

Forest Preserves District Budget Address – 10/17/13

Good afternoon.

As the President and Board of Commissioners of the Forest Preserves of Cook County, we share a duty to oversee the wise stewardship of the county's nearly 69,000 acres of natural areas and open space.

One hundred years ago, leaders of our community predicted the growth of this region. They understood why it was so important to preserve our natural lands for the education and recreation of our all of our residents, especially those living in the densest urban areas.

They started with just this vision, and a single piece of property. Today, the Forest Preserves account for 11% of our county – nearly 69,000 acres. And we are continuing to acquire critical parcels to increase the amount of open space we have for our residents, while at the same time preserving and restoring these natural habitats.

It is our great honor and privilege to be responsible for carrying out the mission of conservation and preservation that our founders articulated nearly a century ago.

In that vein, I am proud to present my 2014 Budget Recommendation to you today. This proposed budget includes a request for total

appropriation authority of \$179 million dollars and is balanced without raising property taxes and with no fee or fine increases. Most importantly, this budget will allow us to accomplish our critical goals of protecting the diversity of plants and animals that depend on the Preserves, and introducing new educational and recreational opportunities for residents of this County.

Before I delve into the specifics of our 2014 plans, I'd like to highlight just a few of our most significant 2013 accomplishments.

As you remember, last year we issued bonds that resulted in \$110 million in new money for capital projects. Although the 2014 – 2018 Capital Improvement Plan is a separate document that will be submitted to the Board later this year, the most critical aspect of managing the Preserves for future generations is preserving the assets we have, and making them accessible and attractive to all County residents. With that in mind, I want to start by detailing some of the efforts in our capital program.

This past year, we began important planning and design work for capital projects that are being funded by these bond proceeds. Some of this work is targeted toward rehabilitating many of our wonderful historic facilities, including the pavilions at Thatcher, Dan Ryan and Eggers Woods, three projects that were completed in 2013. Other buildings include a new comfort station at Swallow Cliff and a

renovation of the clubhouse at Rolling Knolls to create a new visitor center. As part of our broader initiative to ensure sustainability in all aspects of what we do, we intend to seek LEED certification for the latter two projects.

Other capital efforts aim to provide experiences that attract new users. The most significant of these is our \$26 million commitment to provide new public camping and recreation experiences in our preserves. We have an ambitious goal of renovating existing bunkhouses, adding new primitive cabins, year-round cabins, tent sites, modern toilet and shower buildings and gathering spaces at least five primary locations in the next two years. These camp experiences will provide a new way for families in our area and beyond to experience nature. I look forward to standing with all of you late next year as we dedicate the first of our campgrounds and welcome camping back to Cook County.

In addition to capital projects, we spent more than \$25 million this year to acquire multiple properties that fit the criteria identified in our Land Acquisition Master Plan. Under this administration, we have acquired, or are in the process of acquiring, nearly 1000 acres of land. Very soon, we'll all have to get used to saying that the Forest Preserves include "more than 69,000 acres of land in Cook County."

Of course, it's not enough just to own the land; we must be actively engaged in the vital restoration and preservation of our natural areas.

To that end, I have made a commitment to put the Forest Preserves on a decades-long path to restore even more of our holdings to their original, natural state, an effort that I will highlight in just a moment when I discuss our 2014 Budget Recommendations.

Funds from the 2012 bond issue have also been used to reimburse more than a total of \$1 million to the Brookfield Zoo and Chicago Botanic Garden for critical capital projects that would not have been possible without leveraging our support.

The total commitment to the Zoo and Garden capital projects from the bond proceeds is more than \$13 million. It should be noted that these projects, like all of our contracts, are now subject to the new Minority- and Women-Owned Business Enterprise ordinance, a program I introduced last year.

I am happy to report that, to date, we have had a 47% commitment rate, with more than \$7 million in contracts committed to minority- and women-owned businesses.

