



SKOKIE LAGOONS

10-Year Vision + Action Plan 2018 – 2028



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Introduction

Skokie Lagoons is a unique and celebrated destination within the Forest Preserves of Cook County. The Vision + Action Plan outlines site-specific planning recommendations to make Skokie Lagoons a more welcoming place for visitors.

In 2015, the Forest Preserves identified Skokie Lagoons as one of 12 priority gateway sites as part of the Gateway Master Plan. Internal and external stakeholders met in 2016 to discuss how improvements to signage and wayfinding, visitor amenities and sense of place could help raise Skokie Lagoons' profile and provide a more welcoming visitor experience.

The Vision + Action Plan details the recommendations from a site master plan based on this feedback and prior planning efforts. The four key strategies for Skokie Lagoons are:

- Invest in visitor amenities
- Scale restoration efforts
- Recruit volunteers to welcome and watch
- Build relationships with local partners

The action steps at the end of this plan are organized around these key strategies. Circulation and review of the plan will hopefully result in expansion and refinement of the action steps by internal and external champions of Skokie Lagoons.

RELATED PLANNING EFFORTS :

Next Century Conservation Plan (2014)

A bold and visionary blueprint for the future of the Forest Preserves.

nextcenturyconservationplan.org

Gateway Master Plan (2015)

Defining a class of special gateway sites located throughout Cook County to encourage people to enter into the preserves.

fpdcc.com/gateway-master-plan

“Goal: Invite new visitors and make Skokie Lagoons a more welcoming, well-known public place.”

Site Overview, Amenities & Access

Site Qualities & Analysis

SITE HISTORY

Originally one of the region's largest and richest marshes, much of the area was drained by settlers for agriculture. In the 1930s the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) dug out the current lagoon system, in part to address flooding and increase recreational use. The massive effort was the largest CCC project in the nation.

RECREATION AMENITIES & ACTIVITIES

With a public boat launch, lagoons stocked for fishing, paved and unpaved trails and picnic areas, this wooded preserve offers peaceful retreats and activities around every bend. Visitors can rent canoes and kayaks at the Tower Road entrance from May through October. Dockless bike rental is available at the Tower Road Boat Launch and Erickson Woods entrances. The North Branch Trail travels the entire site of Skokie Lagoons, with a 4.4-mile loop connecting at the north end, bringing visitors to the Chicago Botanic Garden.

NATURAL AREAS

Skokie Lagoons provides critical habitat for migrating ducks, herons, cormorants, and a great variety of fishes including bluegill, sunfish and largemouth bass. Coyote, mink, gray and red fox have been spotted in the preserve.

ACCESS

- Vehicle Access: Skokie Lagoons is accessed through entrances on Willow Road (Erickson Woods), Tower Road (Tower Road and Tower Road Boat Launch) and Forest Way Drive (Forest Way



Grove). The site is easily accessible via the I-94 Edens Expressway.

- Public Transportation: Erickson Woods is accessible from the Metra Union Pacific North Line's Winnetka station, and a connection to the Pace route 423 stop at Willow Road and Forest Way Drive. The Tower Road and Tower Road Boat Launch entrances are accessible from the Metra Union Pacific North Line's Hubbard Woods Metra Station, and a 1.2-mile walk west.
- Trail Access: The North Branch Trail accesses Skokie Lagoons at Willow Road to the south and Dundee Road to the north. A connection can be made to the Green Bay Trail by following the North Branch Trail north past Dundee Road, through the Chicago Botanic Garden and along Lake Cook Road.

INFRASTRUCTURE

- Picnic shelters: 2
- Dam north of Willow Road and other water conveyance and control infrastructure at Tower Road
- Maintenance buildings at Erickson Woods parking lot
- Bathrooms: No permanent bathrooms. Portable bathrooms are available year-round at all entrances except Tower Road (available May – October).
- Parking: Many visitors park in gravel along the shoulder of Forest Way Drive.

