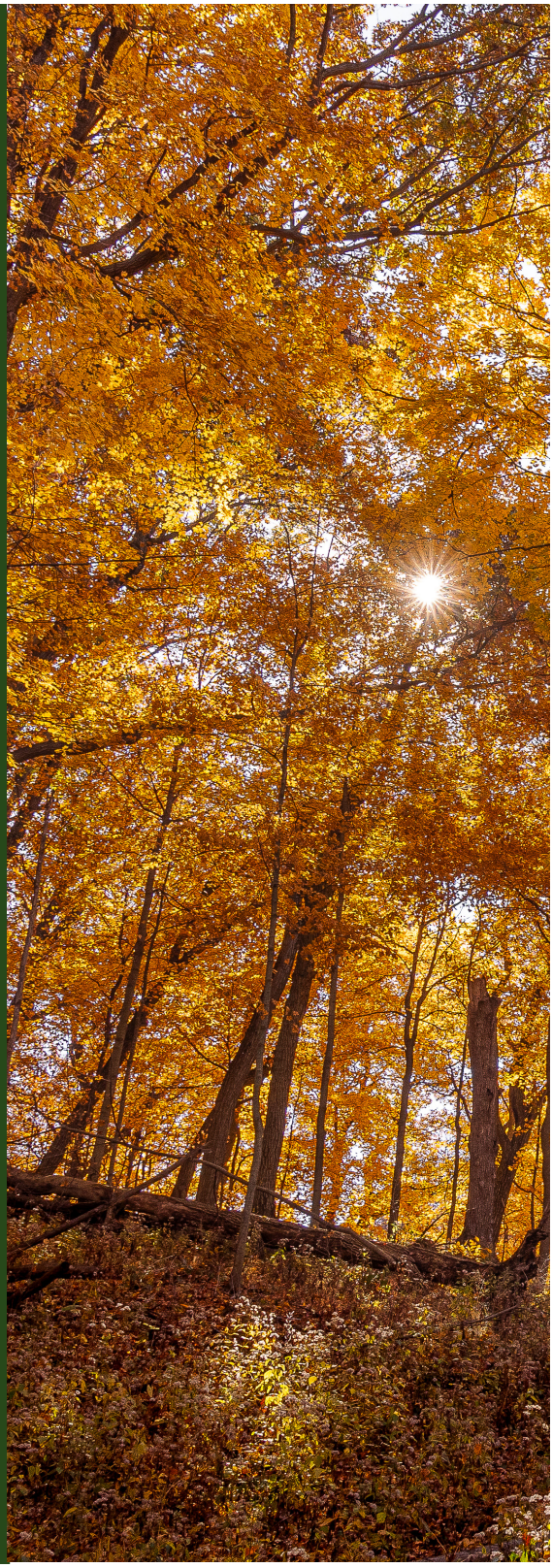
Annual Progress Report (January–December 2025)

Conservation & Policy Council of the Forest Preserves of Cook County



FOREST PRESERVES of Cook County

Submitted on June 7, 2026

To President Preckwinkle and Forest Preserve District of Cook County Board of Commissioners

By Mark Templeton, Chair, Conservation & Policy Council

TONI PRECKWINKLE
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Adam Bianchi

June 9, 2026

Dear President Preckwinkle:

The Conservation & Policy Council is pleased to present to you its annual report as required by Title I, Chapter 18, Section 5 of the Forest Preserve District Code of Cook County, Illinois. The report highlights the progress that the Forest Preserves of Cook County made in 2025 to advance the Next Century Conservation Plan's (NCCP) goals to ensure that native landscapes thrive, that everyone feels welcome in the preserves, that communities throughout Cook County value the economic benefits of protected public lands, and that leadership continues to provide guidance and resources to safeguard the preserves for future generations.

The attached report covers January through December 2025 and includes several highlights, including:

- An estimated 2,204,464 individuals participated in onsite programs, events, and activities.
- Digital communications efforts grew by 42%, with 5,324,607 engagements across social media impressions, website sessions, and e-newsletter opens.
- There was a 94% increase in the number of community groups engaged in partnerships and collaborative programming with the Forest Preserves from 521 in 2024 to 1012 in 2025.
- 18,322 acres were under active restoration management at the end of 2025 thanks to the hard work of volunteers, contractors, and Forest Preserves staff.
- 184.34 new acres were acquired, bringing the Preserves' total holdings to 70,168.52 acres.
- Accessibility improvements included the construction of an accessible canoe and kayak launch at Beaubien Woods Boat Launch and the purchase of a fleet of GRIT Freedom Chairs to increase opportunities for those with mobility challenges to access trails in the preserves.
- 95,300 hours were contributed by volunteers to help steward natural areas, monitor trail conditions, and support public programs—a value of approximately $3.3 million.

The Council appreciates the leadership of General Superintendent Adam Bianchi. We are impressed by his commitment to collaboration and his fresh insights on how to build on the Forest Preserves' strengths and address its challenges. We look forward to working with him, as he and his team strive to advance the NCCP's goals and the Forest Preserves' mission.

Sincerely,



Mark N. Templeton
Chair
Conservation and Policy Council of the Forest Preserves of Cook County

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

In 2014, Forest Preserves of Cook County President Toni Preckwinkle and the Forest Preserves of Cook County Board of Commissioners adopted the Next Century Conservation Plan (NCCP). Twelve years later, considerable progress has been made by the Forest Preserves' leadership, staff, partners, and volunteers to advance the ambitious vision and actions set forth in the plan. The Council is pleased to see progress toward restoring more land to ecological health, expanding public land access throughout Cook County, particularly in southeast Cook County, and growing programming offerings to ensure that people of all ages and abilities can explore their connection to nature.