While this program has broadened economic opportunities for local businesses, it also reinforces the need for us to be as diligent as possible in holding vendors accountable for contract compliance. Throughout 2013, the Finance and Administration team has continued to tighten its oversight of the entire procurement process. For

example, this year we substantially upgraded our accounting system to centralize procurement functions.

And speaking of accountability and transparency, when I took office, I pledged that the Forest Preserves and Cook County would root out political favoritism in hiring and employment decisions. The corrupt practices of the past were unfair to the taxpayers of this County, who picked up the tab. They were unfair to the qualified applicants who never had the chance to interview for open positions. And they were unfair to the many good, hard-working employees who were denied promotions.

In February, a federal Judge agreed that we have accomplished this goal. He granted a motion to dismiss the Shakman litigation against the Forest Preserves. This is a huge accomplishment and serves as a model for how Cook County and other municipalities can move forward.

In the summer of 2011, I said that my goal was to help introduce no fewer than 2,000 new children to the Forest Preserves by working with community groups and civic organizations that help bridge the gap between those kids and the preserves. Little did I know how successful we would be. In 2013, we implemented even more new educational experiences and programs for the public, with an enhanced emphasis on attracting new users from historically

underserved urban residents of the County. These efforts have consisted of hands-on community outreach and promoting awareness of our holdings, even providing transportation for people who are not able to get to us on their own. Since I made that statement, we have introduced tens of thousands of children to the preserves for the very first time.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I mentioned a few moments ago that the Forest Preserves were founded 100 years ago. In June, we kicked off our three-year Centennial campaign. With this campaign we have set lofty goals to renew our vow to preserve biodiversity and our natural wonders in this fully developed urban area...to reinvigorate the types of experiences people can have in a forest preserve....to ignite passion and understanding of this asset among all Cook County residents...and to develop new partnerships that can help us advance the valuable mission of the preserves.

So as we take our first steps into the Forest Preserves' Second Century, and we reflect upon the important work we have done in 2013, today I am pleased to submit my 2014 Executive Budget Recommendations to the Board of Commissioners of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County.

As I have said before, a budget is not just a collection of numbers; it is a policy document. I applaud the efforts of Superintendent Randall

and his dedicated staff for all their accomplishments over the past three years. But there is always more to do.

Let me put our budget recommendations into context by first highlighting the Forest Preserve District's major objectives for fiscal year 2014, each of which focus on preparing our organization for its next century. The district will:

- Restore our most precious natural forests, savannas, wetlands and prairies – 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;
- 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.
- Create a foundation for long-term fiscal security by creating efficiencies and avoiding “quick fixes” in favor of responsible and sustainable spending;
- And continue to refine and modernize our hiring and procurement practices

My 2014 Budget Recommendation includes a request for total appropriation authority of \$179 million dollars. As I mentioned earlier, it is balanced without raising property taxes and with no fee or fine increases.

The Corporate Fund, also known as the general operating fund, stands at \$57 million and supports each of the departments and their services to the public, as well as district-wide expenses.

The two most significant changes to the 2014 Budget Recommendations reflect our two most important objectives; Restoration and Programming.

In acknowledgement of how important restoration work is to the Preserves, in this budget I am recommending \$6 million for Landscape Restoration and related work and projects. This is by far the largest single line item in this budget, and represents a \$1 million increase over the 2013 budgeted amount. The magnitude of this investment underscores the importance of this effort to our future. While I want to acknowledge the great work that our staff has done in being a national leader in the field of ecological restoration, the scale of restoration that needs to be done is so great that I anticipate continued increases in this investment in future budgets.

In order to guide our restoration priorities, in 2014, we will develop a new natural and cultural areas master plan in partnership with the Prairie Research Institute of the University of Illinois.

In addition to centralizing and organizing the wealth of information that's currently out there, this plan will also utilize rapid field surveys to fill the information gaps on natural and cultural resources within the Preserves and it will establish systems to update this data on a regular basis. Most importantly, once it's completed, the plan will serve as the framework to guide our restoration priorities and decisions. We expect to have the plan completed by December of 2014.

