

Forest Preserves of Cook County

2025 Budget Remarks for President Toni Preckwinkle

Good morning.

The Forest Preserves of Cook County are an astonishing resource for *everyone* who lives in and visits our great county. Stretching from Spring Lake Nature Preserve in Barrington Hills to Plum Creek Meadow at Chicago Heights, the Forest Preserves offers nearly 70,000 acres of natural public lands to enjoy.

Today, I am pleased to share the proposed 2025 budget for the Forest Preserves of Cook County, which will provide the resources to continue to maintain the wild places, exciting amenities, fun and educational events, and important initiatives that impact every part of Cook County.

The request for all funds for Fiscal Year 2025 is \$189.3 million dollars. This includes \$31 million dollars to fund our world-class partners Brookfield Zoo Chicago in Brookfield and the Chicago Botanic Garden in Glencoe. The Corporate budget, which funds the day-to-day operations of the Preserves, is \$89.3 million dollars: \$2 million more than the 2024 budget.

This is a responsible, sustainable budget that allows the Preserves to build on the successes and the momentum from this past year.

Today there are more than 16,800 acres of Forest Preserves undergoing ecological restoration or active maintenance, *the most ever*. We are removing invasive species, nurturing native plants and creating healthy ecosystems from the prairies of Orland Grasslands at Orland Hills, to woodlands in Salt Creek Woods in Westchester, to the wetlands in Deer Grove in Palatine.

Thousands of volunteers and partner organizations are part of that work, deeply involved in creating healthy ecosystems at places like Beaubien Woods on Chicago's far South Side and La Baugh Woods on the far North Side. From July 2023 to June of this year, volunteers for restoration, trail safety, litter pick-up and other programs logged more than 85,000 service hours—the equivalent of more than 9.5 years of donated time.

In that same annual period, the Forest Preserves issued nearly 10,000 permits for an estimated attendance of more than *a million people* for events from graduation parties at Blue Star Memorial Woods in Glenview, to a mountain biking festival at Paul Douglas Preserve in Hoffman Estates, to employee and family picnics at Turtlehead Lake.

We held more than 14 hundred public programs and events at Nature Centers and preserves across Cook County.

Nearly all are free—everything from crafts and activities for pre-schoolers at River Trail Nature Center in Northbrook to a frog survey night walk at Sand Ridge Nature Center in South Holland to Live Healthy, Discover Nature outreach right here at Daley Plaza.

Our programming team also offered more than 750 school programs in the year, many through long-standing partnerships with schools like Clissold Elementary in Chicago's Morgan Park neighborhood, Chicago Academy High School in the Dunning community and Sykuta Elementary in County Club Hills.

And we joined the Green Teachers Network and developed trainings with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources to help educators use our spaces as outdoor classrooms.

In 2024 the Forest Preserves increased our outreach at hiring fairs to expand and diversify our staffing—a jump of 50 percent over last year, including representing the Preserves at events in Chicago like St. Sabina’s Church Career Fair in Auburn-Gresham, the Chicago Public Library Fair in Edgewater, and the Kennedy King College Fair in Englewood.

We partnered with Cook County Bureau of Economic Development and local convention and visitor bureaus as they launched the “Outside Chicago” campaign to promote visits to nature and outdoor recreation in the Cook County suburbs.

Our wildlife veterinarian residency partnership with the University of Illinois and the Chicago Zoological Society expanded this year to better monitor the health of the animals that live in the Forest Preserves, from kestrel banding at Arie Crown Forest in Countryside to soft shell turtles health checks near sites like Dam Number One in Wheeling.

We hosted a summit with organizations serving Native American and Tribal Governments to create a more structured partnership on topics such as Indigenous land access and cultural programming.

We opened a new preserve for picnics and walks in the woodlands and prairie of 6101 Oak Forest Avenue in Tinley Park and expanded the concession program for small businesses that offer everything from disc golf equipment at Rolling Knolls in Elgin to ice cream and tacos at food trucks at Dan Ryan Woods on the South Side.

We will continue projects and programs like these in 2025. I want to be clear, however, that this budget is very different than the budgets of just a few years ago, when the Forest Preserves was underfunded and keeping long-term, pressing needs at bay.

