

FOREST PRESERVE DISTRICT
of Cook County, Illinois

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536 NORTH HARLEM AVENUE, RIVER FOREST, ILLINOIS 60305
773-261-8400 / 708-366-9420 / 800-870-3666 TDD 708-771-1190

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Thank you.

In 1904, prominent Chicago architects Jens Jensen and Dwight H. Perkins initiated a study of recreational facilities and the remaining natural areas in Cook County. Upon completion of this effort, they concluded:

“Instead of acquiring space only, the opportunity exists for preserving country naturally beautiful...the Skokie, the North Chicago river valley, the Des Plaines Valley, Salt Creek, Flag Creek, Mt. Forest, the Sag Valley, Palos Heights, Blue Island Ridge, the Calumet River... all of these should be preserved for the benefit of the public in both the city and its suburbs, and for their own sake and scientific value, which, if ever lost, cannot be restored for generations.”

These visionaries knew that no opportunity to procure vital and valuable open space should be missed...and that each purchase would represent not just a mere land transaction, but a promise to our children and grandchildren that their ecological futures were being protected.

It is interesting to note that these thoughts about the Forest Preserves predated Daniel Burnham's lauded *Chicago Plan of 1909*, which also called for the preservation of “forest lands in a green ring around the city.” It is clear that much of the prevailing wisdom of the early 1900's was that the preservation of open space was paramount; that, as urban areas grew more dense, those residents would need green spaces to enjoy, appreciate nature and learn about their natural heritage.

We do well to emulate them now.

In fact, it is in that same spirit that I have appointed Arnold Randall to continue the day-to-day stewardship of Perkins' and Jensen's vision.

As many of you know, Mr. Randall is an accomplished planning professional with significant managerial experience. He worked for the Chicago Park District in various roles and has worked with a number of individuals and organizations in the public and private sector. He has my



complete trust and support as we work to further the District's mission - "protecting and preserving the flora, fauna, and scenic beauties" of our preserves.

I believe that under the new leadership team, the District will experience an unprecedented period of growth in its programming, volunteer opportunities and public outreach.

I do not believe, however, that it is enough to simply let the public know that we exist.

We must open the door for them, create bridges into our preserves and do all we can to facilitate growth in the number of individuals who participate in the Cook County forest preserve experience.

With that in mind, I am proud to present my 2011 Executive Budget Recommendation.

This \$160.2 million dollar balanced budget is sustainable in that it holds the line on taxes for the third year in a row, calls for increased operational efficiencies and provides for the continued expansion of our holdings and programming.

The operating budget of the District is \$57.1 million dollars.

It also includes contributions towards the operations of the Brookfield Zoo and Chicago Botanic Garden in the amounts of \$14.88 million and \$9.35 million dollars, respectively.

In 2011, the District will focus on five distinct goals: increasing land acquisition, with an eye towards also maintaining our current land holdings and facilities in good condition; increasing non-tax revenue; requiring our staff to do more with each dollar of revenue; increasing the educational benefit for children and young people during their visits to the District; and the implementation of a District-wide training program.

The District has reported that, last year, revenues from recreational activities dropped 1.9-percent.

We believe that families and individuals simply were not coming to participate in activities that required fees as often as in past years.

We are, however, putting into place the changes to ensure that our revenues are up in 2011. We will increase our non-tax revenues this year through a combination of increasing participation in our fee-generating activities, carefully raising fees where appropriate and improving the quality of our visitors' experiences.

In these difficult economic times, we have cut the operating portion of the District's budget by a corresponding 1.9-percent. We have been careful in making these cuts, and are confident that we can continue to provide our high levels of performance in spite of this.

While keeping a balanced budget, we have placed that 1.9-percent into the Land Acquisition Fund.

Our Forest Preserve staff will endure another year without performance raises, and we are grateful for their talents and their wonderful team spirit.

The current real estate market reflects some of the lowest relative real estate prices that we have seen in decades. We must take advantage of this opportunity and make strategic acquisitions to fill the gaps in our remarkable 300-mile trail system and our extraordinary map of forests, prairies and savannahs.

