

Forest Preserves of Cook County
2026 Budget Remarks as Prepared for President Toni Preckwinkle

Good morning.

Today, I am pleased to propose another balanced, sustainable budget for the Forest Preserves of Cook County.

I want to congratulate and thank our new General Superintendent Adam Bianchi for seeing this budget through to completion in his first few months at the helm.

Adam has inherited an organization that is on sound footing thanks to dedicated staff and the leadership of Arnold Randall and Eileen Figel for more than a decade. I want to thank them as well.

Thank you to the Board of Commissioners, for your support and guidance, and to our many partners, for your collaboration.

The Forest Preserves of Cook County are a part of the lives of people in every part of our vibrant communities. It's a place to have fun outdoors with family; to get out on the trail to work up a sweat or clear your head; or to give back as a volunteer. You can find solitude, community or an on-ramp to a career. Or you can simply spend time in the natural world that's a wonder and a delight, right here in our own backyard.

The budget for Fiscal Year 2026 will allow the Forest Preserves to continue to protect and expand our wild spaces. And it allows us to continue to be a resource for everyone in Cook County. The Forest Preserves request for all funds for Fiscal Year 2026 is \$194.1 million dollars. This includes \$31.3 million dollars to fund our world-class partners Brookfield Zoo Chicago and the Chicago Botanic Garden.

The Corporate budget request, which funds the day-to-day operations of the Preserves, is \$92.6 million. A transfer of \$22.8 million from the Corporate Reserve Fund is proposed for funding for the Corporate budget, capital improvements, real estate acquisition and self-insurance.

The 2026 budget builds on the initiatives and successes of the Forest Preserves this year. Perhaps my favorite example is the 232 acres of land added to the Preserves from July 2024 to June of 2025. As part of that addition, we passed a momentous milestone: For the first time in its 110-year history, the Forest Preserves of Cook County covers more than 70,000 acres.

Of that land, nearly 17,000 acres is being restored or undergoing ecological maintenance. For this year, that includes 1,700 acres of brush removal and a spring prescribed burn season of more than 8,600 acres. This is at or near the best ever for the Preserves.

We expanded our seed program to ensure we are prepared as restoration efforts continue to expand, and more than doubled the size of the Busse Forest Nature Preserve. Now, more than 1,200 acres at Busse are officially among the highest quality natural areas in the state.

Over the summer, the Forest Preserves was able to add more participants in three Conservation Corps programs, thanks to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources' first-ever grant to support a conservation workforce.

The IDNR chose the Forest Preserves for this inaugural investment because of our track record in the field. Over the last 20 years, more than 3,500 people have participated in Forest Preserves Conservation Corps programs.

One of those people is Dasharey (*DASH-uh-ray*) Parks, who started as a crew member in the Forest Preserves Experience program seven years ago, when she was a junior at Thornwood High School in South Holland. Today, she has advanced through the ranks to become a crew leader.

Dasharey (*DASH-uh-ray*) says she appreciates knowing that her summer job is helping the planet. The Forest Preserves Experience program has widened her love of nature, and she says it is an inspiration as she pursues her associate's degree in the arts from South Suburban College.

Conservation Corps is one of our best examples of having a strong partnership. Funders include IDNR, the Forest Preserves Foundation, Cook County Bureau of Economic Development, and the Housing Authority of Cook County. And the programs themselves are run by close partners that include Friends of the Forest Preserves, Greencorps Chicago, Audubon Great Lakes, Openlands and the Student Conservation Association.

From partnerships to infrastructure, the Forest Preserves will also continue to invest in improving our public serving spaces. We completed a set of picnic grove restorations in South Cook County; restored and reopened the John Husar I&M Canal Trail; and continued reconstruction of the Des Plaines River Trail system.

This year, the Preserves completed work on a new set of amenities at Beaubien Woods in Chicago's far South Side, including a new program shelter and a state-of-the-art accessible canoe and kayak launch.

These are just the latest improvements to a preserve that is the starting point for both the African American Heritage Water Trail and tours of local sites that were part of the path to freedom in the Underground Railroad.

All told, the Forest Preserves held more than 2,400 public events and programs last year—everything from salsa dancing to guided ecology walks to senior nature club. We will continue to invest in these programs with this year's budget.

