



2018 Budget Recommendation Address from President Toni Preckwinkle

October 24, 2017

Good morning,

Today I am presenting my 2018 budget recommendation for the Forest Preserves of Cook County. I would like to welcome members of the public who are with us and thank them for their civic engagement and interest in the Preserves.

To our many partners -- including the Chicago Zoological Society and the Chicago Botanic Garden, our advocates and loyal volunteers -- thank you for your commitment to promoting restoration and conservation. I know for many of you, the Forest Preserves are a longstanding passion and labor of love.

Commissioners, the Forest Preserves benefit all of our Cook County residents, and I want to extend my appreciation of your roles in helping us make the Forest Preserves a better, more inviting place where all people can enjoy the wonders of nature and benefit from the quality of life they provide.

I also want to thank Wendy Paulson and all the members of the Conservation and Policy Council, our advisory group of civic leaders who are helping to guide us on the long-term vision outlined in the Next Century Conservation Plan.

Finally, I want to thank General Superintendent Randall, and the Forest Preserves staff who in a short time have transformed the Preserves into a place where people can create adventure, a place where plants and animal can thrive, and a place that contributes to healthy communities.

The daily operations of the Forest Preserves are complex. As I've learned during my time as President, nature — especially in an urban setting — needs our help.

The Resource Management Department oversees the management of nearly 70,000 acres. In 2015 we developed the first-ever formalized restoration plan: The Natural & Cultural Resources Master Plan. Our skilled staff is executing this plan to help us reach our long-range NCCP goals of restoring 30,000 acres in 25 years.

This year we:

- Dedicated Harms Flatwoods as an Illinois Nature Preserve and Jens Jensen Grassland and Woodland along with Bobolink Meadow as Illinois Land and Water Reserve;
- Designed restoration projects for 11 landscapes which included monitoring of rare plants and insects;

- Conducted the most successful prescribed burn season in Forest Preserves history—approximately 7,200 acres;

Other great successes this year are the partnerships with the Housing Authority of Cook County, as well as the Friends of the Forest Preserves and the Forest Preserve Foundation.

50 African American youth participated in the Forest Preserves Experience, a summer youth employment program that provides basic job and conservation work skills and environmental education.

During the five-week program, the young people who live in Cook County housing, provided more than 1,500 hours of invasive species removal, tree care and urban gardening.

As one graduate named Sydney described it: *“This program has made me a better person. I learned how nature has helped us as human beings and how to appreciate nature.”*

This is why we’ve worked to connect more and more people to the Preserves through our Conservation and Experiential Programming Department.

Our Camping Program is a continued success boasting more than 100,000 visitors to our five campgrounds.

Our six Nature Centers have expanded nature education programs to include night programs and summer day camps.

We’ve stepped up engagement by hosting Community Workshops and assigned staff to maintain a presence within communities to strengthen our ties.

Many Forest Preserves sites have also received capital investments such as visitor’s centers in Rolling Knolls and at Dan Ryan Woods.

Additional improvements include trail extension projects adding to 300 miles of trails throughout the county.

Just this summer the very popular North Branch Trail extended three miles further south— expanding our footprint into many new Chicago neighborhoods and linking more than 13 communities.

We’ve worked hard this year to attract even more visitors and enhance their experiences. We developed and launched an interactive trail map which has logged nearly 9,000 monthly visitors. 42 percent of those visitors are city of Chicago residents — signaling an appetite for outdoor activities among those from communities which lack an open expanse of nature.

Our marketing efforts also including a social media trail challenge, increased positive media coverage of our restoration efforts and events, as well as the continuation of a successful campaign in collaboration with the Cook County Department of Public Health.

While we are always welcoming new visitors, we know the Preserves have a loyal following of lifetime picnickers who purchase thousands of permits for family and special events. Those core visitors come back year after year not only because it’s tradition, but because of the excellent customer service provided to them by our Permits staff and our Landscape Maintenance crews. My thanks again to our hard-working staff.

