



Forest Preserve District of Cook County

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**Forest Preserve District of Cook County
Board President Toni Preckwinkle Budget Introduction Remarks
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The Forest Preserve District of Cook County was established nearly 100 years ago by a group of civic leaders who understood the incredible value that natural lands have to offer in an urban environment. They had the foresight to secure this land, and to create a Forest Preserve District - the first of its kind in the county - charged with protecting and preserving it for the education, pleasure and recreation of the people of Cook County and our visitors.

As the County has grown and become more developed over the past century, the open spaces of the Forest Preserves have become even more important. Our lands serve as a gateway from the urban and suburban environments where we live and work to a vibrant natural area that is filled with life.

Moreover, the wildlife preservation and environmental protection work of the Forest Preserves is essential to maintaining and enhancing our region's native biodiversity and health in the face of increasing urbanization, habitat loss, environmental pollution, and the introduction and spread of invasive plant species.

Our lands comprise the largest clean air resource in the region, cleansing and cooling the air we breathe. The Forest Preserves are also the region's greatest rainwater retainer . absorbing, cleaning and evaporating the hundreds of millions of gallons of rainwater that fall in the County each year, protecting hundreds of thousands of homes and businesses from flooding.

I firmly believe that the Forest Preserves are the pride of Cook County and improve the lives of all of our residents.

Today, it is our great honor and privilege to have the responsibility for carrying out the mission of conservation and preservation which our founders articulated nearly a century ago.

Before I talk about the goals and details of the 2013 budget, I'd like to take a moment to reflect on this past year, and to congratulate General Superintendent Arnold Randall and his staff on a number of important achievements that will set the stage for a successful year ahead.

In July, Governor Quinn signed legislation allowing the District to establish provisions to address the underuse of minority and women-owned businesses with respect to construction and procurement contracts. This new legislation brings the Forest Preserve District in line with other local governments, and will significantly benefit the residents of our County by increasing the pool of qualified minority and women-owned businesses that have the opportunity to be selected for the contracts awarded by the District each year.

This was an effort that was near and dear to my heart and I am pleased that we were able to make it a reality.

In June, the District's fiscal responsibility and sound financial decision-making earned it a credit rating upgrade. Combined with favorable borrowing conditions in the municipal debt market, this allowed the District to refinance and issue new bonds for the first time in eight years, receiving \$110M in new project proceeds at the lowest cost of debt issuance in our history. In addition to providing much-needed capital project and land acquisition funds for the District, a portion of the proceeds were designated for capital projects at the Brookfield Zoo and the Chicago Botanic Garden, two of the most important cultural institutions in the region.

While this municipal bond money presents a tremendous opportunity for us to reinvest in our future, we recognize that any spending must take place within the context of a larger strategic framework.

Through careful planning, we will be spending the bond proceeds in a way that strikes a balance between acquiring and restoring new natural areas, investing in infrastructure to hold down long-term maintenance costs and adding new mission-compatible recreational opportunities for our growing user base.

To help us do this, we've spent the last year working on a series of master plans which will guide our efforts, and the use of these proceeds, moving forward. These include a land acquisition plan, which you received last month, a camping master plan, which will be finalized in November, and our recreation master plan, which will identify opportunities for compatible recreation, which you'll see early next year. Can you tell that our General Superintendent comes from a planning background?

The 2013 . 2017 Capital Improvement Plan, which will outline the use of all of these bond proceeds, is a separate document from this operating Budget Recommendation and you will see it later this year; however, it is important to note that the bond transaction was budget-neutral and did not result in any tax increase for the residents of Cook County.

In 2012, we also began planning our centennial efforts, which will serve as a platform to attract new audiences to our lands, increase volunteerism, generate new sources of non-tax revenue, and honor those who had the foresight to establish the District and guide it through our first hundred years.

The centennial, which will begin next year and run through 2015, will focus on families and children from early childhood through the teen years, introducing greater numbers to the incredible natural, educational and recreational opportunities that surround them. It will also reestablish the Forest Preserve District's role as a leader and innovator in the fields of conservation, environmental education and outdoor recreation. I will be sharing more details about our plans for the centennial with you in the coming months.

Our 2013 goals build on the important work we've done in 2012 and today I am pleased to submit my 2013 Executive Budget Recommendations to the Board of Commissioners of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County.