Site Challenges

NO PUBLIC BUILDING OR STAFF ON SITE

Because of its size, variety of recreational opportunities and lack of on-site information, Skokie Lagoons can be overwhelming for new visitors to navigate. The seasonal boat rental concession is the only staffed location at Skokie Lagoons. Limited capital funds for developing new buildings and limited operational funds to add new staff to the site present a challenge.

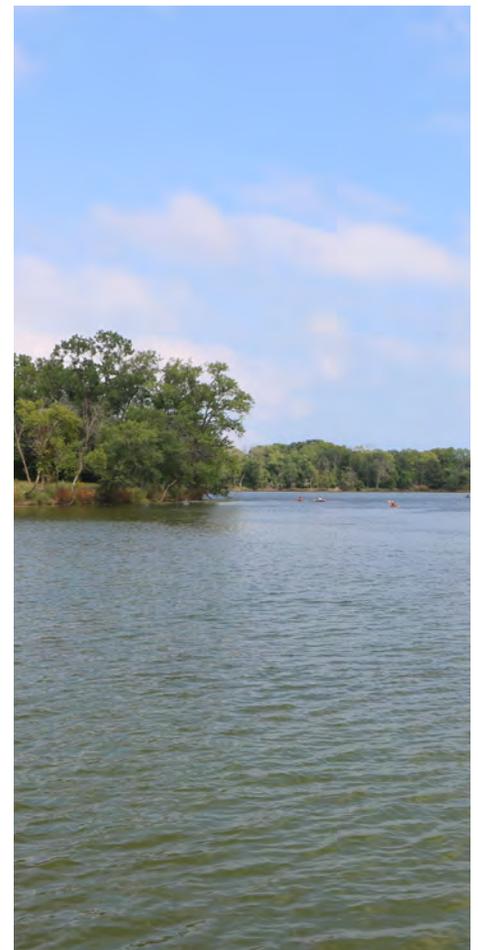


INVASIVE SPECIES AND ALGAL BLOOMS

Water quality is critical at Skokie Lagoons because of all the water-based activities available. Despite the best efforts of Forest Preserves staff, volunteers and contractors, invasive species and algal blooms continue to be a problem. Additionally, there are potential water quality threats from stormwater runoff of neighboring municipalities.



Before algae treatment



After algae treatment

Site Challenges

NUISANCE VANDALISM

The presence of graffiti, trash and vandalism creates a negative experience for visitors to Skokie Lagoons. With only intermittent monitoring from Forest Preserves police and landscape maintenance departments, these issues are difficult to control.



LIMITED PUBLIC PROGRAMMING AND EVENTS

While Skokie Lagoons hosts dozens of permitted private events and public volunteer workdays per year, there are far fewer official Forest Preserves public recreational and educational events. Challenges limiting the number of public events include: limited Forest Preserves resources, lack of a formal role for Chicago Botanic Garden at the site and limited engagement with nearby park districts and community organizations.



Photo by Denise Gilmore-McPherson.

AGING INFRASTRUCTURE

Infrastructure at Skokie Lagoons includes six miles of paved trails, three parking lots, two picnic shelters, a maintenance compound with several buildings, and multiple dams and water control structures.



What Makes a Successful Public Place

Gateway sites should convey a sense of welcome, interest, safety and beauty.

Some visitors have expressed difficulty in knowing where to begin their experience at Forest Preserves properties. This is especially true for first-time visitors who may be looking for a main entrance or a central hub of information where they can learn more about the site they are visiting and the Forest Preserves as a whole. As wayfinding is improved at gateway sites, it is important to think about where visitors should be directed. To help address this, a hierarchy of destinations should be defined for each gateway site.

Site improvements that contribute to a positive sense of place include healthy, well-managed landscapes, interpretive

installations, signage and exhibits using a variety of media or even through public art. Perceptions of safety are also influenced by lighting and landscape conditions. Public art and integrated design can strengthen the recognition of the Forest Preserves and its properties, encourage collaboration with surrounding communities, and attract funding from partners.

