

Forest Preserves of Cook County 2020 Budget Remarks as prepared from President Preckwinkle

Good morning.

I would like to present the Fiscal Year 2020 budget recommendation for the Forest Preserves of Cook County.

I thank everyone who is here, invested in the success of the Forest Preserves. Thanks to the Board of Commissioners, General Superintendent Arnold Randall and the Forest Preserves staff, and our many partnerships organizations, advocates and volunteers.

The Forest Preserves are a wonderful, invaluable asset for Cook County.

They are a place where wildlife thrives and where visitors can experience the serenity and beauty of nature. Time in the Preserves makes us healthier in body, mind and spirit.

The Forest Preserves green spaces make our water and air cleaner and play an essential role in mitigating the impact of climate change in our region.

We are stewards of the nearly 70,000 acres protected by the Forest Preserves. For more than 100 years, the Forest Preserve District of Cook County has held public land for the education, pleasure and recreation of the public. We are responsible for handing down the legacy of this land and of the District itself to the next generations, more sustainable, resilient, and healthy than ever before.

When I became the President of the Forest Preserves, I appointed Arnold Randall to be General Superintendent with a mandate and a mission to improve operations, programs and services.

The Forest Preserves have become a more transparent, accountable and strategic government agency, with an increased focus on restoring and protecting Cook County's most precious natural areas. This budget continues that work.

For Fiscal Year 2020, the Forest Preserves of Cook County total budget request for all funds is \$124.6 million dollars, an increase of 3.8 percent over last year. This includes \$23.3 million dollars to continue to fund our world-class institutional partners the Brookfield Zoo and the Chicago Botanic Garden, both the same level as last year.

The Corporate budget request, which funds the day-to-day operations of the District, is \$63.5 million.

The proposed budget for 2020 reflects the fiscal discipline that we have instituted over the years. It includes healthy reserve funds that no longer pay for recurring programs and services. It assumes no layoffs and has 40 fewer full-time equivalent positions than four years ago.

We have cut costs by eliminating landlines and outsourcing management of our room rentals, aquatic centers, campgrounds, and other amenities.

Non-tax revenue is up, having doubled from \$4.7 million dollars in the Fiscal Year 2014 budget to \$9.3 million dollars in the proposed 2020 budget. That includes more income from innovative new concession opportunities and fee structures, including picnic permits, pools and campgrounds.

Since 2013, the Forest Preserves have raised more than \$16 million dollars in grants, and our partners have raised an additional \$17 million. The Forest Preserve Foundation is a notable success in this story, having increased the amount it provides to the Forest Preserves annually from private donors from \$3,500 in 2012 to more than half a million dollars this year.

This budget allows the Forest Preserves to build on the successes of 2019. By the end of August, the Preserves had issued more than 6,900 permits, and more than 700,000 people had enjoyed reunions, family picnics, graduations, and other celebrations in picnic groves and indoor facilities around the county.

Another 64,000 visitors spent the night in one of our five campgrounds to date this year, generating more than \$500,000 dollars in revenue for the Forest Preserves. Since we opened the campgrounds in 2015, attendance has risen every year.

Restoration work remains a priority. This year we removed invasive brush from more than 850 acres of the 13,000 acres currently under restoration or active maintenance and conducted the most successful prescribed burn season in Forest Preserves history to keep invasive species in check and support native plants.

I want to be sure to say thank you to the thousands of volunteers who will give more than 71,000 hours of time in stewardship and other activities in the Forest Preserves in 2019. Your work year in and year out has a transformative impact on the Preserves.

The Forest Preserves added two new sites to the protection of Illinois Nature Preserves this year—Harms Woods and Wampum Lake—and a 100-acre addition to the Thornton-Lansing Road Nature Preserve, as well. At Eggers Grove we installed a new water control system that will restore one of the few remaining wetlands in the Calumet region, providing a critical habitat for migrating birds, whose populations have been in steep decline.

We continued to work this year to reach the goals in the Forest Preserves' 2018 Sustainability and Climate Resiliency Plan.