You'll also notice in this budget that we've added a new department – the Department of Conservation and Experiential Programming. This department will be responsible for overseeing education (including our nature centers), outreach, recreation and special events programming. Previously, these employees were working in the General Office, the Department of Resource Management and the Department of Recreation, Volunteer Resources and Permits. While they have already been doing great things and work very closely together, I believe that putting them under one umbrella will lead to even more cohesion in our programming, education and outreach efforts and will help us advance our mission while increasing our users and advocates in the coming years.

Overall, I am proposing only 9 new full-time positions in this budget. To support the Department of Conservation and Experiential Programming, we hope to create one new administrative position. We also plan to add one new Event and Facility Coordinator to manage the programming for our recently-restored pavilions at Thatcher and Dan Ryan Woods. To improve safety in the preserves by allowing for a more efficient allocation of police resources, I am proposing four new police sergeants. In support of our restoration efforts, I am recommending to add one new Resource Technician. And finally, I am proposing to reduce two professional services contracts and add two new staff people for IT support and website management, for a savings of \$100,000.

The increase in salaries and benefits for these 9 new positions is more than offset by almost \$2 million in budgeted savings from more accurately budgeting for position vacancies and benefit costs.

This Budget Recommendation also maintains funding for the day-to-day operations of the Brookfield Zoo and the Chicago Botanic Garden at the higher level of funding we provided in 2013, with property tax levies of \$14.9 million to the Brookfield Zoo and \$9.3 million to the Chicago Botanic Garden. As this body knows, these are two of the most important cultural institutions in the entire region, and indeed the entire country, and we believe this tax payer subsidy is a great value to the residents of Cook County.

As in recent prior years, the 2014 Budget Recommendation reflects a continued effort to identify opportunities to collaborate with Cook County departments to provide more efficient and effective administrative services than either organization could offer on their own. Examples of new opportunities include information technology management, administrative office space, and risk management.

Perhaps most significantly, we've developed a much closer partnership with the Cook County Department of Homeland Security Emergency Management. Together, we will be working to facilitate county-wide response to large scale disasters, and to introduce innovative computer and communications technologies that will directly contribute to improved operations, enable greater intradepartmental coordination, and facilitate the delivery of helpful information to County residents.

And finally, I am recommending a \$525,000 line item for a cohesive county-wide marketing effort that reintroduces the residents of Cook County to the wonders of the Forest Preserves. This campaign was a recommendation in our Centennial plan and will compel and inspire county residents to discover the wonders of nature in their own backyards.

In addition to constantly striving to reduce the cost and increase the effectiveness of government, we are working on behalf of taxpayers to keep property taxes flat, with a total net property tax levy of \$86.5 million, the same level as 2013. While we are adjusting the levy to recapture new property on the tax rolls, the net levy will remain flat through a reduction in the debt service portion.

We anticipate an increase in the amount of Personal Property Replacement Tax revenue we will receive from the State, up \$2 million to \$8.4 million. We also expect to continue to see modest growth in picnic permit and pool revenues from higher use, and modest growth in fines from enhanced enforcement of code violations. However, I want to state again that this budget includes no increases in fees or fines.

Finally, we are continuing to follow our policy of avoiding one-time fixes. We propose to balance the 2014 budget by appropriating only \$3 million dollars from corporate fund balance. This allows the Forest Preserves to achieve our goals of meeting minimum fund balance requirements and maintaining strong liquidity while avoiding contributing to future deficits.

One hundred years ago, the leaders of this county saw the wisdom of giving this great gift the future generation. Today, it is again our collective responsibility to show great wisdom in making sure this

great gift endures for the next 100 years and beyond. I want to thank you all for being here today, and for your consideration of this budget recommendation.

Thank you.