Restoration and landscape improvements can enhance sense of place at gateway sites. The Forest Preserves has an amazing variety of habitat including prairies, woodlands, savannas and wetlands and with that comes an impressive diversity of plants

and animals. In order for people to continue to enjoy these natural areas, the Forest Preserves must continue to invest in restoration. Showcasing restoration work at gateway sites can demonstrate its importance and build community support. Recruiting new volunteers for already established stewardship sites as well as un-stewarded sites will help connect the larger community to these locations. Providing interpretive signage and programming will also help educate the public about the work of the Forest Preserves and importance of restoration.



Key Strategy #1

Invest in Visitor Amenities

Capital improvement in enhancing wayfinding signs, a new boathouse, expanded parking and other site amenities is proposed.

A series of focus groups were held as part of the Gateway Master Plan process during the summer of 2015. The Skokie Lagoons focus group included participants from the Village of Glencoe, Village of Northfield, Village of Winnetka, Illinois Paddling Council, Chicago Canoe & Kayak, Friends of the Chicago River, Winnetka Park District, Forest Preserve Foundation, Winnetka-Northfield Chamber of Commerce, Forest Preserves and the Lakota Group (Gateway project consultant), along with residents and stewards.

The participants primarily focused on capital improvements to Skokie Lagoons, which informed the Site Vision Plan on the following page.

Key suggestions were:

- Adding additional boat launches and improved portages
- Formalizing vehicular and bike parking along Forest Way Drive
- Improved bike trail wayfinding to the Green Bay and North Branch trail
- Mobile-friendly electronic applications that provide wayfinding and interpretation information
- Implementation of interpretive signs or art for wayfinding that also convey information about the ecology and history of the site
- Construction of a facility/pavilion with bathrooms, storage space and covered space for outdoor education

