

Forest Preserves of Cook County

Clean Air, Clean Water, and Wildlife Habitat Protection Referendum

November 8, 2022 Ballot



The Forest Preserves of Cook County

Since its founding more than 100 years ago, the Forest Preserves of Cook County's mission has been to protect and preserve public open space in its natural state for the education, pleasure and recreation of the public. The Forest Preserves are a place to go to experience nature close to home. They are a place where native plants and animals thrive. They offer opportunities for adventure and fun. And they make our communities healthier. They are to the Chicago region what the National Parks are to our country.



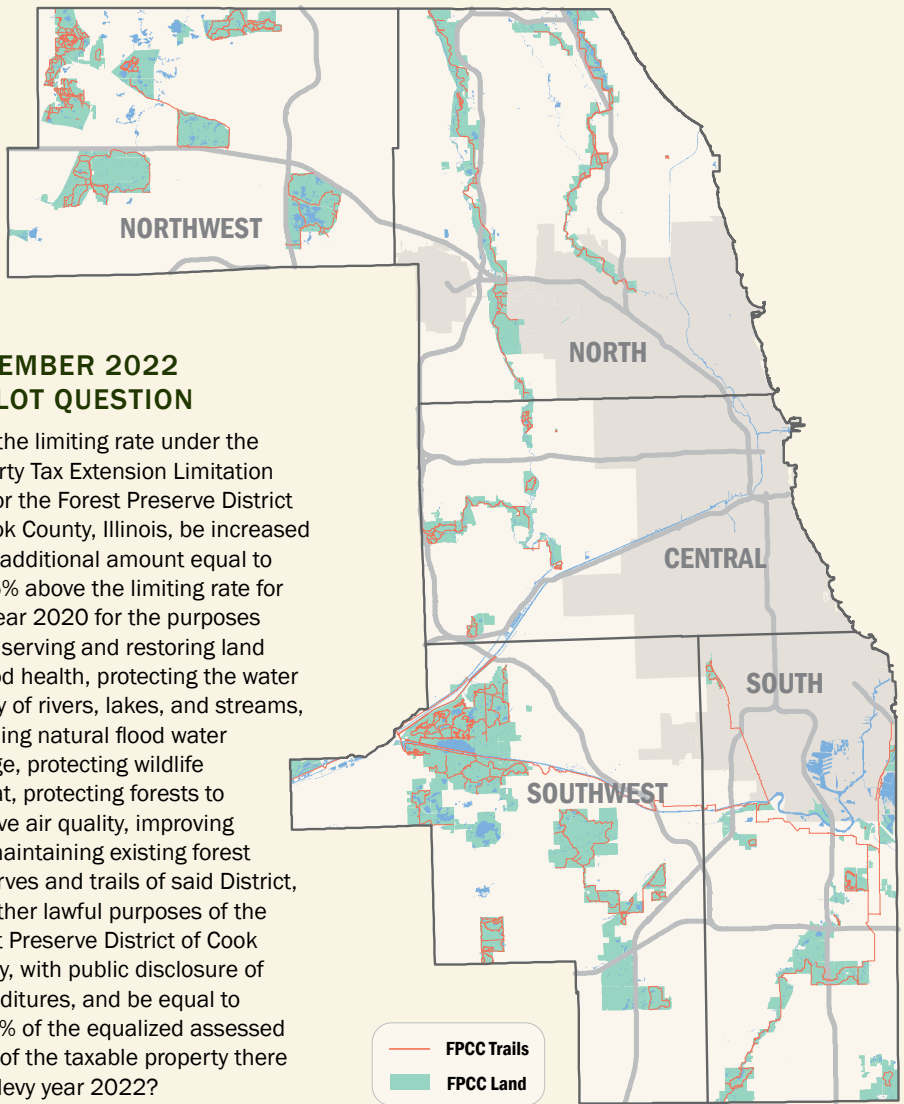
Bergman Slough-Reconstructed Mesic Prairie

The Ballot Referendum

On November 8, 2022, Cook County residents will be asked to vote on a referendum to bring more resources to the Forest Preserves. If approved, new funding would be used to expand and improve the benefits the Forest Preserves provides us all and set the Preserves on a sustainable fiscal path.

New funding would be used to:

- Acquire and protect more natural open land for the enjoyment of generations to come.
- Protect and restore wildlife habitat that is home to native plants and animals, some of which are threatened or endangered.
- Increase programs and events for the public and schools, including more outreach to communities from every part of Cook County.
- Expand and maintain trails, improve signage, and make amenities more energy efficient and accessible to all.
- Resolve the Forest Preserves' pension shortfall.
- Address the deferred capital needs of the Brookfield Zoo and Chicago Botanic Garden.