These are just a few highlights of the good work we've done in 2017 while remaining efficient and fiscally prudent. The Forest Preserves, however, are like many government agencies that face future challenges.

2018 presents several immediate budget challenges, which created a \$5.5 million gap in FPCC's operating budget. I want to underscore next year's budget assumes no layoffs, but several actions -- including deferred hiring, reducing non-personnel costs and reducing funding to our partners -- are among the measures we are taking to close the gap.

The Forest Preserves will be relying on increasing earned revenue and capturing inflationary growth in the tax levy to close the remaining gap.

Today, I am proposing total appropriation authority of \$198.2 million which includes the budgets of the Brookfield Zoo and Chicago Botanic Garden of \$68.5 million and \$38 million, respectively. Appropriation across all funds for the Forest Preserves is \$91.8 million, an increase of less than 1 percent over 2017.

While the FPCC is continuing to tighten its belt, we will maintain funding for restoration work at the same level we did in 2017 — a total of \$3.9 million. For the first time, restoration work is being funded from operations, rather than relying on reserve funds. This \$3.9 million accounted for part of the total budget gap. The additional \$1.6 million shortfall comes from anticipated increases in salaries and wages due to cost of living adjustments and increasing health care costs.

Measures taken to close the gap include cutting vacancies to the tune of \$1 million, a decrease in \$1.8 million to the Construction and Development Fund, a decrease in contractual services of \$600,000, reduced funding to the Brookfield Zoo & Botanic Garden by \$1 million and capturing inflationary increase from the FPCC levy, which accounts for \$1.2 million.

While the percentage allocated to the Forest Preserves will remain the same on individual property tax bills, the revenue collected will grow due to increased home values, new development and inflationary growth.

Additionally, non-personnel cost reductions include \$600,000 across all Forest Preserves departments which includes reductions in funding for many partners. As mentioned the Zoo & Garden will each receive reduced funding by \$600,000 and \$400,000 dollars respectively.

These historic partnerships are valued and respected. Both the Zoo & Garden are world-class institutions. We value your partnership and appreciate your commitment to leverage resources and raise awareness for shared programs and opportunities for the public.

Our 2018 budget holds steady what we have been providing during my tenure as President. However, it does not provide additional resources needed to scale up in order to further our Next Century Conservation Plan.

The current budget does not address the ongoing pension shortfall as well as the nearly \$30 million worth of deferred maintenance. Funding for future capital needs will be a major challenge. In the next

year or two, we will use our existing debt capacity for a modest bond issue of approximately \$8 million to fund urgent capital projects.

While the budget proposal includes reductions, our team is committed to maintaining our sites and facilities while continuing to offer free educational and recreational opportunities.

We will continue to pursue grant opportunities to fund the critical restoration work and opportunities for young people. In 2017, the Forest Preserves received nearly \$3.4 million in grants from federal, state and private funds, including \$47,500 from the Forest Preserve Foundation. Additional funding from the foundation is expected in November to help fund critical projects.

These grants helped pay for land management but also physical expansion of trails to improve our existing amenities and recreational offerings.

Staff is also being charged with growing earned revenues. A concessions master plan was completed to identify opportunities and various assets across the district such as picnic groves, trails, dog parks and aquatic centers to be marketed for corporate sponsorships. In 2018, the FPCC is also developing a strategy to restructure its Permits, Rentals and Concessions Department to focus on growing earned revenue.

It is clear additional resources will be needed in 2019 and beyond not only to support long-term goals, but simply to maintain the status quo.

We are not sitting idle in the face of our challenges. The FPCC has been working with partners and our Conservation Policy Council in identifying and analyzing more than 40 initiatives, some of which include major restructuring of various FPCC programs and services.

We have been entrusted with this treasure, and we have worked hard not just to maintain our Preserves, but to grow and improve them. I look forward to working with you as we confront our fiscal challenges and continue to be good stewards of the environment.

Thank you.

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