

Forest Preserves of Cook County

2024 Budget Remarks as Prepared for President Toni Preckwinkle

Good morning.

Today I am introducing the Fiscal Year 2024 budget recommendation for the Forest Preserves of Cook County.

At this moment a year ago, we were at a crossroads. For years, fiscal constraints had limited ongoing progress and improvements in the Forest Preserves. Unless more resources became available, we would have to prepare to lower our expectations for what could be accomplished and cut back on what the Preserves offer.

Thanks to a unanimous vote by this Board of Commissioners, Cook County residents were presented a choice on that November ballot: To approve or dismiss a referendum that would provide the necessary resources with an increase to the property tax of one quarter of one tenth of one percent.

When I stood here with the proposed 2023 budget last October, we were awaiting those results. Waiting to see which road we would take.

As you know, by an overwhelming majority, voters chose the path to support the Forest Preserves and to invest in nature. It has made all the difference.

With the new available funds, the Board approved amendments that added more than \$40 million to the Forest Preserves 2023 budget. We have just begun our journey down this path, but you can already see improvements in the Preserves that simply would not have happened without Referendum resources.

New ecological restoration work has been completed at priority sites like Sauk Trail Woods and Jurgensen Woods, with ongoing work occurring this fall on more than 28 hundred acres at Orland Grassland, Deer Grove, Country Lane Woods and other preserves.

We spent more than \$2 million upgrading equipment that was past its useful lifespan—from pick-up trucks to woodchippers to mowers. And we are starting a modernized waste removal system that will keep the preserves cleaner and be more efficient, too.

We're working with more day camps and more schools to bring young people out into nature, and with more organizations to host cultural events in the preserves that connect with the amazing quilt of diverse communities and residents that we are so lucky to have in Cook County.

Racial equity, diversity and inclusion are primary goals at the Forest Preserves, and that is reflected in expanded outreach efforts with Referendum funding.

Work began this year on more than \$3.5 million in contracts for repairs on paved and unpaved trails across the County, thanks to the Referendum. We have begun similar multi-year repair initiatives for more than 30 picnic shelters and major restrooms renovations at as many as 60 buildings.

All this is in addition to existing initiatives to protect and expand the wonderful natural places of the Forest Preserves and to make these places a resource for us all.

The Forest Preserves are home to beautiful prairies, woodlands, wetlands and savannahs, where native plants and animals thrive. There are more than 15,000 acres of land in restoration or active maintenance across the Forest Preserves, and nearly 11,000 acres are designated as Illinois Nature Preserves—protected land of the highest ecological value.

Within these natural spaces are more than 350 miles of trails, 300 picnic groves, six nature centers, five campgrounds, three aquatic centers and many more amenities that visitors enjoy for nature-based recreation all year round.

In 2023 to date, nearly three-quarter of a million people have attended 75 hundred permitted events in the Forest Preserves, from summer barbeques to athletic tournaments to class reunions.

In 2023, the Forest Preserves finished nearly \$2 million in renovations at Crabtree Nature Center, with new exhibits, energy efficiency upgrades, and accessibility improvements. We rehabilitated the Des Plaines River Trail system from Touhy Avenue to Lawrence Avenue.

We held more than 15 hundred programs and engagement activities at Nature Centers and preserves across Cook County. Nearly all are free, from quiet nature hikes to big and bold celebrations like the six Parties for the Preserves we held last month to celebrate National Public Lands Day.

Our Conservation Corps programs continued to expand and improve. We doubled the size of the Greencorps Chicago Conservation Corps program, which serves workers who can face barriers to employment, and created a new Gap Year program for graduates of the high school summer Conservation Corps programs who want to continue to explore working in conservation.

I want to acknowledge the partners for our seven Conservation Corps programs, which provided an opportunity for more than 280 participants to earn a paycheck while caring for our natural lands this year.

Thank you to Audubon Great Lakes, Friends of the Forest Preserves, Greencorps Chicago, Housing Authority of Cook County, Student Conservation Association and the Forest Preserve Foundation. I am also pleased to say that this support includes funding from the federal American Rescue Plan Act via the Cook County Bureau of Economic Development.

The proposed 2024 Forest Preserves budget continues the momentum that we have created for these strategies and initiatives and many more.

The request for all funds for Fiscal Year 2024 is \$188.7 million dollars, an increase of 3.6 percent over last year. This includes \$30.5 million dollars to continue to fund our world-class partners the Brookfield Zoo and the Chicago Botanic Garden. The Corporate budget request, which funds the day-to-day operations of the Preserves, is \$87.3 million dollars, which is \$12.1 million more than the 2023 budget.