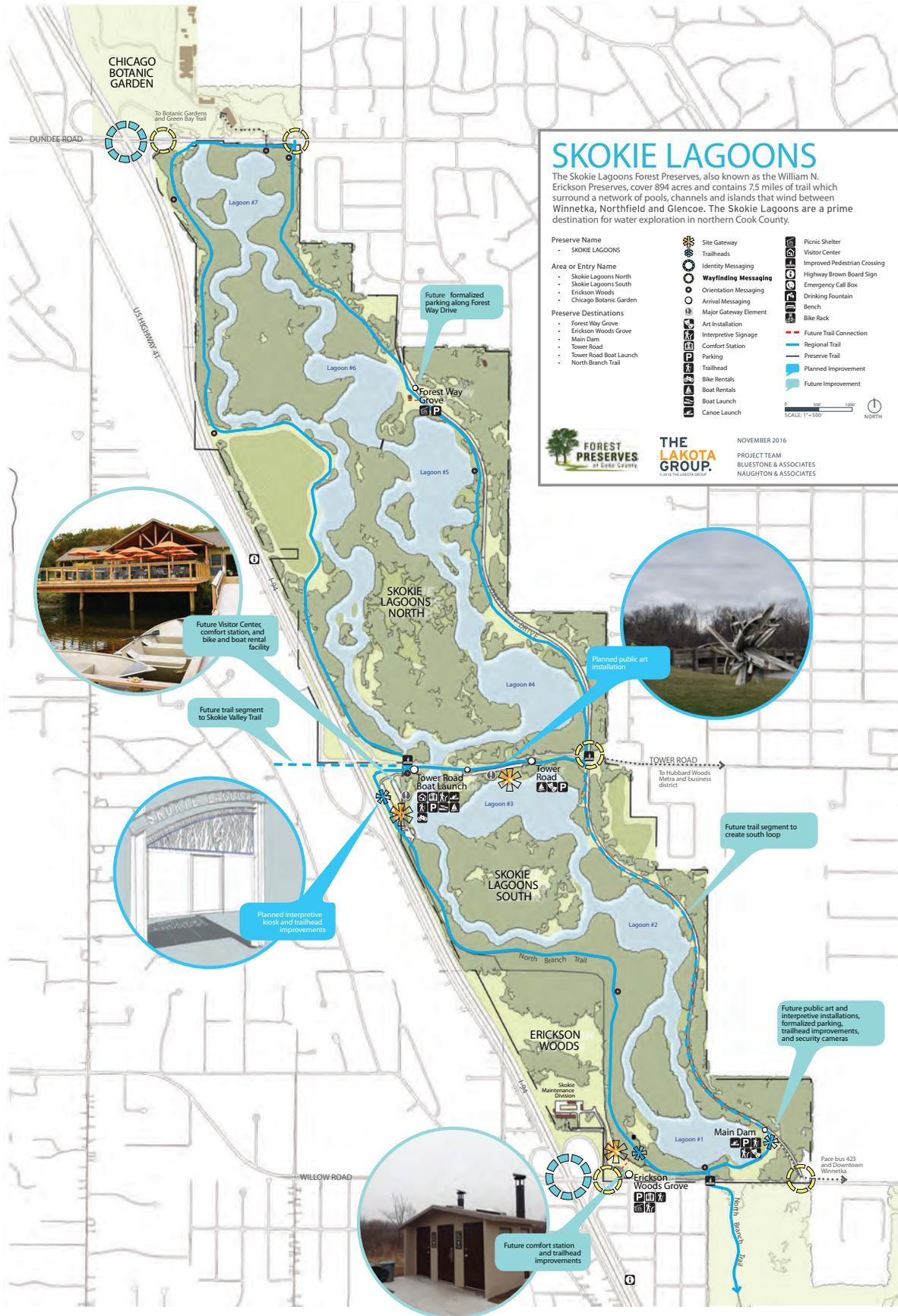


INSTALL NEW INFORMATION & WAYFINDING SIGNS

Updating and adding gateway signage will help visitors plan trips and navigate Skokie Lagoons. Updated gateway signage was installed in 2017, including new entrance signs, pedestrian directional and map signs, and a new visitor kiosk that will showcase maps, site information and interpretive messages.

Future signage to promote Skokie Lagoons could be placed on high-visibility roadways and even along the I-94 Edens Expressway to help guide visitors into the preserve and to promote site amenities. Wayfinding signs that direct visitors to nearby amenities in surrounding urban areas should be considered. Maps and signs should emphasize that the trails in Skokie Lagoons belong to the North Branch Trail system and help visitors understand how to connect with other trails and preserves.

Site Vision Plan



Key Strategy #1

Invest in Visitor Amenities



DEVELOP BOATHOUSE CONCEPT PLAN

By far, the most significant recommendation for capital investment at Skokie Lagoons is the addition of a new boathouse facility near the existing public boat launch. A feasibility study and concept plans was developed in 2018 for a building that provides boat rentals, restrooms, water fountains, seating and an opportunity for public art. Staff is currently exploring opportunities to partner with the Village of Winnetka or other local park districts or organizations on the future fundraising, operation and maintenance.

EXPLORE FEASIBILITY OF FUNDRAISING FOR CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS

The Forest Preserve Foundation engages in protecting and restoring the treasured natural habitats of the Forest Preserves of Cook County and enhancing the outdoor experiences of all communities. It encourages and administers private gifts to further the Forest Preserves' mission, goals and programming. Additionally several of the nearby municipalities have expressed interest in partnering to fund-raise. For more information visit forestpreservefoundation.org.



Key Strategy #2

Scale Restoration Efforts

Skokie Lagoons is rich in both natural and cultural resources, providing habitat for countless plants and animals and offering varied outdoor recreation opportunities, including a popular trail system.

Several efforts are already underway to maintain and improve the site including an ongoing effort to remove invasive species allowing for native plants to thrive, creating clear sight lines and allowing for more sunlight, ultimately making the preserves more welcoming to visitors.

