



**Office of the Cook County Board President
Toni Preckwinkle**

**President Preckwinkle's Remarks
on Release of FY 2012 FPDCC Budget**

October 27, 2011

One of the greatest environmental advocates in American history, Aldo Leopold, once wrote, "We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."

It is in this spirit of connecting "community" with land conservation, protecting our natural resources, and effective governance, that I submit my vision and 2012 Executive Budget Recommendations to the Board of Commissioners of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County.

Budgets are not merely numbers and line items on a spreadsheet; they reflect our principles and our priorities. This is why I am pleased to present this budget as a blueprint for how we are continuing to rebuild and strengthen this historic institution.

I've always said that the Forest Preserves are the gems of Cook County. They improve the quality of life for County residents and visitors alike. The wildlife preservation and environmental protection work is essential to maintaining the region's biodiversity and health. It is a source of recreation and learning for all of Cook County. It is the largest clean air resource in the region, cleansing and cooling the air we breathe. The Forest Preserves are the region's greatest rainwater retainer, absorbing, cleaning and evaporating hundreds of millions of gallons of rainwater that falls in the County each year, protecting hundreds of thousands of homes and businesses from flooding. Creating a stronger and more vibrant Forest Preserve District is one of my highest priorities -- and not just because my husband is a science teacher.

My administration has said from the outset that the Forest Preserve District, just like all Cook County government agencies, must become transparent, accountable, improve services for all our residents, and find innovative solutions to streamline its operations. I am pleased to announce that under the leadership of Superintendent Arnold Randall, the Forest Preserve District is taking dramatic steps toward achieving those objectives. Superintendent Randall and District staff continue to have my full support and my appreciation for the work they are doing.

The clearest example of the new direction and reform at the Forest Preserve District is the comprehensive desk audit that I ordered earlier this year and that we released to the public on October 12th.

The goal of a desk audit is to assess the overall effectiveness of an organization by examining its personnel and systems. Auditors took a detailed look at the District's operations and listed 118 recommendations to streamline its work, creating a framework for reform. Their findings guide many of the budget recommendations I am proposing today.

Let me put our budget recommendations into context by first highlighting the Forest Preserve District's six major objectives for fiscal year 2012.

These include:

- focusing on greater accountability throughout the entire organization by implementing the recommendations from the desk audit and achieving compliance with the Shakman rules;
- continuing to restore our most precious certified natural forests, savannahs and prairies;
- continuing to identify and acquire key land parcels and create connections between our properties;
- expanding public outreach initiatives and educational programs, particularly for children;
- building and leveraging the District's conservation, land restoration and environmental protection work by continuing to grow our volunteer corps; and
- completing our new Land Acquisition Plan, releasing a new, more transparent Capital Improvement Plan, and completing a plan for the District's new initiative to restore and expand our historic campgrounds.

With those objectives in mind, the 2012 fiscal year budget includes a total appropriation of \$195 million dollars. Despite the continuing economic downturn, the Forest Preserve District's proposed budget is balanced without raising taxes.

This total budget also includes contributions of \$15.5 million to the Brookfield Zoo and \$9.6 million to the Chicago Botanic Garden, two of the most important institutions in the entire region, and indeed the country.

The District's general operating fund, is \$58 million and supports each of the nine departments and their services to the public. This represents a 1.5 percent increase from last year's budget.

Ninety-two percent of the total general operating budget is for preservation and restoration, education, recreation and volunteerism, public safety, and the maintenance of trails, groves, and family picnic areas. Consistent with our commitment to restoration and volunteerism, nearly all of the increase in the general operating fund has been dedicated to creating additional positions in our ecology division and our expanded volunteer resource program.

This budget's commitment to transparency and accountability is a cornerstone of the auditor's recommendations to streamline, restructure and redeploy staff. We reorganized and clarified the roles and responsibilities of each of the District's departments, and moved twenty-five positions to locations where they would be most effective. When I was running for President of the County Board, I was informed numerous times that there were virtually no personnel policies and procedures in the District. Our desk audit confirmed that fact. In this budget we have begun aligning positions and job titles with departments so that staff know definitively to whom they report. We also believe that this structural change will allow our staff to be more responsive to public requests for involvement and to more effectively engage with our partners, volunteers and land stewards.