Dora Chen has been a driving force for one of our fastest growing events: The Lunar New Year celebration at Little Red Schoolhouse nature center. Dora says that she loves the idea of bringing the warmth and vibrancy of Eastern New Year to the cold Chicago winter.

It takes nearly half the year to prepare the event, as Dora coordinates closely with staff. But she says it's worth it. More than 2,000 people came out for the event in January, a testament to what Dora says is the power of nature to attract a community of people who cherish life and beauty.

Dan Martin can attest to the power of nature, too. A physics teacher at the Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences, he regularly brings students in the Ecology Club to Sagawau Nature Center to experience its woods, trails and prairie. He says their first winter trip was one of the two best days of his nearly 40-year teaching career.

When these city kids learned how to cross-country ski, then go out one-by-one into the beauty of the winter landscape, Dan says they came back almost euphoric. No matter the season, the students say that there is nothing like spending time away from screens, outside their neighborhood, and out on the trail.

The Forest Preserves held nearly 750 school programs in the last year and took a lead role in the Green Teacher Gathering conference. At that event, more than 150 local educators learned more about nature-based learning for neurodiverse students, about the Forest Preserves' classroom curriculums, and more.

This was also a continuation of our commitment to a more sustainable future. The Forest Preserves expanded its green fleet with two new all-electric garbage trucks, new hybrid police vehicles and propane-powered pick-up trucks.

Our sustainability team added two new Trash Bash events this year too. Jefferson Park resident Jen Atkin stopped by the Bunker Hill bash just a few weeks ago to drop off old electronics, craft materials and more. She was happy to know that they would be reused or safely disposed. And she says she is out on the North Branch Trail all the time, on her bike or walking dogs from a local animal shelter where she volunteers.

Now, **our** volunteers are with us every day of the year to restore the preserves to ecological health, improve trail safety, monitor threatened species and more. Over this year, our amazing volunteers logged more than *11 years* of donated time, providing the equivalent of \$3.5 million dollars in work.

Another thread running through this year in the Preserves is an unwavering commitment to equity and inclusion. New interpretive signs celebrating local Black history at Beaubien Woods; events for cultural celebrations like Lunar New Year, Pride and Hispanic Heritage Month; and deeper connections to the Native American community are examples of how we aim to serve the diverse communities that we are lucky to have here in Cook County.

This year, that included adding new accessible amenities such as the kayak launch at Beaubien, and expanding and promoting the list of our accessible picnic groves, camp sites and fishing spots. And in May, we announced new all-terrain wheelchairs that the public can use on unpaved trails at nature centers and campgrounds, funded in part by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity.

The response has been gratifying. Disability advocate Bill Bogdan remembers that growing up, his parents had to restrict where he could explore, to keep his wheelchair from being damaged and to avoid tracking mud into the house.

As an adult, he has more options, but he also points out that adaptive recreation equipment can be expensive. So these wheelchairs open up the world for visitors like him. When he has been out on trail excursions with the new equipment, he's not only enjoying nature, he says. He is creating memories with family and friends.

Fiscal Year 2026 will be the fourth Forest Preserves budget since the Referendum was overwhelmingly passed by the voters of Cook County, providing more than \$40 million annually to invest in nature. Its impact is foundational for this year's accomplishments.

New vehicles and equipment, the Seed Amplification Program, repairs to trails and picnic shelters, Conservation Corps expansion, purchasing new land—none would have been possible at the level we have achieved without the Referendum.

I want to once again thank the coalition of advocates who led the successful effort in 2022 to bring these resources to the Forest Preserves. Your determination laid the groundwork for a new era. We now have a fiscal and organizational structure that allows the Preserves to both meet basic needs and more fully reach towards the goals of the Next Century Conservation Plan.

With this budget, the Forest Preserves is committing to continue on the responsible, long-term path. The proposed 2026 budget does not vary widely from this year. The total budget increases by only 2.5 percent, and the corporate budget by just 3.7 percent. For the second year running, the number of full-time positions has actually decreased. While there will be many new achievements in 2026, they are budgeted within our means and in a sustainable manner.

The Forest Preserves are a legacy that has been handed down for generations here in Cook County. It is our responsibility to honor that inheritance and pass it down better and stronger to the generations that follow. With this budget, we will meet that responsibility.

Thank you.