Despite its highly altered condition, Skokie Lagoons is an important habitat for many animals with numerous great blue herons, ducks and geese. The site is also used by black-crowned night herons (state endangered), doublecrested cormorants, green herons and other wading and shore birds and extensively used by migratory marshland, woodland and shrubland birds. There are numerous turtles (common snapping, painted, red-eared sliders, softshell, etc.), amphibian, fish and aquatic invertebrates.

Skokie Lagoons also provides benefits to surrounding communities by controlling flooding, filtering stormwater runoff, and serving as a CO2 sink.

The 242 acres of fishable waters at Skokie Lagoons are managed by the Forest Preserves Fisheries Division. Fisheries staff coordinates the annual stocking of channel catfish, northern pike and walleye, and manages the overall health of the aquatic community within and around the lagoons. Invasive and nuisance aquatic vegetation is controlled by Fisheries staff and contractors to promote a healthy ecosystem for native plants and animals and continued accessibility for fishing and boating. Fisheries staff also monitors for new exotic or invasive threats with partners to help safeguard the entire Lake Michigan watershed.

IDENTIFY AND COMPLETE VISITOR-FOCUSED RESTORATION PROJECTS

The FPCC Resource Management department is removing vegetation at strategic locations to clear sight lines from the North Branch Trail to the lagoons to enhance the visitor experience in addition to ecological benefits. Resource Management will continue to work with volunteer stewards to identify and complete at least one visitor-focused restoration project each year.



Key Strategy #2

Scale Restoration Efforts



SUPPORT EXPANDED RESTORATION WORK

Skokie Lagoons volunteers meet once a month with volunteers from BackYard Nature Center to work on restoring the site to health by removing invasive plant species. The North Branch Restoration Project works at this site several times a year. Additionally, Friends of the Chicago River, in partnership with Illinois Water TrailKeepers, Openlands and REI, organizes paddling events to clean up the lagoons. Because of these efforts the lagoons are often used for scientific research projects and advanced fisheries/aquatic field study programs with local schools and organizations.



ENGAGE LOCAL PARTNERS TO MANAGE & MONITOR WATER QUALITY

Chicago Botanic Garden, the Village of Winnetka and other adjacent municipalities may be able to provide support and help monitor the outfalls and water quality in some areas. The Village of Winnetka has agreed to long-term water quality monitoring as a part of a conceptual agreement to allow the construction a new flood storage capacity on a portion of Forest Preserves land. Engineering plans and a request for approval of a license are expected to be filed in early 2019. The Forest Preserves is also engaged in an on-going discussion with the Chicago Botanic Garden about partnership opportunities.

Key Strategy #3

Recruit Volunteers to Welcome and Watch

Volunteers can help make Skokie Lagoons more welcoming and serve as an extension of staff to help visitors when needed.



RECRUIT MORE TRAILWATCH VOLUNTEERS AND NATURE AMBASSADORS

The Trail Watch program is a group of volunteers that patrol the preserves and act as extra eyes and ears for the Forest Preserves Police, reporting suspicious or illegal activity with a phone call. But it's also so much more than that—for both volunteers and preserve visitors.

Members of the program are outfitted with a neon green t-shirt, whistle, Trail Watch ID and maps and encouraged to use the preserves as much as possible. Current volunteers love both the interactions they get to have with preserve users and the public safety service they provide. While there is very little crime in the preserves, having visible Trail Watch volunteers helps increase the perception of safety, which is key to getting more people out in nature and fostering a sense of community around the preserves. Besides simply being seen, volunteers support public safety efforts by reporting suspicious activity, graffiti and maintenance or other safety issues.

Nature Ambassadors actively participate in community events throughout Cook County on behalf of the Forest Preserves and promote awareness of the Forest Preserves and all of its resources. They also connect community members with opportunities in the preserves.

ENGAGE HOMELAND SECURITY IN MORE ACTIVE "RESIDENT WATCHMEN" ROLE

Homeland Security occupies some of the non-public work yard located at the end of the Erickson Woods parking lot. Engaging Homeland Security to determine how they can assist at the site will help add to the current invested stakeholders.