This budget also reflects our commitment to achieving compliance with Shakman rules. We established the position and hired a compliance officer in 2011. In 2012, we will add a training and development manager in Human Resources who will be responsible for creating training modules throughout the entire organization -- at all levels. In agreement with the Shakman Compliance Administrator, the District has developed its own hiring plan and has hired qualified professionals for the reorganized and separate Human Resources Department.

To keep natural land restoration at the top of our priorities, this budget will create eight new ecology and restoration staff positions, the largest increase in over ten years. This will better align our budget with our mission to preserve and protect the natural lands and beauty of the Forest Preserves, and better comply with requirements related to grants from the Army Corps of Engineers.

The funds recommended for land restoration remain at \$5.5 million.

We are achieving progress while remaining efficient.

Anyone who has toured the Forest Preserves, as I have over the last year, knows that we are faced with decades of deferred maintenance. The District will allocate just under \$8 million for infrastructure improvements such as repairs and replacements of existing bridges, plumbing systems, and other related needs.

The fiscal year 2012 budget allocates an additional \$18.6 million in non-grant funding for facilities and infrastructure that will be used for maintenance and minor enhancements of the District's capital holdings.

Finally, we have set aside \$4 million for land acquisition.

The Forest Preserve District continues to make strategic land acquisitions to fill the gaps in our 300-mile trail system and add to our forests, prairies and savannahs. This year alone the District has acquired 69 acres and we anticipate ending the year with a total of 170 acres after the District closes on its proposed acquisition of 99 acres near the Burnham Prairie.

Through all of this, we now have strong leadership and dedicated, hard-working employees at the Forest Preserve District who have accomplished numerous goals and objectives in just one year.

Along with our partners at the US Environmental Protection Agency and Chicago Wilderness, the Forest Preserve District received the “Excellence in Conservation and Native Landscaping Award” for the Orland Grassland Restoration Project and was awarded \$4.2 million by the Army Corps of Engineers for the restoration project.

The District has begun to effectively enforce encroachments on Forest Preserve property and has already reclaimed six acres of land in 2011.

We have organized numerous meetings and forums on the Capital Improvement Plan, the Land Acquisition Plan, and feedback sessions on our stewardship and volunteer programs. For the first time, all residents are encouraged to provide comments via the District’s new website.

The District instituted a new hiring process and trained its seasonal staff before the summer even began. This may sound basic, but our long-term employees told us this is something that hasn’t happened for over 18 years. And we are over half-way through completing a thorough updating and rewriting of every job description in the District.

The District has also put in place several reforms to increase transparency and accountability. In addition to the desk audit and hiring the Compliance Officer, the District successfully created an employment plan, and is working closely with the Shakman Compliance Administrator to comply with the Supplemental Relief Order and Consent Decrees entered into by the District in connection with the Shakman litigation.

The District also initiated a robust and transparent hiring process within the police department. In October, 180 applicants attended an information and tutorial session to assist them with preparing for the written police exam and to provide them with a clear understanding of the hiring process.

Finally, the Forest Preserve District implemented Performance Management measures to critically evaluate District finances, programs and operations. Each department created transparent, measurable goals and has been working to achieve them all year.

These are only a few of the many accomplishments from the 2011 fiscal year. The challenge now for the Forest Preserve District is to build on our successes to create a streamlined and effective organization that leverages the talents, skills and resources of the District and its employees.

My budget recommendation aims to accomplish just that.

It appropriately shifts resources to improve our services to the public. We are adding professionals and experts to the District's conservation and land restoration work, reorganizing a new Human Resources Department to train all of our managers and employees to facilitate an open and fair hiring process and increasing staff in recreation and volunteerism.

Following the recommendations from the desk audit means that the District will upgrade and update its technology and equipment, such as creating an Intranet system to share and archive information, institute and update processes and policies, and better communicate with employees. All full-time District staff will have email addresses, receive skills training, and have clear job descriptions and responsibilities.

I have full confidence in Superintendent Randall's abilities to accomplish all of this and to carry out the principles and priorities established in my 2012 budget recommendations.

In closing, it is my sincere hope that, under my administration's agenda and the Forest Preserve District's leadership team, we will reclaim and strengthen the role of the Forest Preserves in all of our communities. And that we will continue to reach out to residents and visitors -- and especially our young people -- and encourage them to utilize everything the Forest Preserves have to offer.

This budget and our reforms help make this a reality for us all.

Thank you.