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2015 Budget Address – 10/08/14

Good afternoon.

Many of you in this room are probably aware that we have two important milestones coming up next month. Almost 100 years ago, on November 3, 1914, the residents of Cook County approved a referendum to establish the Forest Preserve District of Cook County. Later that month, on November 30, the Forest Preserve District was officially established.

A century later, all of us in Cook County are benefitting from the vision and dedication of civic leaders who would not give up on their dreams of creating the first -- and what would eventually grow to become the largest -- urban forest preserve system in the nation. Our forest preserves represent the largest concentration of natural lands in the county, roughly 11 percent of the county's entire land area, and protect ecosystems of global significance.

As the President and Board of Commissioners of the Forest Preserve District, the stewardship of this legacy's our responsibility. A healthy natural environment provides a critical resource in our county.

And so I am proud to present my 2015 Budget Recommendation to you today. This proposed budget includes a request for total appropriation authority of \$187.4 million dollars and is balanced without raising any individual's or business's property taxes, and with no increase to existing fees or fines.

This budget grows directly out of an extensive planning process, keeping us focused on our critical goals of protecting Cook County's natural areas and connecting residents to these invaluable resources.

Before I present the specifics of our 2015 plans, I'd like to highlight a few of our most significant 2014 accomplishments.

When I was elected to this position, I knew that we needed to leverage the rare opportunity that our Centennial presented. With that in mind, I charged General Superintendent Arnold Randall and his staff to create comprehensive plans that address key areas throughout the preserves.



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Over the last three years, the Forest Preserves has developed master plans for recreation, camping, capital improvement and other key areas. We're currently working on plans to better manage our natural and cultural resources, as well as "legacy projects" initiated during our centennial but designed to have an impact for decades to come.

At the center of these unprecedented planning efforts is the ambitious Next Century Conservation Plan, which we launched this past winter. This plan lays out a set of bold actions to establish the Forest Preserves of Cook County as a national leader in urban conservation.

The plan calls for the Forest Preserves to make a massive commitment to restoration, expand protected lands by at least 30 percent and to make the preserves more accessible to the diverse people of Cook County. Last month, the Metropolitan Planning Council awarded the plan its prestigious Burnham Award for Excellence in Planning.

As we've shifted toward implementation of our plans, positive physical changes have become increasingly noticeable throughout the preserves. Following a \$110 million bond issue in 2012, we awarded \$60 million in contracts to build a new boathouse at Busse Reservoir, build trails at Thorn Creek, North Branch, the Calumet-Sag Valley, Orland Grassland, and Oak Forest Heritage sites, and install life-safety and accessibility improvements at Little Red Schoolhouse Nature Center and our General Headquarters building.

Some of these projects are still in progress, while many are already being enjoyed by Cook County residents, including the Busse Boathouse and the recently opened North Branch Trail extension at the Chicago Botanic Garden and Turnbull Woods.

Visitors to our prairies and woodlands will notice a healthier landscape too. Last year, we directed \$6 million to our Resource Management Department for the core priority of habitat restoration. To date, we've implemented restoration projects to improve habitat for native plants and animals over a total of 66 properties and managed grant-funded restoration projects across 10 properties.

Just last month, we celebrated the completion of a massive five-year restoration project at 960-acre Orland Grassland in partnership with the US Army Corps of Engineers, which removed invasive brush from hundreds of acres and reseeded and replanted the area with native prairie and wetland species. The Orland project has leveraged Forest Preserve investments by making substantial use of federal dollars and wetland mitigation funds.



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An integral part of our habitat restoration efforts is our volunteer program. Our two-year Centennial Volunteers campaign is on track to build a corps of 6,000 volunteers in the Forest Preserves. Our volunteer web portal has registered 2,075 volunteers to date.

Another exciting development in 2014 was the opening of our new Wildlife Research Center. This new facility allows our Wildlife Biology Division to expand its scientific research and partnerships with leading institutions to better understand the place of wildlife in the urban landscape. The Division will continue to build its behavioral studies, its collaborations with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on zoonotic diseases (that is, diseases transmitted from animals to humans) and its study of land management practices.

With our help, more and more people are discovering and enjoying the preserves. In 2014, the newly created Department of Conservation and Experiential Programming vastly expanded the public programming and events we offer in our nature centers and preserves. The Forest Preserves initiated several new educational and recreational series.

We also started important new programs to reach youth and underserved audiences, including the Youth Outdoor Ambassadors, a 10-month teen internship program to encourage the next generation of conservation leaders. Also in 2014, nature centers were open one evening a week through the summer for the first time in the Forest Preserves' history.

2014 was also a banner year for land acquisition. In May, we purchased the 400-acre Horizon Farms site in Barrington Hills. This former equestrian estate is our single largest land acquisition in more than 40 years.

We've continued to support innovations for our Forest Preserve police. In 2014, we installed mobile computers in patrol vehicles to improve communications and data transmission between FPCC and CCSO 911 Communications Center. We also revitalized our Trail Watch program, engaging regular visitors to help us spot trends and deploy officers exactly where they're needed.

The Forest Preserves grew even more user-friendly in 2014. Our facility rental program opened interesting new spaces for public use, including Dan Ryan Pavilion and Thatcher Pavilion. We also implemented a new online permit reservation system that has made the process of purchasing picnic permits easier for the public, and has allowed our Permits Department to achieve more accurate and detailed accounting.

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I'm pleased to announce that so far in 2014 the Forest Preserves has achieved its aspirational goal of committing 35 percent of Forest Preserve contracts to minority- or women-owned business enterprises.