The additional resources from the Referendum present the Forest Preserves with an unprecedented opportunity to advance its mission and meet the goals of our Next Century Conservation Plan. As we transition into a new era, this budget reflects the continued work by Forest Preserves leadership to carefully and intentionally modify operations to accomplish more. Several changes from last year's amended budget are a result of this judicious approach.

With new strategies and mounting experience of what works well during this time of growth, the Preserves will add more than 40 new positions to accomplish and support new initiatives. That includes a restoration hydrologist, ecology field supervisor, heavy equipment technician, employee recruitment manager, and more.

This year, we successfully worked with the Illinois State Legislature to raise the amount the Preserves can contribute annually to its pension fund. In this budget, as promised, we will finally meet actuarial recommendations that will fully resolve the fund's pension shortfall.

The proposed 2024 budget is in sync with the long-term funding strategies for Referendum funding. Adding to our in-house expertise and fully funding the pension puts allocations across funding categories in line with the annual investments that we projected if the Referendum passed.

The proposed budget continues to build our reserves for long-term efforts that often require several years to complete or require much larger investments. For example, this budget contributes more than twice as much to our Real Estate fund than the Forest Preserves could accomplish just a few years ago. With this available funding, we are prepared if and when larger properties reach the market in a way that has not been the case. When opportunities arise, ecologically important lands will be preserved, thanks to this foresight.

Every budget is an annual blueprint for an organization, a distillation of what it values and how to reach those goals. As in year's past, this is a responsible, balanced budget for the Forest Preserves of Cook County.

But for the first time in a long time, it is not the budget of an agency in a holding pattern, keeping long-term, pressing needs at bay. For Fiscal Year 2024, we are moving forward, and there is only more on the horizon for the residents and visitors of Cook County.

As important as budgets are, numbers only tell one kind of story. You learn more when you hear about the people who use and enjoy our nearly 70,000 acres of Forest Preserves.

For some, the Forest Preserves are a resource in their community. Like Caroline Williams, the founder and CEO of the nonprofit Chicago Muslims Green Team, who have used the Swallow Cliff pavilion for their board meeting and enjoyed outdoor activities at Maywood Grove led by Forest Preserves' staff.

Or Alan Anderson, who organizes bird walks at Busse Woods and other preserves along the Des Plaines River to help others catch a glimpse of grassland birds and pileated woodpeckers.

Or Angela Grier with Thornton Township, who coordinates the event permits to hold the Steppers Set at Green Lake, where more than a thousand folks come every year to enjoy the music and fun at this annual event.

For others, the Forest Preserves provide a chance to give back. For twenty years, David Cohen has gone for runs on the North Branch Trail. He enjoys it so much that he's joined our Trail Watch program so he can be a resource for other visitors.

At Somme Woods, Eriko Kojima (*KO-jee-mah*) is an ecological steward, leading a dedicated group of fellow volunteers to restore embattled natural ecosystems. She describes the work as bringing her a "quiet joy."

And for many, the Forest Preserves are a place to learn and grow.

Khia (*Kai-uh*) Whorton is a student at Eastern Illinois University. For the last three summers she has served as one of the Forest Preserves' Youth Outdoor Ambassadors. This year and last, she was at Sand Ridge Nature Center, where she works with staff to welcome and educate visitors about the natural world around them.

The principal of Hoover Elementary School in Calumet City, Dr. Carmelita Cross, brought her school into the Mighty Acorns program this year. Hoover joined as part of our expansion of this partnership, which connects urban youth with nature through hands-on experience and a school-based ecology curriculum.

For all the people who get so much from the Forest Preserves, I want to say how proud and appreciative I am that this precious resource is available to you. For those who are helping the Preserves become even better, I want to say thank you. Forest Preserves staff have supported more than 45,000 hours of volunteer time in just the first six months of 2023.

Thank you too for all the partner organizations that work closely with the Forest Preserves.

To General Superintendent Arnold Randall and his staff for doggedly and continuously moving the Forest Preserves forward for more than a decade.

And to this Board of Commissioners, who consistently provide support and guidance in the work.

Together, we have made the Forest Preserves an agency that has been worthy of the trust put in us by the people of Cook County. More than 100 years ago, visionary advocates sought to create a world-class refuge for nature and for people, in and amongst this world-class metropolitan area. We honor and endeavor to build on that vision.

When speaking at events in the Forest Preserves, I typically remind the audience that these are *our* Forest Preserves, all of us, every one of us in Cook County. *Everyone* is welcome in the Preserves. With this budget, we continue to strive to make better on that promise and that opportunity.

Thank you.