

Forest Preserves of Cook County
FY2027 Budget Remarks as Prepared for President Toni Preckwinkle

Good morning

More than 100 years ago, a group of visionaries succeeded in their efforts to protect for all time the wide array of natural lands in Cook County for the many benefits they provide to the public. Since that moment, maintaining and improving the Forest Preserves of Cook County has been a responsibility that has been handed from generation to generation.

Today, we are here to continue that legacy with the introduction of the budget for Fiscal Year 2027, which will carry forward the remarkable momentum of the Preserves. Just ask Zorbari Nwidor, the executive director of Chicago Adventure Therapy.

Since earlier this year, Zorbari's organization has been partnering with the Forest Preserves at Beaubien Woods to offer community paddles along the African American Heritage Water Trail. The events introduce residents from Altgeld Gardens, Robbins and surrounding communities to the fun of being out on the river and to the local history of the Underground Railroad, Tuskegee Airmen, environmental justice advocate Hazel Johnson and more.

This is just the latest step in the expansion of what Beaubien Woods offers on Chicago's Far South Side. Nearly a decade ago, we started building community connections with our Better Beaubien initiative. In 2025, we cut the ribbon on a new accessible canoe and kayak launch, a program shelter, an improved fishing boardwalk and more. This fall we added a restroom building at the site and are putting the final touches on a new trail that connects the preserve to the Altgeld Garden community.

Zorbari says that people in the neighborhoods they serve have not always felt represented or welcomed in outdoor spaces. Chicago Adventure Therapy lets participants try something new with instructors who may share their backgrounds and experiences. She hopes that the people who come out fall in love with being outdoors, and maybe even see a path for themselves for employment and leadership in the conservation field.

To support programs like this and much more, the Forest Preserves request for all funds for Fiscal Year 2027 is \$206.9 million dollars. This includes \$31.9 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 \$103 million. A transfer of \$31.1 million from the Corporate Reserve Fund is proposed for adding resources to the corporate budget, capital improvements, real estate acquisition and self-insurance funds.

This is a responsible budget that is balanced and within our means. It is also true, though, that the overarching budgetary numbers for 2027 are increasing more than is typical for the Forest Preserves over the last decade. The overall budget is a 6.6% increase from this year. The Corporate budget is 11% higher, and the transfer from the Reserve Fund is 36% higher.

These increases do not stem from decisions to expand programs or initiatives. For the third year in a row, the number of full-time positions in the Preserves remains stable, and construction and other funds are largely the same or even lower than in 2026.

Rather, higher costs account for almost all of the growth, including for energy, goods, contracted services and especially for personnel.

As you know, the Forest Preserves is a unit of government that's tightly limited in its options to increase revenue. It's one of the key reasons we maintain a healthy Reserve Fund: to be prepared for situations such as Fiscal Year 2027.

The proposed budget for 2027 is not only balanced. It will once again produce a reserve that far exceeds the required minimum set by the Board of Commissioners. We will use this moment, however, to prepare to remain on our responsible, long-term fiscal path while continuing to meet our mission, just as we have done this year.

2026 has been another impressive year of restoration work, adding more than 1,000 new acres to what has grown to a current total of more than 19,000

acres. That is an increase of about 25 percent in land under active ecological management in the Preserves in just the last four years.

We finished multi-year stormwater erosion projects at Camp Sullivan and Schubert's Woods this year to protect important habitats at the sites. The award-winning Seed Amplification project continues to expand, collecting more seeds from more species, and putting them into production at locations such as Eggers Grove and Powderhorn Lake. At Schiller Pond, we piloted a floating wetland program that improves water quality, supports biodiversity and creates a habitat for fish and invertebrates.

We continued to nurture the Conservation Corps programs, which mobilize high school youth and adults to restore natural areas while earning a paycheck and learning about nature. This year, we launched the Resource Management Career Immersion Program. Participants are embedded with Preserves' staff to get on-the-job training in conservation work.

Meredith Flaherty joined the internship program in June, after graduating from North Carolina State University last year with degrees in forest management and environmental science. She grew up in Cook County and says that becoming an ecologist here would be her dream job.

To continue that path, Meredith is working in a Forest Preserves crew in Thorton Lansing and Glenwood Heights, cleaning up storm damage, keeping invasive species at bay and operating heavy equipment. She says she knows she has so much to learn to reach her dream—but that she's learning more every day.