The Forest Preserves lowered its emissions by purchasing vehicles that use propane, and landscape equipment that runs on batteries. We launched a LED lighting system that can reduce energy use by as much as 80 percent and a program for recycling at picnic groves that has diverted nearly 30 tons of refuse from landfills in just its first three months. Staff are competing in a five-month Green Office Challenge to adopt sustainable practices in their daily work.

I also want to highlight the ongoing efforts at the Forest Preserves to address racial equity. We live in a country and in a county where segregation and structural inequities create an unequal playing field. As elected officials, I believe we have a moral and fiscal responsibility to change that.

The Forest Preserves are a resource for everyone. Over the last several years, we have fostered an explicit mission to invite and engage diverse visitors from everywhere in the County, especially from communities where many residents have not seen the Preserves as a place for them.

As important, we are working to ensure that our investments that bring so many benefits to residents—from outdoor recreation to employment opportunities, from youth engagement to storm water abatement—are shared equitably across Cook County.

This year, we opened a new Nature Play area and exercise stairs at Dan Ryan Woods on Chicago's South Side, the latest new amenities in \$3.5 million dollars of improvements since 2013 at this Gateway site.

We began a \$1.3 million dollar project to create a new "Sand Ridge Campus" in suburban South Holland that will reimagine Sand Ridge Nature Center as a place to learn about local ecosystems and local history. New signs, trails, programs and projects will link the nature center, Camp Shabbona, Green Lake Aquatic Center, and the adjacent nature preserve into a unified experience for visitors.

After building a new canoe and kayak launch in west suburban Maywood Grove in 2018, we started the Greater Maywood Paddling Program, which teaches leaders of local organizations how to lead a group kayak trip on the Des Plaines River. This year, the program won awards from the Society of Outdoor Recreation Professionals and the National Association of County Park and Recreation Officials.

For the last two years, Forest Preserve staff have worked with more than a dozen community and civic organizations in Altgeld Gardens and other South Side neighborhoods in our Better Beaubien initiative. It's helped us launch new events at Beaubien Woods, bring out more residents to the site, and even started a native planting program this year with seniors living in Chicago Housing Authority housing.

From what we've learned at Beaubien, the Forest Preserves began a new effort in 2019 to build partnerships that produce more events and activities created and led by local groups, making the Preserves a vital resource for their community. Proposals are welcome from any part of Cook County, and the Preserves is particularly targeting its outreach in the South and West sides of Chicago and the South suburbs.

2019 also saw another increase in the number of participants in the Forest Preserve Experience, an award-winning summer jobs program for high-school students whose families are in public housing or using vouchers from the Housing Authority of Cook County. In partnership with the Housing Authority, Friends of the Forest Preserves, and the Forest Preserve Foundation, 112 youth had a chance to earn a paycheck and learn about a career in the conservation field.

It's one of a half dozen Conservation Corps programs in the Forest Preserves, providing paid, hands-on experience to participants from across Cook County's diverse communities—including those with barriers to employment.

Addressing equity is not a simple task or one that will be complete in years or even decades. The Forest Preserves is in the fight for the long haul. This year the newly formed employee Racial Equity, Diversity and Inclusion committee has begun its work to promote a work culture that embraces diversity and is inclusive and welcoming to all FPCC employees, visitors, and partners.

The proposed 2020 budget builds on all this work, extending the progress that we have made together. In the last five years, the Forest Preserves of Cook County and its staff and partners have received more than 50 awards for Forest Preserves projects and management, ranging from youth programming to natural area conservation to good governance and conservation leadership.

As many already know this budget does not fully address the long-term fiscal challenges ahead. We are cognizant of the current atmosphere facing Cook County taxpayers, and it goes without question there is great sensitivity to any potential levy increase. But let me be abundantly clear, we remain serious and committed to helping the Forest Preserves and we will do everything in our power to help prioritize their needs and help them find viable long-term solutions that will benefit all Cook County residents.

I present the Fiscal Year 2020 budget as another responsible allocation of limited resources from the Forest Preserves. It illustrates the vision and capacity at the District and among our partners to effectively and efficiently marshal the resources that are entrusted to us.

Thank you.