NOVEMBER 2022 BALLOT QUESTION

Shall the limiting rate under the Property Tax Extension Limitation Law for the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, Illinois, be increased by an additional amount equal to 0.025% above the limiting rate for levy year 2020 for the purposes of conserving and restoring land to good health, protecting the water quality of rivers, lakes, and streams, providing natural flood water storage, protecting wildlife habitat, protecting forests to improve air quality, improving and maintaining existing forest preserves and trails of said District, and other lawful purposes of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, with public disclosure of expenditures, and be equal to 0.076% of the equalized assessed value of the taxable property there in for levy year 2022?

(1) The approximate amount of taxes extendable at the most recently extended limiting rate is \$85,127,981 and the approximate amount of taxes extendable if the proposition is approved is \$126,857,385.

(2) For the 2022 levy year the approximate amount of the additional tax extendable against property containing a single family residence and having a fair market value at the time of the referendum of \$100,000 is estimated to be \$7.29.

(3) If the proposition is approved, the aggregate extension for 2022 will be determined by the limiting rate set forth in the proposition, rather than the otherwise applicable limiting rate calculated under the provisions of the Property Tax Extension Limitation Law (commonly known as the Property Tax Cap Law).



Tomahawk Slough - Marsh

Improving the Preserves

Since adopting our Next Century Conservation Plan in 2014, the Forest Preserves has made significant changes to how we work. We have cut costs, doubled non-tax revenues, and implemented a broad range of best practices to invest our limited resources. Over the last decade, the Forest Preserves and partners have won more than 100 awards.

If the referendum passes, the Forest Preserves will expand and improve the benefits we provide to local residents.

Protect open land: Pressure to develop land for housing, businesses and roads is unending in Cook County. Approval of the referendum would allow the Forest Preserves to purchase and protect an estimated 2,700 additional acres of open land for future generations, before it disappears. More than half would be in Southeast Cook County, where less natural land has been protected than elsewhere in the county.



Compare and contrast: The land on the left side is crowded with invasive brush. The land on right has been restored to open woodland.

Restore nature to ecological health: Most people think that nature can take care of itself, but nature in urban areas needs our help. Ecosystems face threats from pollution, invasive plants and the changing climate. In the last decade, the Forest Preserves has made it a priority to invest in ecological restoration to reverse those effects. A successful referendum would allow us to restore an additional 20,000 acres over the next 20 years.



Images: Migrating monarchs, Ralph Chichester; Bald eagle, Carol Freeman; Blanding turtle, Andrew Cannizzaro

Give wildlife a home: Because native habitat has been protected and restored, in the Forest Preserves you can once again find bald eagles, Blanding’s turtles, river otters and other species that were almost gone or had disappeared entirely from our region. Forest Preserve land can never be developed. It will forever remain a place where plants, birds, insects and other animals can thrive.

Cleaner air and less pollution: Healthier open land benefits us all. With tens of millions of trees, the Forest Preserves cleans and cools the air we breathe. These lands absorb as much greenhouse gas annually as is produced by more than 330,000 cars. They filter stormwater to keep pollution from entering our waterways and help protect against flooding by absorbing hundreds of millions of gallons of rainwater each year.

Improve a vast trail system: There are more than 62 million visits to the Forest Preserves each year, and most of these people are going for a walk, jog or bike ride on one of our trails. With more than 350 miles of paved and unpaved trails, the Forest Preserves has one of the most extensive trail systems in the region. A successful referendum would allow us to improve signage, add key connections and make needed repairs.



Better amenities and wider reach:

The Forest Preserves are a place to create your own adventure, with nature centers, campgrounds, aquatic centers, boating centers, fishing lakes and even a zipline course. We also offer tools to schools throughout Cook County to teach students about the natural world around them. Our commitment is to be inclusive, accessible and culturally relevant for everyone—regardless of race, color, disability, sexual orientation, religion, age or gender. A successful referendum would allow us to maintain and expand our amenities, and to build more partnerships in communities where residents have not historically felt welcome out in the preserves.





Conservation Corps high school crew members removing invasive shrubs such as buckthorn to improve the land for people and wildlife. Eggers Woods.