The eight Conservation Corps programs at the Forest Preserves are truly a collaborative effort. With the Career Immersion Program, Integrated Lakes Management and Living Habitats join our list of critical partners: IDNR, the Forest Preserves Foundation, Cook County Bureau of Economic Development, the Housing Authority of Cook County, Friends of the Forest Preserves, Greencorps Chicago, Audubon Great Lakes, Openlands and the Student Conservation Association.

So much of what we do is supported by and extended with allies. This year we improved our systems to partner with outside organizations to connect people to nature, adding groups like Mandela Arts, In Tune with Nature, and Solidarity Studios who hosted events in the Preserves.

When Kalpulli Piltzintecuhtli, a group that performs traditional Indigenous dances from Mexico, lost their weekly practice space about year ago, they found a new home at Trailside Nature Center. The partnership has blossomed, with performances at Forest Preserves events for Hispanic Heritage Month, Dia de los Muertos and more.

The group's chief, Sandra Payan Cataño, says that being at Trailside includes practicing outside, deepening the connections between the land and their traditions.

In February, we cut the ribbon on the Caldwell Woods Wellness Center to serve as a welcoming gateway to health, wellness and access to nature. Not only does the nearly \$2 million investment add amenities and re-imagine the space for public use. It's the home of a pilot program for working with groups to host events for the public, or strictly for their members.

This year, we started partnerships with local organizations like the wellness group Be Lightfooted and Planted Green, which teaches about native plants. In August, I visited the site again, this time to help pass out free backpacks with school supplies to hundreds of young people, many of them immigrants and refugees. It's an annual program run by ICNA Relief Chicago, in partnership with the Preserves, and another excellent example of how we serve our communities.

In 2026, the Forest Preserves acquired new properties across Cook County that buffer existing greenways, complete trail projects, and protect creeks, wetlands, woodlands and wildlife habitat. We have added new seating, lighting and landscaping to the Gold Star Memorial at Dan Ryan Woods; reconstructed the North Branch Trail from Lawrence to Irving Park Road; and finished a parking lot repaving project with a sixth addition at Joe Orr Woods.

In the 12 months that ended in June, more than 900,000 people attended nearly 8,000 picnics and other permitted events in the Preserves, with an average customer satisfaction rating of 95%. Volunteers logged 85,000 hours of service. That's more than nine and a half years of donated time.

This year, the National Association of County Park and Recreation Officials recognized two of our long-time volunteer stewards, Anne Stake and Sue Gorr, with their Outstanding Volunteer award. Anne, who has been volunteering at Deer Grove for 15 years, says she didn't start with any background in botany or restoration. Now she leads a team of volunteers who help shape the ecological health of the site.

Knowing she is making a difference is a huge reason Anne keeps at it—from seeing the sandhill cranes returning every year to Deer Grove to passing on what *she* has learned about the land and how to care for it to the next generation of volunteers.

All these projects and more are dependent on the Preserves' organizational infrastructure, and that keeps improving too. This year we continued replacing ageing vehicles with a green fleet and added more back-of-house charging stations for our electric vehicles. We finished rolling out our Garbage Modernization Program; completed digitization of personnel files; and received the Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting from the Government Finance Officers Association for the 18th consecutive year.

We've added new facilities and improved existing building for our fisheries team at McGinness Slough; completed energy efficiency and other upgrades at the General Headquarters building in River Forest; and added a rooftop solar array at our new Landscape Maintenance Headquarters for the Salt Creek team, a "net zero" energy-use building.

The civic leaders who founded the Forest Preserves envisioned public open space that protected the natural wonders and the wildlife of our County, places where the public could enjoy and learn about the natural world. Today, that vision is a reality.

The Preserves are not only a leader in conservation and providing a place where native plants and animals can thrive. They offer something for everyone: hiking, birdwatching, golfing, kayaking, picnicking, fishing, and more. At hundreds of events a year you can learn about spring flowers or the insects that live out in the Preserves, learn to paint in nature, or learn how to grow a garden full of native plants.

And none of that happens without the people who work every day to care for these lands and make them accessible to everyone.

Thank you to General Superintendent Bianchi and the Forest Preserves staff for all your work year-round to improve and maintain our Preserves. Thanks to our partners and volunteers who make the Preserves more than they ever could be without your efforts.

And thank you to the Board of Commissioners for your support and leadership. With passage of this budget, we will fulfill a critical part of our responsibility to keep the Forest Preserves a gem in Cook County.

Thank you.