

2019 Forest Preserves Budget October 23 Special Board Meeting

President's Remarks

I am pleased to present the 2019 budget recommendation for the Forest Preserves of Cook County.

Thank you to all who are in attendance to hear what the Forest Preserves have accomplished this year and our vision for what is to come. Even more, I want to thank all those who have helped make those accomplishments a reality. That includes the support and guidance from the Board of Commissioners, the hard work of General Superintendent Arnold Randall and the Forest Preserves staff and the commitment of our many partnerships organizations, advocates and loyal volunteers.

We all are here today because more than 100 years ago, visionary civic leaders made the decision to preserve a portion of the land to protect the flora, fauna and scenic beauty of Cook County and ensure all residents had access to nature. We are the beneficiaries of that foresight.

The District likes to say its nearly 70,000 acres are a place where you can create your own adventure. There are plenty of opportunities for that.

The Forest Preserves has 300 miles of trails, 40 rivers and lakes, 10 golf courses, six nature centers, five campgrounds and three aquatic centers.

In those lands and facilities, our residents can hike and bike and run. They can ice skate and ice fish and fly model airplanes. They can enjoy birding or horseback riding or zip-lining. And that list just scratches the surface.

To continue fostering its mission, the Forest Preserves of Cook County Fiscal Year 2019 budget request is \$119.1 million, of which a total of \$23.3 million is provided in support to our institutional partners located on Forest Preserves land, the Brookfield Zoo and the Chicago Botanic Garden.

The total budget request represents an increase of 3.4 percent over 2018. Revenues to support this increase include an increase in the amount raised by the property tax levy totaling \$2.7 million, which captures inflationary growth as in past budgets, and other non-tax revenues totaling \$1.7 million.

The Corporate budget request, which funds the day-to-day operations of the District, is \$61.7 million, an increase of 3.2 percent over last year. Approximately half of these funds cover cost-of-living adjustments included in collective bargaining agreements and increasing health care costs. The recommended increase to the Self Insurance Fund will be used to fund workers' compensation expenses and other insurance claims.

We will continue to build on the successes of 2018.

This year, we launched a new dockless bike rental pilot program, adding 46 sites and 500 bikes. We opened a new boat rental operation at Saganashkee Slough in partnership with REI.

We created and implemented the Greater Maywood Paddling Program, which trains people on how to use the kayaks we loan out and how to lead a group of kayakers, too.

For those who want some help creating an adventure, Forest Preserve staff have that covered too. They run public programming focused on nature and conservation education, camping and other outdoor activities, and cultural and seasonal special events.

The Preserves are a resource for everyone, and over the last several years we have fostered an explicit mission to invite and engage diverse visitors from everywhere in the County and from all walks of life.

New programs this year to bring in new groups and communities include Films from the Forest with the Chicago Park District, Blue Grass Jams, Camp Hip Hop, Painting by the Pond, and more. In partnership with Roosevelt University, we hosted a symposium focused on the historical and contemporary connections between environmentalism and the African American experience.

To connect residents near Beaubien Woods in the Calumet area with nature and healthy recreation activities outdoors, we launched the “Better Beaubien” Initiative. More than a dozen community and civic organizations in Altgeld Gardens and other South Side neighborhoods have been assembled into a broad Community Partner Alliance, which hosted 10 events this year. Those included public design showcases and paddling outings—the first step in a long-term local engagement strategy.

Beaubien Woods is just one example of what the Forest Preserves offers across Cook County, one of the most densely populated areas of the country. Our Preserves contain tallgrass prairies, native wetlands, oak woodlands and sunlit savannas. They are a place where plants and animals can thrive in the wild, protected and preserved.

Four years ago, this Board of Commissioners adopted the Next Century Conservation Plan, a set of bold actions to make Cook County a leader in urban conservation. Since its implementation, the Forest Preserves has made significant improvements to conserve, preserve and restore native species and their homes.

We continue our focus on some of the Forest Preserves’ most critical sites. The highest priority section of Cranberry Slough will be 70 percent clear of invasive brush by the end of the year, opening up a thousand acres at that site since 2015. Today 13,000 acres of land across our Preserves are in restoration or active maintenance.

Our exceptional volunteers are an integral part of those efforts. In 2018, more than 4,500 volunteers contributed more than 65,000 hours in the Preserves. This year, in partnership with the Morton Arboretum, we launched online courses to prepare volunteers for stewardship roles and piloted new protocols so volunteers can monitor and assess changes to the local vegetation.

Our restoration work also prioritizes the expansion of our Conservation Corps program, which has grown to more than 280 high school youth and adults this year. A half dozen different summer and year-long Conservation Corps programs offer training, employment and exposure to conservation-related careers thanks to operational partners such as Audubon Great Lakes, Friends of the Forest Preserves and Greencorps Chicago.