I believe that this budget builds upon a strong foundation of fiscal stability, allowing the Forest Preserve District to continue to become a stronger, more transparent and accountable government agency, while also showing responsibility in ensuring that it has the resources necessary to fulfill its important mission for the next 100 years and beyond.

Let me put our budget recommendations into context by first highlighting the Forest Preserve District's major objectives for fiscal year 2013, each of which focus on preparing our organization for its next century. The district will:

- Restore our most precious natural forests, savannas and prairies and continue to acquire new lands to move us closer to our statutory limit of 75,000 acres. This is the heart and soul of what a Forest Preserve District does, and it will continue to be our highest priority in the year ahead;

- Create a foundation for long-term fiscal security by creating efficiencies, enacting reasonable user fee increases, and avoiding quick fixes in favor of responsible and sustainable spending;
- Become a more effective government agency by increasing transparency in our budgeting process, and making adjustments to our staffing levels to accurately address our current needs;
- And, finally, increase our focus on community engagement and outreach, ensuring that even more of our citizens have the opportunity to experience the wonders of the Forest Preserves for themselves.

With those objectives in mind, the 2013 Budget Recommendation is \$190 million dollars, and is balanced without raising property taxes.

The Corporate Fund, also known as the District's general operating fund, stands at \$52 million and supports each of the ten departments and their services to the public, as well as district-wide expenses and a \$1M transfer to the Capital Improvement Fund.

Previous years' budgets included large, one-time transfers from the Corporate Fund for Construction and Development and Land Acquisition.

For 2013, changes in all of these funds, and in the Bond and Interest Fund, reflect the fact that the District's recent bond transaction reduced the need for annual pay-as-you-go-capital, resulting in a \$3M savings to the operating budget. The District also anticipates that several long-pending legal cases (including the Shakman litigation) will conclude shortly in our favor. The reduced costs will be funded out of the Self-Insurance Fund, allowing for an additional \$3M in operating budget savings.

This Budget Recommendation also includes contributions of \$14.9 million to the Brookfield Zoo and \$9.3 million to the Chicago Botanic Garden, two of the most important institutions in the entire region, and indeed the entire country.

There are a number of format changes to this year's Budget Recommendation, intended to increase its readability and transparency. For example, for the first time in this document, you can find detailed prior-year expenses for each budgeted line item, allowing taxpayers the opportunity to compare the budget to actual expenditures.

In prior years, the Fee Schedules did not clearly show the total cost to permit holders; now, the Fee Schedule is more transparent and shows the true cost of obtaining a permit for events on the District's lands.

And finally, the unique maintenance operations of the District are more clearly detailed by showing budgeted personnel and expenditures for %Landscape Maintenance+and %Facilities & Fleet Maintenance+as separate departmental sections.

Several operational positions were eliminated from this budget as other means of providing services were developed, such as replacing an Internal Auditor with additional services from the Inspector General's office.

Additional critical positions were created for new programs, including a Contract Compliance Administrator to ensure the integrity and accountability of the District's new Minority- and Women-Owned Business Enterprise program.

The District will also invest in its concession program by hiring a new Concession Manager in 2013. This person will be charged with enhancing the quality of our food and recreation vendors, as well as expanding and increasing profitability of the overall concession program.

And while one new project management position was added to assist with overseeing the new bond-funded capital projects, we anticipate that the cost of this additional position will be covered from interest earnings on the bond proceeds.

In total, the 2013 Budget Recommendation shows a full-time staff headcount that is increased by only three positions.

The 2013 Budget Recommendation also projects savings found from new collaborations with Cook County governments to provide administrative services more efficiently and effectively than either organization could do on its own. Examples include coordination and cooperation in benefits management, increased audit and review services from the Office of the Inspector General, public safety communications systems, and Contract Compliance Administration.

All of these structural improvements are critical, in large part because they help us to do a better job at fulfilling our mission of restoring and preserving our natural lands.

Lands within the Forest Preserve District of Cook County are among the most geologically unique and biologically rich in the United States. Through the Forest Preserves, our residents have access to countless habitats including bogs, artesian fens, ancient lakeplain prairies, wooded swamps, tall-grass prairies, oak woodlands and savannas and more.

We are committed to ensuring that these natural assets of our County are available to future generations. To that end, in 2013, we will provide the same levels of maintenance and service for natural resource management as we did in 2012, but we will improve how we do it. We will decrease private contract costs and add part-time and seasonal staff for improved natural resource management. The combination of hiring lower-cost staff and enhancing our volunteer stewardship program will also us to be more effective in this important work, and it will also better fit the seasonal nature of the job.

