

## Forest Preserves of Cook County 2023 Budget Remarks as Prepared for President Preckwinkle

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Good morning.

Today I am here today to introduce the Fiscal Year 2023 budget recommendation for the Forest Preserves of Cook County.

Like a good history teacher always does – I want to start at the beginning. More than 100 years ago, when civic leaders and people who today we would call environmental advocates pushed for a bold, even revolutionary strategy:

Preserve and protect the beautiful natural areas that were quickly succumbing to the rapid development in and around Chicago, and be certain the public could enjoy and appreciate these outdoor places, “now and in the future.”

For generations, the residents of Cook County have been beneficiaries of this extraordinary inheritance. In that spirit, let’s focus for a moment on what the Forest Preserves means to the *next* generation.

Today’s children will be able to enjoy our ecological heritage throughout their lives because countless native plants and animals—including more than 100 threatened and endangered species—live in these protected Forest Preserves.

The Preserves’ nearly 70,000 acres clean our air and water, and are a critical asset in helping Cook County mitigate against the accelerating impacts of climate change.

And for generation after generation, the Forest Preserves are where millions of young people have learned to love nature and to make it part of their lives.

I see it myself when I am out at events like our annual Party for the Preserves at Bunker Hill last month. Kids were making walking sticks and helping collect native seeds to replant in the Spring. I sat down with a group and we roasted hot dogs

over a campfire. For many young people, this kind of experience unlocks a whole new world.

From sunrise to sunset, the Preserves are there every day for our children.

- To get out on lake or river in a canoe for a quiet afternoon, or spend some time on the shoreline trying to catch a fish.
- To meander down a trail through a forest or prairie and maybe spot a deer or a dragonfly—or even a bald eagle.

We have campgrounds where kids spend their first night ever in a tent or cabin under the light of a full moon. At our six nature centers, families stop by and talk to a naturalist. They go for guided hikes, or take an art lesson, or snowshoe, or join in one of hundreds and hundreds of other free events every year.

Dana Burton can tell you all about it. She's one of the teachers at Wentworth Intermediate School in Calumet City who brought out the third graders to help plant a pollinator garden at our Sand Ridge Campus this past Spring.

It's just the latest field trip to this nearby preserve for the students. Every year the whole school visits the Sand Ridge Nature Center. They look for animal tracks on the trails, explore what's living in the pond, and hear about the different plants and animals that live in the campus's diverse environments.

It's more than just a fun time: The staff at Sand Ridge work with the school's faculty to connect the day's events directly to the learning standards of Wentworth's science curriculum. Ms. Burton says even the students who start the day afraid of bugs see how all the parts of an ecosystem are important—and why they need our care.

With everything that the Forest Preserves offer the youngest residents of Cook County in mind, I want to introduce our proposed 2023 budget.

The Forest Preserves request for all funds for Fiscal Year 2023 is \$140.7 million dollars, an increase of 2.8 percent over last year. This includes \$23.4 million

dollars to continue to fund our world-class partners the Brookfield Zoo and the Chicago Botanic Garden, continuing again at the same level as the year before.

The Corporate budget request, which funds the day-to-day operations of the Preserves, is \$70.5 million, which is \$4.8 million more than Fiscal Year 2022. A transfer of \$16 million from the Corporate Reserve Fund is required to address inflationary pressure, deferred maintenance, an aging fleet, and available property for land acquisition.

As has been the case now for many years, this is a responsible, balanced budget that allows the Forest Preserves to address the most pressing ecological restoration priorities and capital maintenance needs, and to maintain ongoing operations and initiatives.

In 2022 to date, that includes more than 6,800 event permits, with more than 700,000 people attending family reunions, summer barbeques, athletic tournaments and other special events. And it supports more than 41,000 hours of volunteer time in just the first six months of 2022, or the equivalent of more than \$1 million in labor.

The Forest Preserves continues to make improvements on day-to-day details that advance the experience of visiting the preserves.

- This year we've repaved trails, access drives and parking lots at more than two dozen locations, and replaced docks at Tampier Lake and Busse Reservoir.
- Facilities re-opened our three aquatic centers after two years of closures due to COVID, which included repairing and refinishing Whalen Pool to return it to its historic look.
- The Finance and Legal Departments launched an expanded procurement website in conjunction with Cook County, the Chicago Botanic Garden and Brookfield Zoo.
- The Police Department appointed a sergeant as a mental health awareness liaison for the public and our force.

- Permits, Rentals and Concessions started a new concessions program, so visitors can buy organic honey at Swallow Cliff, Polish food at Schiller Woods, or ice cream at Dan Ryan Woods from local vendors.
- We added new green equipment and more than 40 green vehicles to continue to strive toward the goals set in our Sustainability & Climate Resiliency Plan.

Within the confines of our budget limitations, the Forest Preserves continues to make tangible progress towards the Forest Preserves' latest, bold, even revolutionary strategy: our Next Century Conservation Plan.

To make the Preserves more welcoming to all, this year we've built on our successful camping and paddling leadership training and gear library model with a new day hike program.

Groups with financial limitations can now apply for our free Nature Express Bus to our events at Brookfield Zoo and the Chicago Botanic Garden, allowing more people to get from their neighborhood to nature.