Jobs for our communities: Each year, the Forest Preserves provides paid, hands-on experiences to hundreds of youth and adults in our Conservation Corps programs. Two-thirds of the participants are high school youth and three-fourths are people of color. For many participants, it's their first paycheck and first extended time in nature. If the referendum is successful, these programs can expand from 300 participants per year to 500.

Resolve a pension shortfall: Forest Preserves employees contribute to their pension fund, and they are not eligible for Social Security. With a portion of the resources available if the referendum passes, the Forest Preserves can close a shortfall in pension funding. As a separate and unique unit of government, the Forest Preserves pension issue would be solved without any cuts to services or programming.

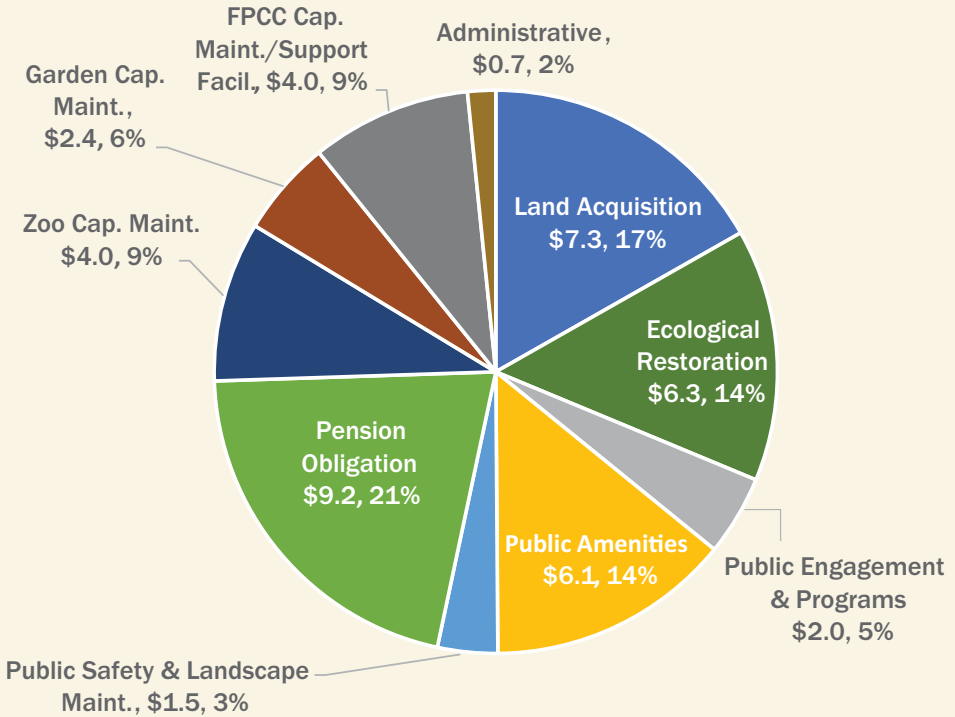


Left: Grizzly Bear by Graesen Arnoff, Brookfield Zoo, May 2019. Right: Chicago Botanic Garden by Jessi Lenth.

Improvements at the Brookfield Zoo and Chicago Botanic Garden: Few people realize the Brookfield Zoo and the Chicago Botanic Garden are on Forest Preserves land and that we help support these institutions which share our mission to protect and educate about the natural world. A successful referendum would allow these local treasures to complete urgent repairs to buildings, repair stormwater and irrigation systems, install new paths, and more.

Allocation of Funds

(\$ millions)



How much would this cost taxpayers?

Less than 1 percent of the property taxes that a homeowner pays go to the Forest Preserves. Across Cook County, the average homeowner pays \$3 to \$4 per month toward the Forest Preserves. This referendum is an opportunity for voters to decide if they want to make an investment in the Forest Preserves for the decades to come. If the referendum passes, the increase for an average homeowner would be less than \$20 a year, or about a dollar and a half per month.

Holding ourselves accountable

If the referendum does pass, the Forest Preserves, Brookfield Zoo and Chicago Botanic Garden have an obligation to report back to the public. Each organization will develop an evaluation system to measure progress and present a public report documenting how funds have been used and the progress made to date.



Front cover: *Busse Woods* by Philip Walker, August 2021. Above: *Prairie Trillium* by Maria Sacha, Busse Woods, May 2020; *Juvenile Black-crowned Night Heron* by Janet Haugen, Skokie Lagoons, September 2020; *Fiery Skipper Butterfly* by Tarah Leigh, Little Red Schoolhouse Nature Center, September 2020; *Busse Woods* by Maria Sacha, November 2018.