The Forest Preserves has also worked to attract alternative sources of funding, to leverage tax dollars and bring the highest possible value to taxpayers. 2014 marked the first year that the newly created Forest Preserve Foundation brought in significant funding for Forest Preserve programs. This nonprofit organization attracted \$290,000 in revenue from private sources—corporations, foundations and individuals. Proceeds supported new and existing programs such as the memorial bench and tree program, Young Professionals Association, Nature Express bus rides to forest preserve events and Citizen Scientists in Action!

Finally, in 2014 the Forest Preserves was awarded more than \$1.4 million by federal and state funders in support of land acquisition, trail development, restoration of natural areas, community outreach and environmental education. We also collaborated with partner organizations, who themselves brought in \$2.6 million to further the mission of the Forest Preserves.

As we reflect upon the important work we have done in 2014, today I am pleased to submit my 2015 Executive Budget Recommendations to the Board of Commissioners of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County.

Let me put our budget recommendations into context by highlighting the Forest Preserves' major objectives for fiscal year 2015. The district has pledged to:

- protect the diversity of plants and animals that depend on the preserves
- provide well-maintained buildings, trails and other facilities, and make them accessible to all county residents
- increase outreach to underserved communities and expand educational and recreational opportunities for all residents
- and manage our finances as efficiently and effectively as possible to ensure that our long-term financial health aligns with our long-term strategic goals.

My 2015 Budget Recommendation includes a request for total appropriation authority of \$187.4 million dollars. As I mentioned earlier, this budget is balanced without raising taxes and with no increases to existing fees and fines.

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This Budget Recommendation proposes 14 new full-time and 41 new seasonal or part-time positions, primarily in the departments of Resource Management and Conservation & Experiential Programming. These new positions will support our continued goals of restoring the landscape and expanding visitor programming.

Two major investments I'm recommending in the 2015 budget further reflect my commitment to these critical objectives.

First, I am recommending \$6 million for Landscape Restoration and related projects, which matches 2014 funding levels. This remains by far the largest single line item in this budget. The magnitude of this investment underscores the importance of this effort to our future. It is essential that we act quickly and definitively to address invasive species in our preserves, to both protect and restore our rich biodiversity. While I want to acknowledge the great work our staff has done in the field of ecological restoration, the scale of required restoration continues to be so significant that I anticipate continued future investment in this area.

Our restoration work will be aided by the completion of the Natural and Cultural Resources Master Plan in December. This plan is a collaboration with the Prairie Research Institute of the University of Illinois and will serve as the framework to guide our restoration priorities and decisions.

Second, I am recommending an allocation of approximately \$800,000 toward our initiative to bring public camping back to the Cook County Forest Preserves. In 2015, renovated campgrounds will open in Palatine, Oak Forest and Northbrook, at Camps Reinberg, Sullivan and Dan Beard. New campgrounds will open at Bullfrog Lake near Willow Springs and Shabbona Woods near Calumet City. These facilities will offer overnight and day-camp experiences. They take our efforts to strengthen communities' connections to the preserves to an entirely new level.

The Department of Conservation and Experiential Programming will oversee campground programs, as well as the activation of new facilities and amenities at Rolling Knolls, Swallow Cliff, Thatcher Woods and Dan Ryan Woods. The Forest Preserves will charge a fee for the new camping program, the goal being for the programming to eventually pay for itself.

This Budget Recommendation also maintains our support for the operations of the Brookfield Zoo and the Chicago Botanic Garden, with property tax levies of \$14.9 million and \$9.3 million, respectively. These are leading cultural and scientific institutions in our region and are valued by the Forest Preserves as partners. This taxpayer subsidy



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benefits Cook County residents, and allows the Forest Preserves to reach a very large additional audience: in 2013, 1 million people visited the Chicago Botanic Garden, and 2.2 million visited Brookfield Zoo.

Managing our finances to align with our long-term strategic goals is critical to the sustainability and success of the Forest Preserves. The Corporate Fund, also known as the general operating fund, stands at \$62 million and supports each of the departments and their services to the public, as well as district-wide expenses. This figure represents an increase of \$4.5 million over 2014.

To account for this increase, the 2015 budget employs conservative growth projections in the property tax levy and PPRT, and includes the recapture of expired TIF and new construction values in the amount of a half million dollars. In addition, we expect to see continued growth in picnic permit and winter sports revenues due to increased visitor usage.

I am also recommending the appropriation of \$7.4 million from the Corporate Fund balance, which stands at \$37.3 million as of the end of last year. \$6 million will be allocated for landscape restoration and \$1.4 million will go to support corporate operations. This allows the Forest Preserves to achieve its goals of meeting minimum fund balance requirements and maintaining strong liquidity without increasing property taxes.

This budget also includes a debt-service reduction of \$1.2 million by spending down available escrow funds.

As in recent years, the 2015 Budget Recommendation reflects a continued effort to collaborate with Cook County departments to leverage delivery of services. Examples include administrative office space, risk management services and information technology management, including initiatives such as the Time & Attendance system and Enterprise Resource Planning.

To conclude, we have much to look forward to in 2015. We will culminate our three-year Centennial Celebration with a major event next September featuring 100 activities across the preserves in 48 hours. Centennial programming will also include an oral history campaign, a Nature and Health Initiative and even a documentary on the history of the Forest Preserves.



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We look forward to completing additional capital improvements, appointing our Conservation and Policy Council, completing a revised set of Centennial Maps to help the public navigate our 69,000 acres, finishing our Natural and Cultural Resources Master Plan and continuing to phase out our old fleet of vehicles for new, greener equipment.

The Forest Preserves of Cook County exists because of the foresight of our founders and the continued commitment of taxpayers, volunteers and employees. These lands offer a much-needed resource and refuge, not only for countless plants and animals, but also for the millions of people living in Cook County.

The budget I'm recommending today sets the stage for a successful culmination of our centennial and will put us in a strong position as we enter our second century.

Thank you.