

Forest Preserves of Cook County 2022 Budget Remarks as prepared for President Preckwinkle

October 5, 2021

Good morning.

I am here to present the Fiscal Year 2022 budget recommendation for the Forest Preserves of Cook County.

To start, I want to thank the Board of Commissioners, General Superintendent Arnold Randall, the Forest Preserves staff, and the many organizations, advocates, funders and volunteers who partner with the Forest Preserves.

Working together, you have transformed how the Forest Preserves operates and what it offers the people of Cook County. Earlier this year, we heard a presentation that documented a wide-ranging and consistently impressive list of improvements over the last decade in the Preserves. The Forest Preserves are on a steady upward trajectory, and I know we have the right people and organizations involved to continue to rise.

The Forest Preserves of Cook County Fiscal Year 2022 total budget request for all funds is \$136.6 million dollars, an increase of 1.8 percent over last year. This includes \$23.4 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 \$65.2 million, which is \$3 million more than the Fiscal Year 2021 Corporate budget. This includes a transfer of \$17.1 million

from the Corporate Reserve Fund to address loss of revenue due to the COVID-19 pandemic, rising expenses, deferred maintenance, an aging fleet, and available property for land acquisition.

In July, this Board of Commissioners approved a referendum for the general election in November 2022 that will ask voters if the Cook County property tax should be raised by one quarter of one tenth of one percent as an investment in the Forest Preserves. When it passes, the referendum will address a long-standing goal of my administration and the many supporters of the Forest Preserves to put the Preserves on a sustainable fiscal path.

Within that context, the proposed 2022 budget will allow the Forest Preserves to maintain current operations and initiatives and address the most pressing ecological restoration priorities and capital maintenance needs. This budget holds steady in our work protecting natural spaces that:

- provide a place for us all to be outside,
- clean our air and water,
- and are home for countless native plants and animals.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, all of us were reminded that the Forest Preserves are an amazing and important resource, right in the midst of our densely populated county. In 2020, the number of visits to the Preserves rose from an estimated 62 million in a typical year to an estimated 100 million.

In 2021, we all have many more options for places to go outside our own home. But I'm happy to report that the interest in the Preserves remains high. For example, we've seen a 33 percent increase in the number of visits to our website compared to the same period in 2019.

Despite starting the year with COVID-related restrictions, our Permits Department issued more than 5,000 picnic permits through August of this year—a return to 2019 levels. And revenues from our five campgrounds are on pace to be the highest ever.

We are proud of this progress, but I want to be clear, the pandemic has continued to impact the Forest Preserves. Non-tax revenue has not yet returned to 2019 levels, and filling some positions has been difficult, particularly for seasonal employees. Landscape Maintenance Department staffing has been at only 75 percent of capacity this year, and I want to thank the Department for their hard work keeping the Preserves in such good shape with many more visitors and fewer staff hours.

Yet, despite financial and public health constraints, the Forest Preserves has continued to work toward the goals in the Board-approved Next Century Conservation Plan.

We now have more than 15,000 acres in active ecological restoration or maintenance, and in 2021 we completed nearly 1,000 acres of restoration projects at Sweet Woods Preserve, Country Lane Woods, and Tinley Creek Ravines. We also added Somme Prairie Grove as another Illinois Nature Preserve in the Forest Preserves, bringing our total to 27 of these state-protected, critical natural areas.

As a land management agency dedicated to preserving natural open space, the Forest Preserves play an important role in mitigating the impact of climate change in our region. Our Sustainability & Climate Resiliency Plan is a roadmap for both how Forest Preserves lands can be resilient in a changing climate and how we as an organization can reduce our greenhouse gas emissions.

This year, the Forest Preserves adopted a Clean Energy Framework as a roadmap to achieving our 2030 and 2050 goals, and made progress

toward those goals, as well. We installed rooftop solar panels at Sagawau Environmental Learning Center that can make the building a net energy producer on sunny days. We also upgraded more than 10 percent of our vehicle fleet to cleaner fuel sources.

In the Palos Preserves, our new designation as the world's largest Urban Night Sky Place was made possible in part due to a light management plan that reduces both the artificial light in the area and the amount of electricity used every night. And now we're working to adopt this planning tool in sites across the Preserves.

As you've probably heard before, my administration has made it a priority to apply a racial equity lens in every aspect of the operations of the Forest Preserves. For far too long, segregation, inequity and structural racism have been woven into American society. In too many instances, government has not only been unwilling to address these wrongs - it has been complicit in advancing them. We can change that narrative. And we will.

In the Forest Preserves, that work includes trainings this year by the Racial Equity, Diversity and Inclusion committee to employees, volunteers and representatives from partner organizations around equity in the Preserves and in the conservation field. And it includes a commitment to minority and women owned businesses that reached nearly fifty percent participation for both awarded contracts and contract payments.

This year the Forest Preserves Police Department signed the 10 Shared Principles that have been developed by the Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police and the Illinois NAACP to guide the relationship between law enforcement and the community. This have informed our strategic planning process led by an independent consultant to become a model police department.