Because of the 2022 referendum, which provides more than \$40 million annually to the Forest Preserves, we can create a fiscally prudent, balanced budget that

also supports unprecedented opportunities to advance our mission and make substantial progress toward the goals of our Next Century Conservation Plan.

The Forest Preserves has been in a transformational era for the two fiscal years since voters overwhelmingly passed the referendum. We added nearly 90 new staff positions, established the ability to fully fund the pension, modified funding allocations, and set new operational capacity to effectively manage expansion.

Also, with the retirement of a 2015 bond issue this year, the full tax levy in 2025 will actually *decrease slightly* from 2024.

With new staff at the nature centers, we strengthened our work with local organizations, like a new partnership to connect the refugee community to our natural resources with the nonprofit Refugee Education & Adventure Challenge, based in Oak Park.

And we added even more events that celebrate our wonderfully diverse population in Cook County to keep demonstrating that everyone is welcome in the Preserves, like the Rainbow Family program for Pride Month at Crabtree Nature Center in Barrington, a Lunar New Year celebration at Little Red Schoolhouse in Willow Springs, and an Arab American story trail at Catherine Chevalier Woods on Chicago's Northwest Side.

We were able to expand our Nature Express bus program, providing free transportation for community organizations like Enlace from Little Village, which visited Thatcher Woods, and a trip organized by the Back of the Yards branch of the Chicago Public Library to Kids Fest at Wampum Lake.

We invested the extra funding into our seven Conservation Corps programs to keep pace with rising wages and costs and avoid cutting the number of participants. I want to give a special nod to two of these programs that are gateway to careers in conservation:

The Forest Preserve Experience Program, which brings in high school youth whose families utilize the services of the Housing Authority of Cook County to help care for our natural lands at local sites like Midlothian Meadows in Midlothian and Calumet Woods in Riverdale.

And GreenCorps, a nine-month training program where Chicago residents with barriers to employment begin each workday in Humboldt Park before traveling to help restore the ecology at sites throughout the Forest Preserves.

All our Conservations Corps programs work in conjunction with partners, and I want to acknowledge and thank: Friends of the Forest Preserves, the Housing Authority of Cook County, the Cook County Bureau of Economic Development, and the Forest Preserve Foundation for their partnership for the Forest Preserve Experience Program.

And the Chicago Department of Transportation and WRD Environmental for their partnership for Greencorps Chicago.

These are only some of the many funders, partners and advocates who bring so much to the Preserves. This year, that collaboration and its impact was visible again and again.

In August we cut a ribbon for completion of renovation for 4.4 miles of the Des Plaines River Trail, running south from Axehead Lake at Touhy Avenue in Park Ridge to a new pedestrian bridge over Lawrence Avenue. Thanks to federal funding largely procured by local municipalities, the trail is safer, easier to ride or run, and less prone to flooding.

We completed a two-year pilot engagement process this year at Eggers Grove in Chicago's East Side neighborhood, building local partnerships, holding more events and adding new signage, thanks in part to funds from the Illinois

Department of Natural Resources' Coastal Management Program and accomplished with so many local partner organizations.

With funding from the American Rescue Plan Act, we acquired 145 acres of new preserves south of Sweet Woods Forest Preserves to follow the strategies outlined in our award-winning Southeastern Cook Land Acquisition Plan. When you also include in an additional 128 acres we purchased with referendum funding and donations, the Forest Preserves has added more natural land to protect and preserve in the last twelve months than in any year for more than a decade.

And we have launched the \$10 million, multi-year Swallow Cliff and Palos Trail System Infrastructure Improvements project, funded by the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity and Build Illinois bond funds. Started at Red Gate Woods, the project will restore habitat, reduce erosion, repair and improve trails, and enhance the visitor experience. When complete, it will be the *largest* ecological restoration project in Forest Preserves history.

Thank you to all the funders who join us in investing in the Forest Preserves, to all the partner organizations that work closely with us, and to all the volunteers who give their time and share their skills.

Thank you to this Board of Commissioners for your guidance, support and shared love for the Preserves and what they offer our constituents.

And thank you to Eileen Figel for seamlessly leading the progress we have created together while serving as the Interim General Superintendent of the Forest Preserves, and to the staff for their work to accomplish all I outlined today.

With this budget, the Forest Preserves can continue to expand and improve this amazing refuge for nature and for people in the midst of the second most populous county in America.

Thank you.