Key Strategy #4

Build Relationships with Local Partners

Skokie Lagoons is primarily used for water-related activities including paddling and fishing.

The Forest Preserves' Conservation and Experiential Programming (CEP) department hosts a number of paddling events throughout the year. The Forest Preserves also partners with local birding groups and Chicago Botanic Garden to lead birding hikes at Skokie Lagoons and surrounding preserves as part of the Bird the Preserves initiative. The site is a

popular venue for private events, including fishing tournaments, 5K runs, youth camps and group paddles. These offerings could be expanded by partnering with community organizations, municipalities and existing partners to organize events around the activities already popular at Skokie Lagoons—fishing, paddling, hiking, biking and birding.



ENCOURAGE PARTNERS TO HOST EVENTS

The Forest Preserves CEP department restructured in 2017, assigning staff geographically to allow deeper connections with local communities. The goal is to develop high-quality partnerships and build the capacity of local contacts to share resources of facilities, equipment and programs.

The Forest Preserves should focus outreach efforts on partners already hosting events at Skokie Lagoons and local park districts interested in partnering on new programs. Additionally, closer collaboration with Chicago Botanic Garden on programming could yield more jointly hosted events at Skokie Lagoons.



PARTNER EVENTS

The Forest Preserves regularly partners with the Illinois High School Association for bass fishing tournaments at Skokie Lagoons and other FPCC sites. Nearby high schools bring teams regularly to Skokie Lagoons to practice both from shore and by boat. The FPCC should consider how to expand reoccurring events and partnering with IHSA to bring additional visitors to the site.

Measuring Success

EVALUATION STRATEGY: USER COUNTS AND SURVEYS

How will we know if increased investment and ramped up management and programming are helping us achieve the intended goal of introducing new visitors to Skokie Lagoons? Right now, the primary approach is to measure visitors through periodic trail counts and surveys. Trail counts and surveys were completed along trails at Skokie Lagoons in August 2016 to gather baseline data on the number of visitors entering the site by car or on the North Branch Trail using vehicle and trail counters over a 45-day period. The same trail survey and data collection is planned for 2018 to measure if new wayfinding signs have an impact on the number and diversity of users.



SKOKIE LAGOONS TRAIL & VEHICLE COUNTERS

Measuring Success

EVALUATION STRATEGY: PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

The Forest Preserve has adopted a practice of performance management with identified targets for measurable outcomes, such as number of acres restored or number of visitors to our nature centers. Measurable outcomes need to be developed for each of the key strategies and reviewed with the lead Forest Preserves staff. Progress and status of the strategies should ideally be reviewed at least once a year.

EVALUATION STRATEGY: RECONVENE STAKEHOLDER FOCUS GROUP

This plan requires both internal and external champions to review and confirm support for the suggested strategies, agree upon measurable outcomes, assist in developing specific implementation plans and review progress.



Action Steps	Department	Timeframe
Design boathouse concept plan	Planning & Development	2018/19
Explore feasibility of fundraising for capital improvements	Planning & Development	Annually
Identify and complete visitor-focused restoration projects	Resource Management	Annually
Support expanded volunteer work	Volunteer Resources	Annually
Engage local partners to manage and monitor water quality	Planning & Development	2018/19
Recruit more Trail Watch volunteers and Nature Ambassadors	Volunteer Resources	Annually
Engage Homeland Security in more active "resident watchman" role	Law Enforcement	Annually
Encourage partners to host events	Conservation & Experiential Programming	Annually
Identify new partners for events	All	Annually

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the people who participated in the 2015 Focus Group or reviewed the plan in 2018.



About the Forest Preserves of Cook County

Tens of millions of people annually visit the nearly 70,000 acres of public land held by the Forest Preserves of Cook County to explore their natural beauty, bicycle, hike, fish, picnic, golf, canoe or simply relax. Established in 1914, the Forest Preserves protects and restores natural habitats so plants and animals can thrive in their native prairies, woodlands, savannahs and wetlands.

Toni Preckwinkle, *President*

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