This is yet another example of how the District continually shows leadership in working to reduce the cost of government while enhancing the services we provide.

Similarly, we are adding additional part-time and seasonal staff for improved and enhanced recreation and outreach programs. These new outreach efforts will include one-on-one, targeted coordination with community groups, churches, not-for-profits and other organizations to attract new users from all areas of the County, and to equip them with the tools and knowledge to become frequent visitors to our Preserves.

We~~d~~ also be adding more special events, like those that we piloted this summer, including canoeing and paddling outings, Films in the Forest and Forest Jams, and other family-friendly and educational offerings.

In 2013, we will begin to implement the first phases of our recreation and camping master plans, both of which will be completed and submitted to this board shortly. We believe that mission-compatible recreation, such as camping, trails, fishing and even nature play, is a critically important way that we can introduce more of our residents to the benefits of nature, and hopefully foster a lifelong love of the outdoors.

I want to stress that adding these additional recreational opportunities will in no way diminish our commitment to preserving our County's incredible natural resources and that these opportunities will not come at the expense of ecology and our natural resources.

In total, the District is adding the equivalent of 13 fulltime staff through part-time and seasonal positions to support all of these restoration and recreation programs.

In addition to constantly striving to reduce the cost while increasing the effectiveness of government, the District is working on behalf of taxpayers to keep property taxes flat, focusing instead on increasing non-tax revenues.

In 2013, the District is adjusting user fees for the first time in seven years. These adjustments will bring the District's rates for picnic permits, special events, and athletic field rentals in line with the fees charged by other local Forest Preserves and Park Districts in the region. All rates will remain discounted for children, families, seniors and not-for-profit groups.

For example, this means that the cost of a typical family picnic permit in 2013 will increase from \$35 to \$37. Permits for larger groups of more than 1000 participants will see more substantial rate increases, moving from \$760 to \$960 to reflect the larger impact on our lands and the greater staff resources required. To put this into context, so far in 2012, we've sold 6000 permits for groups smaller than 100 and 21 for groups of more than 1000. And again, even with these increases, the Forest Preserve District's rates remain extremely competitive with our peers in the area.

This budget also recommends that golf rates, which have remained exactly the same for the past five years, increase by \$1 at nine of our ten courses. The 10th course, George Dunne, will see a rate increase of \$2.

In addition to increases in user fees, we anticipate higher revenues from strengthened ordinance enforcement and increased investment income from better Treasury management.

Finally, the District will begin charging for parking where property is used by outside vehicles, such as fleet vehicles from other units of government, commuters and local commercial traffic.

In total, the District anticipates non-tax revenues to increase by 6%.

In balancing the 2013 budget, the District is avoiding one-time expenses by spending down fund balances in a responsible, measured way that meets its minimum fund balance requirements, maintains its strong liquidity and does not contribute to future deficits.

For example, the 2012 budget was balanced with \$8M appropriated from the District's Corporate Fund Balance; in 2013, this amount is less than \$2M. This is just one more example of how we are continually managing our finances with an eye towards sustaining and building our fiscal strength to support ongoing operations.

The importance of a strong and vibrant Forest Preserve District is perfectly illustrated by another high point of 2012. In the spring, we announced the presence of a bald eagle nest in Tampier Slough in Palos . believed to be the first verifiable site where eagle eggs have been laid and hatched in Cook County in more than a century.

These birds had an incredible impact on the people of this County. Throughout the spring and summer months, thousands of people have lined up along 131st Street to get a glimpse of the family. It also generated national attention and media coverage.

The fact that bald eagles have chosen to nest here is a testament to the success that the Forest Preserve District has had in realizing our mission. It shows that we've achieved a healthy, bio-diverse ecosystem in this area and has a positive impact on all of our wildlife.

We expect the birds to be migrating shortly, but we hope that they'll come back to the same nest next year, and again and again in the future.

In May, this board passed a resolution celebrating the permanent return, hopefully, of the bald eagle to Cook County, along with the inspiration and joy these eagles bring to us.

This is why the work of the Forest Preserve District, now, and in the years ahead, is so important. And it is why I am so pleased to be submitting this 2013 budget recommendation, which will continue to build the solid foundation needed for the Forest Preserve District to thrive for the next 100 years and beyond.

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