We launched the Connecting People to Nature Challenge, an investment in localized community outreach and improvements at three sites across Cook County: Sauk Trail Woods, Miller Meadow, and Caldwell Woods and Bunker Hill.

This work is based in the Forest Preserves' deep commitment to racial equity and inclusion. That includes partnering on events like our Juneteenth Celebration, the annual Native American Pow-Wow this weekend, and a "Without Limits" event for people with disabilities with accessible kayaks, cycles and a rock-climbing wall.

And we continue to plan for the future. We launched an Equity, Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusion Task Force to review our site names, and at the October board meeting will introduce the Conservation and Policy Council's latest policy paper, "Amplifying Diversity and Inclusion."

This year we released a Trail Capital Plan & Guiding Principles to ensure we're making the best decisions for maintaining and improving our more than 350 miles of trails. We also benchmarked our Ambassador Animal program, creating a

report with specific improvements to reach and remain at the cutting edge of the field.

To protect the natural world and restore our land to the highest quality of ecological health, we conducted prescribed burns on more than 8,000 acres over the spring and fall. We've partnered on projects that launched the Urban River Otter Research Project and released juvenile endangered Blanding's turtles back into the wild.

In total, more than 15,000 acres of the Forest Preserves are under restoration or active land management today by staff, contractors, volunteers and participants in our Conservation Corps programs, which offer paid, hands-on experience in the conservation field. Two-thirds of Corps members are high school youth, and three-quarters are people of color.

That includes Flossmoor's Davion Hickland, who has returned to the Forest Preserve Experience program every summer for the last five years, starting as a 16-year-old crew member learning how to identify and remove invasive species. This summer, he served for the second time as a crew leader, now responsible for a team of more than a dozen teenaged crew members.

Like a lot of the participants in the program, the Forest Preserves Experience was Davion's first paying job. He says that it's rewarding to be out protecting our natural environment, and that he goes home at the end of the day feeling like he's done something good.

More than anything, though, he says he likes the comradery, especially being a confidant and a mentor to the members of his team, all young people whose families receive services from the Housing Authority of Cook County. At Prairie State College, Davion is a sophomore following his passion for a career in information technology. He says that as long as he can, though, he'll return to the Forest Preserves Experience because of all it offers.

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.

This year, thanks to funding from the American Rescue Plan Act, I'm proud to say that list of supporters includes the Cook County Bureau of Economic Development. To advance my administration's goals for ARPA funding that supports economic development, the environment and sustainability, Cook County has provided the Forest Preserves with \$13.8 million dollars to invest in Conservation Corps programs, land acquisition, and restoration of woodlands and floodplain habitat.

The County and other public and private funders are making these investments because General Superintendent Arnold Randall and his team have the track record, the commitment and the vision to improve the Forest Preserves of Cook County. We have been on a steady upward trajectory, and I know we have the right people and organizations involved to continue to rise.

This proposed budget enables us to continue the work I outlined today due to careful and sound fiscal practice. But let me be clear - what it does not do is address the chronic fiscal issues that the Forest Preserves faces. That includes more than \$78 million in unfunded maintenance needs over the next four years, an ongoing pension shortfall, and urgent capital needs at the Brookfield Zoo and Chicago Botanic Garden.

As important, the Forest Preserves lacks the capacity to make substantive progress on the important goals of the Next Century Conservation Plan. This year, for example, we will add 110 acres of land to the preserves, thanks in large part to welcome funding from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, the Illinois Clean Energy Foundation and others.

That is a far cry from the plan's aspirational goal of 21,000 more acres of preserved land over 25 years. And project-by-project external grants are simply insufficient to build sustained momentum.

To address the Forest Preserves' structural budgetary gap, this Board of Commissioners has unanimously approved a referendum for the general election on November 8. On the ballot will be a choice for Cook County voters to determine if the property tax should be raised by one quarter of one tenth of one percent for the Forest Preserves. If it does not pass, we will use 2023 to begin

planning a phased approach to re-allocating funding to address the Preserves' long-term, pressing needs.

If the voters see fit to make this investment in the Forest Preserves, the 2023 budget you have been presented today will be amended with increased appropriations for:

- Land acquisition
- Ecological restoration
- Community public engagement and programs
- Improved amenities, including energy-efficient and accessible investments
- Deferred capital needs at the Forest Preserves, Brookfield Zoo and Chicago Botanic Garden

In upcoming years, a successful referendum will also provide the resources necessary to resolve the current pension shortfall. Over time, the Forest Preserves will be able to purchase 2,700 additional acres of open land—more than half in Southeast Cook, where less natural land has been protected than elsewhere in the county.

We will restore an additional 20,000 acres over the next 20 years, and expand the Conservation Corps programs from 300 participants annually to 500. We will improve our trails, create more local partnerships, and ensure that the beautiful legacy of our ecologically diverse county is always protected.

I want to thank the Board of Commissioners, General Superintendent Arnold Randall, the Forest Preserves staff, and our many partner organizations, funders, advocates and volunteers for your steadfast commitment to the Forest Preserves and the many benefits they provide us all.

Working together, we have transformed how the Forest Preserves operates. It is clear when you arrive at a trailhead, or a nature center event, or a family celebration at a picnic grove that the Forest Preserves are better than ever.

I submit this budget as another step towards making the Preserves more resilient and healthier, as our legacy to the next generation and those that follow.

Thank you.

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