let us strive to meet the mark set so high by the many visionaries, like architects Jens Jensen and Dwight Perkins, who, while making an argument for the preservation of open spaces noted, "the necessity of providing for future generations" and who helped establish our great district.

And, as we approach the new year, let us adhere to the admonition of Mr. Daniel Burnham and make no small plans.

Thank you.