Like Better Beaubien, the Conservation Corps is expanding who is involved with the Forest Preserves. For instance, 103 youth whose families are served by the Housing Authority of Cook County joined the Forest Preserves Experience Program, a paid summer internship. That was an increase of 44 percent from 2017.

This restoration work is so important because it makes the land more hospitable to native plants and animals and it makes the Forest Preserves a more enjoyable experience for us all.

The Preserves make our county healthier, too, keeping the air, water and ecosystem in balance across city and suburbs. The Preserves include nearly 15,000 acres of floodplain and play an essential role for the region's climate change mitigation capacity. Our Preserves have the ability to absorb more than 1.5 million metric tons of CO₂ from the atmosphere annually—as much greenhouse gas as produced by more than 330,000 passenger vehicles over a year.

Yet capital funding for the Forest Preserves in 2018 and 2019 is substantially reduced after depleting 2012 and 2015 capital bond funds. We are working to fill in the gaps. In 2018 to date, the Forest Preserves has raised more than \$2 million in grants from federal, state and private funds, including the Forest Preserve Foundation.

Within these constraints, the Preserves continues new projects. We completed construction of 1.3 miles of the Cal-Sag Trail, including a bridge over the Little Calumet River, in partnership with the City of Blue Island. We built three new nature play areas—at Camp Sullivan, Camp Bullfrog Lake and Dan Ryan Woods—and installed new exercise stairs at Dan Ryan Woods.

Last month we cut the ribbon in partnership with Openlands on a new interpretative trail at Deer Grove East Forest Preserve. We've installed new wayfinding signs and intersection markers on Palos Preserves trails. And critical maintenance continues, from masonry restoration at Trailside Museum of Natural History to exterior renovations at McGinnis Field Station.

The platform that allows all this good work to occur is administration and operations that is finding opportunities to save money, raise revenue and streamline operations. The stewardship of the trust and resources provided to the Forest Preserves is as important as our stewardship of the lands themselves.

Changes in 2018 range from installing a keyless system for our off-leash dog areas—ending the need to mail keys to thousands of members a year—to new protocols that shorten the time between receipt of an invoice to payment.

We finalized a cell tower installation contract at the Palos Maintenance Facility and created a list of priority sites to expand this revenue-generating opportunity. Year-to-date permit revenue as of the end of September was \$1.7 million, a 9 percent increase over the same period last year.

We've piloted the use of electric utility vehicles throughout the Preserves and presented to the Regional Air Quality Council in Denver on how propane mowers reduce CO2 emissions.

Changes such as these will be key to reaching another goal rolled out in 2018, the District's first Sustainability & Climate Resiliency Plan. This ambitious plan commits the Forest Preserves to reducing its greenhouse gas emissions by 80 percent by the year 2050 and establishes a roadmap for Forest Preserves' lands to be resilient in a changing climate.

With these impressive accomplishments in mind, I would like to look to the future.

The Forest Preserves can and will continue to serve the residents of Cook County within the boundaries of this budget. However, we have to acknowledge that moving forward, we must more fully fund the Forest Preserves. The time of being able to maintain what we have come to expect from our Forest Preserves without a larger investment is coming to an end.

The proposed 2019 budget includes \$240,000 in additional Construction & Development funding and a planned \$8 million General Obligation bond. Yet years of deferred maintenance has created a backlog of projects that will cost an estimated \$130 million, including \$30 million for urgent needs such as replacing roofs and boilers, and parking lot repairs.

The Forest Preserves currently contributes \$4.3 million dollars per year to pensions, meeting its legally required payment. To adequately fund our pension obligations, though, an additional \$10 million per year over the next 40 years will be required.

The Next Century Conservation Plan calls for a long-term commitment to restore habitat to robust ecological health, to acquire and protect more land, and to make the Forest Preserves more inviting and accessible to all Cook County residents. The Civic Consulting Alliance estimates that over the next several decades, it will cost more than \$2 billion dollars from the Forest Preserves and our partners to achieve these goals.

The Conservation and Policy Council, our advisory group of civic leaders who are helping to guide us toward the long-term vision in the Next Century Conservation Plan, are working with Openlands and Friends of the Forest Preserves to build awareness and support for the Forest Preserves and the funding needs that lie ahead. I thank the Council, Openlands, and Friends for their efforts.

I like to think that generations to come will think of us as visionary civic leaders, just as we look back at the founders of the Forest Preserves for their commitment to preserving the world-class treasures of our Preserves.

I look forward to working with Board of Commissioners, the Conservation and Policy Council, and all the stakeholders who hold the Forest Preserves dear to find the resources necessary to reach that goal. Thank you.

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