The Conservation Corps programs, which offer paid, hands-on experience in the conservation field, include participants from across Cook County's diverse communities. Two-thirds of Corps members are high school youth, and three-quarters are people of color.

After COVID restrictions last year, the Conservation Corps programs have returned to full strength, with more than 300 participants in 2021. Nearly half are in the Forest Preserves Experience Program, which serves youth whose families receive services from the Housing Authority of Cook County.

We are immensely proud of this work and I want to thank our close partners which make the Conservation Corps programs run, including HACC, Friends of the Forest Preserves, Audubon Great Lakes, Greencorps Chicago, the Student Conservation Association, and the Forest Preserves Foundation.

Inviting and engaging people who may not think of the Preserves as a place for them is a priority at the Forest Preserves. This year, that includes our first Beaubien Youth Crew on Chicago's far South Side. We also launched "Wild and Wonderful," a video series that teaches young children about our local natural world. It is a part of Cook County's Project Rainbow initiative to address learning loss magnified by COVID-19

Our outreach includes a survey of Forest Preserves amenities like picnic groves and campgrounds to determine every site that is accessible for people with disabilities, and then sharing that specific information on our website and mobile map. We also held a weekend event at Camp Bullfrog Lake to introduce people with disabilities to accessible camping, paddling, fishing and biking opportunities in the Forest Preserves.

Our outreach also includes reaching out and developing partnership programs with organizations such as the American Indian Center of Chicago, ENLACE, the Little Calumet River Underground Railroad Project, Asian Human Services, Bellwood School District and many, many more.

We use an equity lens for Forest Preserves capital improvements as well. In 2021, we partnered with the Village of Rosemont to construct a new pedestrian bridge that connects the Village to the Des Plaines River Trail in the north suburbs. In South Holland we completed the re-imagining of the Sand Ridge Campus, with new nature center exhibits, trail connections, interpretive signs, fishing areas and a landscape sculpture.

In the Calumet Region, we had a groundbreaking on a new water management structure at Powderhorn Lake that will restore more than 100 acres of wetland, bring back native birds and fish, and alleviate flooding on the Southeast Side of Chicago. We built new canoe and kayak launches in Busse Woods near Elk Grove Village and in Schuth's Grove near North Riverside that are accessible for people with disabilities.

I think it's also important to note that throughout the year, the Forest Preserves continues to make progress on the important day-to-day details that in the end make a tangible difference in the experience of visiting the Preserves.

- Volunteer resources supported more than 4,500 Trail Watch patrols.
- The Permits Department launched a new and improved online reservation system for visitors.

- The Finance and Legal Departments created a new procurement website for vendors.
- Planning and Development repaved access drives and parking lots at 20 locations, and repaired nearly a dozen picnic shelters.

Taken together, all of the accomplishments and programs I've cited clearly illustrate that the leadership of the Forest Preserves has the commitment and vision to continue to improve what our natural public lands offer Cook County. The budget that I am submitting enables us to continue this work due to careful budgeting and sound fiscal practice.

However, the 2022 budget does not address bigger issues facing the Forest Preserves, including more than \$64 million in unfunded maintenance needs over the next four years, an ongoing pension shortfall, and the capacity to make substantive progress on the important goals of the Next Century Conservation Plan.

I'm confident that this budget can serve as a bridge to a more sustainable fiscal future. That may include opportunities for expanded restoration work, land acquisition and programming with increased funding—or without that support, more difficult decisions about re-prioritizing what the Forest Preserves is able to provide.

Many people who visit the Forest Preserves return repeatedly to their local preserve. Or they are in the habit of using the preserves in familiar ways—for their run through the quiet woods, or for the annual family reunion barbeque, or to get out with their binoculars in the early morning to go birding.

It's wonderful when the Preserves become a beloved part of our regular routines. But that specific experience can obscure the full picture of just how much the 70,000 acres of the Forest Preserves of Cook County offers:

- Those long runs, or bike rides, or taking a walk with an old friend on more than 350 miles of trails.
- An afternoon in a kayak or canoe, slowly exploring a lake or river.
- The first night camping under the stars with your kids.
- Wetlands, lakes and open spaces that clean our water and help limit flooding during storms.
- A home for oak forests and native orchids, bald eagles and river otters, dragonflies and salamanders.
- Nature centers where families and school groups learn about the natural and cultural heritage of this region.
- Fishing derbies, art lessons, snowshoe sessions and hundreds and hundreds of other free events across the county, every week of the year.

And honestly, I could continue with so much more. I didn't even mention the ziplining adventure park.

In closing, as the President and Commissioners of the Board of the Forest Preserves of Cook County, we are stewards of these lands. I know we all understand that responsibility and appreciate the opportunity to advance a legacy that stretches back more than 100 years.

I submit this budget for your consideration to continue our efforts to leave the Preserves for the next generations more resilient and healthier than ever before.

Thank you.