This is perhaps the last time that we will see such an opportune moment in our lifetimes. If we don't take advantage of it, we will answer to our children and the generations to come.

For that reason, my budget calls for a \$4.5 million dollar contribution to our land acquisition fund in 2011.

Additionally, given the inherent difficulty of procuring our legislative limit of 75,000 acres, I have directed the District to redouble their efforts to identify any grant or in-kind donation opportunities that may exist.

We are also setting plans in place for increasing our efficiency in moving funds out and using our Capital Development and Land Acquisition Funds to the fullest.

Our restoration efforts have begun to garner the regional and national attention they deserve, and the staff and funds for this program have not been reduced.

My budget includes a net increase in the District's number of full-time equivalent personnel by six positions; from 538 to 544 - while reducing our operating budget.

While we are eliminating a number of positions, we are also taking major steps to streamline the administration of the District.

For example, certain administrative duties and other responsibilities involving intergovernmental affairs will be performed by the Secretary to the Board and the President's Office of Intergovernmental Affairs.

As we expand our outreach efforts in the coming year, the District will work with the County to share printing, video production and graphic design services.

The elimination of these duplicative functions will not only result in cost savings, but will improve services for the District.

We are also adding positions to address areas that we believe are critical to the core mission of the District. Accordingly, we are adding professional Naturalists, Resource Management Specialists and a Fisheries Technician, all of whom will have with specific skill sets suited to improving the District.

Also, as recommended by our Shakman Administrator, the District will add a Compliance Officer who will help oversee the continued reform of the District. Over the last two months, Mr. Randall has worked closely with the court-appointed Shakman Compliance Administrator and - given that the District was found to be in violation of the Shakman decree more than 100 times over a three-year span - it is clear to me that we need additional and consistent oversight to ensure that our hiring processes are fair, open and transparent and operate in accordance with the letter and spirit of the law.

Other staff additions will be tasked with building a stronger relationship between the public and the District. These individuals will be making the District safer and designing and maintaining trails and other resources.

We're also going to challenge our current employees by asking them to learn new skills. In 2011, we will institute a District-wide cross-training program that ensures our employees gain the new skills necessary to be multi-functional. We will also adapt this program for our summer hires, ensuring that they will leave the District with the means to move forward in their careers with environmental, computer and work-readiness skills that they gain from us.

We're going to improve services by doing more with the resources we have. In 2011, the District will increase the educational benefit that children and young people get from their visits to the District by reassigning positions to this goal. This will involve taking best practices from our nature centers and implementing them District-wide and creating a special District-wide Education Team to improve all our services to children and young people.

Our educational programming initiatives include adding a Master Naturalist Program, allowing the best of our volunteers to earn certifications allowing them to help expand our Mighty Acorns program. As many of you know, the Mighty Acorns is a vital educational program benefitting fourth through sixth graders, but it is currently at capacity. The Master Naturalists will help us continue to grow.

We will also introduce training for Gateway Volunteers – a new opportunity for those who wish to help introduce the District to others. The Gateway Volunteer Program will instruct participants on how to lead hikes and both empower and educate them to give overviews of the District.

The overarching goal is finding ways of getting the public more involved with the District. That means refocusing staff to double the number of volunteers, giving current and new volunteers additional opportunities to contribute, recruiting more volunteers and ensuring that they know we appreciate their services.

This year, we will launch our “Partners for the Preserves” program. The purpose of this program is simple: to expand our capacity through partnerships with organizations that have similar missions. This program will provide us with a vehicle to officially recognize and welcome public and private partners, particularly those with whom partnership can result in real and tangible change and improvement for the District.

In closing, I applaud those commissioners that have worked with the District to improve its finances and operations, and now I challenge you to join me in doing more.

We cannot look to past successes and become complacent. We must always seek opportunities to further improve and streamline this government; to implement operational efficiencies; and to better serve our visiting public. My charge to Mr. Randall is to set a new standard with an unprecedented effort to serve Cook County's families, our volunteers and the visiting public at large.

I believe my budget helps us do that. I hope for your support.

Thank you.