

Forest Preserves of Cook County

2021 Budget Remarks as prepared for President Preckwinkle

Good morning.

Today I present the Fiscal Year 2021 budget recommendation for the Forest Preserves of Cook County.

First, I want to express my appreciation to all who work year-round to ensure that the Forest Preserves is meeting its mission and those who have worked to chart the course for the next year. Thank you to the Board of Commissioners, General Superintendent Arnold Randall and the Forest Preserves staff, and the many organizations, advocates, funders and volunteers who partner with the Forest Preserves.

Like with government agencies everywhere, the COVID-19 crisis has left its mark on the Forest Preserves' 2021 budget, including a loss of revenue, an ongoing hiring freeze and non-personnel budget cuts across every department.

However, two major structural circumstances bolster the Forest Preserves' budget in the upcoming year. As its own, non-home-rule unit of government, the Forest Preserves of Cook County does not levy a sales tax, a source of income for many government entities that is sharply lower during this pandemic recession.

As important, over the last several years Forest Preserves leadership has used caution and sound fiscal policy to establish healthy reserve funds to protect against difficult circumstances. Drawing down from these reserves gives the Forest Preserves the capacity to largely

continue the direction and momentum we have established over the last several years.

With these underlying factors incorporated, the Forest Preserves of Cook County Fiscal Year 2021 total budget request for all funds is \$134.2 million dollars, an increase of 7.6 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 at the same level as last year.

The Corporate budget request, which funds the day-to-day operations of the District, is \$62.2 million, a decrease of 1.9 percent from 2020.

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. The Preserves are a wonderful, invaluable asset for the people of Cook County. During this pandemic, the benefits of our Preserves are more obvious than ever.

Under stay-at-home orders for public health this spring—and with many other outdoor locations across Cook County closed—an unprecedented number of people came out to the Forest Preserves. That interest has continued throughout the summer and fall.

It makes sense. The Forest Preserves 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.

As important, 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.

At the introduction of a new Forest Preserves budget, I typically take a few moments to highlight some of the District's major achievements over the past year. This year, those highlights both include and are limited by the impact of COVID-19.

I say "include" because of the impressive work done by the staff of the Forest Preserves to nimbly respond to the challenges presented by this pandemic. General Superintendent Randall and his staff have kept as many sites open as possible by carefully monitoring the busiest locations and staying abreast of changing public health guidelines since March.

Always prioritizing public health, they have made measured, site-by-site and case-by-case decisions on everything from weekend parking lot closures to public event capacity to the availability of picnic tables. This approach has left trails and preserves open to the public throughout the pandemic, and reopened amenities like Nature Center grounds and campgrounds as quickly and safely as possible.

With many new visitors, staff stepped up to handle increased demand for trash disposal, new signs, restroom cleanings and other maintenance, even as a hiring freeze and seasonal staff reductions left departments with a depleted workforce.

Forest Preserves Police assisted new visitors who were unfamiliar with the preserves and responded to nearly 10,000 reports of visitors who were not following public health guidelines.

While nature centers were closed and events cancelled, staff developed and disseminated new virtual programs, events and materials to continue to teach us about our local natural world. The volunteer department launched a new litter removal program that channels people's interest in giving back while allowing for physical distancing.

Staff and partner organizations, including Friends of the Forest Preserves, Student Conservation Association, Audubon Great Lakes, and Greencorps Chicago found a way to continue the half dozen Conservation Corps programs that provide paid, hands-on experience to nearly 300 participants from across Cook County's diverse communities, including those with barriers to employment.

And throughout the COVID-19 crisis, the Forest Preserves has quickly adapted behind the scenes as well, with technical support for staff who are now working at home, new employee policies, modified workspaces for COVID-19 safety, and much more.

Even amongst these challenges, the Forest Preserves has continued to move ahead. This year, the State of Illinois dedicated Elizabeth Conkey Woods as an Illinois Nature Preserve and Bergman Slough (BERG-MAN SLEW) as an Illinois Land and Water Reserve, meaning that more than 10,000 acres of the Forest Preserves are covered by these special land protection programs.

There are new trail connections to the Poplar Creek Trail and the Busse Trail system and a new pollinator garden at the River Trail Nature Center. We launched a \$25 million intergovernmental agreement with the Cook County Department of Transportation and Highways to resurface Forest Preserves trails and access roads across the county over the next five years.

The permits department has started a rebuild of its online reservation system and brought a sponsorship consultant on board to increase non-tax revenue. We continue to prioritize sustainability: In 2020, the Forest Preserves moved to 100 percent renewable electricity, thanks to renewable energy certificates.

And we continue to prioritize racial equity. It has always been true that communities of color in this country face an unequal playing field due to segregation and structural racism. This year, that reality is clearer than ever.

Over the last several years, the Forest Preserves has 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.

In 2020, the Racial Equity, Diversity and Inclusion committee has continued its work. Comprised of employees from across the organization, the REDI Committee focuses on restructuring internal processes to reflect our values of equity and inclusion.

The Forest Preserves began implicit-bias training for all staff this year, starting with the Police Department, and held a series of racial identity caucuses to help staff process and discuss equity in the wake of the George Floyd killing and the protests and unrest that followed.

This summer this Board approved the Conservation and Policy Council's position paper, "Moving Towards Racial Equity," which includes specific recommendations that apply a racial equity lens to future programs, policies and operations at the Forest Preserves.

We are already working to ensure that the Forest Preserves' many benefits—from employment opportunities to school programs, from stormwater abatement to recreational amenities—are shared equitably across Cook County. The position paper gives a blueprint for how to codify that work, ensuring it will continue far into the future.

None of us know how long this pandemic will continue or what turns it will take. Because of that—and because the Forest Preserves' reserve

funds are not an endless resource—this proposed budget does not address bigger issues facing the Forest Preserves.

By allocating more than 40 percent of the Corporate Reserve Fund to this year's budget and cutting departments' non-personnel budgets by 10 percent or more, the Forest Preserves can continue to operate while addressing long-deferred maintenance at specific sites and adding ecologically significant property while it is still available.

However, to be on a sustainable fiscal path, the Forest Preserves still is in need of viable, long-term solutions. We remain serious and committed to helping the Forest Preserves reach that path. In 2021, we will prioritize the ongoing pension shortfall that faces the Forest Preserves, and we will continue to work on additional funding for critical capital projects and the important needs of the Next Century Conservation Plan, as well.

The Forest Preserves Fiscal Year 2021 budget will continue to advance its role as an asset for all of us in Cook County, as open space for nature in our densely populated region, a mitigation against climate change, a place for be outdoors, a 70,000-acre classroom, and much more. I submit this budget for your consideration.

Thank you.

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