As required by Title I, Chapter 18, Section 5 of the Forest Preserve District Code of Cook County, Illinois, the Conservation & Policy Council presents an annual report documenting progress toward the Forest Preserves' NCCP goals to the Forest Preserves of Cook County Board of Commissioners. The following report provides progress updates based on available data for the period from January 1, 2025, through December 31, 2025. Previous Council reports have included budget recommendations, but because the Council is moving its annual report to reflect on the previous calendar year, the Council plans to present its budget recommendations to the Board of Commissioners in a separate document in October 2026.

ENSURING TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The voter-approved 2022 referendum generates more than $40 million annually in incremental funding for the Forest Preserves and its partner institutions, Brookfield Zoo Chicago and the Chicago Botanic Garden. These sustained resources are strengthening the Forest Preserves' ability to address longstanding maintenance and repair needs, expand conservation work, and deepen public engagement across the preserves. The Council continues to collaborate with the Forest Preserves to promote transparency and accountability, ensuring that referendum funds align with the agency's mission and address the priorities expressed by the voters: conserving and restoring the land to good ecological health, protecting water quality, mitigating stormwater impacts, protecting wildlife habitat, improving air quality, and improving and maintaining preserves and trails.



Bumblebee on bee balm at Crabtree Nature Center *(photo by Forest Preserves)*

OVERALL PROGRESS TOWARD GOALS

This report details progress on NCCP-related goals from January 1, 2025, through December 31, 2025, related to habitat restoration, land acquisition, and engaging and providing access to the preserves for Cook County residents and visitors, and economy and leadership. In 2025, the Forest Preserves encompassed more than 70,000 acres, with 18,322 acres under active restoration. Approximately 2.1 million people participated in Forest Preserves' programs, events and activities; 5.3 million people were engaged through outreach and engagement efforts; and 179 people were certified as stewardship volunteers. While the Preserves did not reduce its annual greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in 2025 (7,696 Mt CO2e) compared to 2024 (6,464 Mt CO2e), it remained below 2016 baseline levels, and remains on track to meet GHG reduction goals, with a 45% reduction by 2030 and net zero by 2050.

While the Forest Preserves continues to advance its major priorities and strategic goals, significant challenges remain. Impacts from climate change, including stronger storm systems and changing weather patterns, are impacting restoration activities, wildlife, programming, and operations. Additional pressures include non-mission-aligned land use, a substantial backlog of deferred maintenance needs, rising inflation, and increasing costs of popular programs such as the Conservation Corps. And the record number of federal Executive Orders and the changes to federal funding opportunities have created an atmosphere of uncertainty for the Forest Preserves and its partners.

While the 2022 referendum meaningfully strengthened the Forest Preserves' financial position and supported progress toward its goals, maintaining long-term fiscal stability will require continued careful financial management and restraint in adding ongoing expenses that could create future structural imbalances. The Forest Preserves is actively addressing these issues, and the next section outlines recent progress and provides additional details on both accomplishments and challenges.

2

PROGRESS TOWARD GOALS

The 2014 Next Century Conservation Plan reaffirmed the Forest Preserves' commitment to ecological restoration, expanding protected lands, and increasing access so that all residents of and visitors to Cook County can experience the preserves. This section of the report includes key performance indicators that illustrate progress toward these overarching goals. In addition, this section details metrics used to evaluate progress on key priorities and shares updates on recommendations outlined in the Council's five position papers.

NATURE

Native landscapes will thrive for generations.



Red Gate Woods restoration (*photo by Forest Preserves*)

The Forest Preserves of Cook County is the nation's oldest and largest preserve system of its kind, encompassing more than 11 percent of the county. While substantial, this is particularly important given that only 4 percent of Illinois' land is currently protected, making the preservation of these public lands vital for the people, animals, and plants that rely on them.

With the support of volunteers and partners, the Forest Preserves restores habitats to ecological health, monitors and protects pollinators, birds, and other wildlife, and acquires new lands that expand access to outdoor recreation and promote public health. The Forest Preserves also plays a key role in mitigating the effects of climate change by improving air and water quality, limiting soil erosion, and reducing flooding.

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

With 18,322 acres under active restoration management at the end of 2025, the Forest Preserves continues to pursue the NCCP goal of restoring 30,000 acres to ecological health by 2040. The Forest Preserves has made great strides in restoration, thanks in large part to leveraging referendum funding, grants, and partnerships. Additional resources will be needed to maintain these restored acres and continue restoring new acres.

In 2023, the Forest Preserves began its largest restoration project to date: the Swallow Cliff and Palos Trail System Infrastructure Upgrades project. Funded through the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, this funding allows for the restoration of 1,045 acres and repair and enhancement of the popular trail system, including wayfinding and signage improvements. In 2025, more than 1,000 acres were cleared of woody brush, with the remaining acreage to be cleared in 2026. Design and permitting for the trail components of this project are underway, with an estimated construction start of fall 2026.



Seed collected by volunteers (*photo by Forest Preserves*)

Another important restoration initiative is the Forest Preserves' Seed Amplification Program. A collaborative effort with the Chicago Botanic Garden, the Seed Amplification Program both supports restoration efforts and addresses the critical shortage of locally adapted genetically diverse native seed essential for resilient ecosystems and climate adaptation.



Staff member collecting seed (*photo by Forest Preserves*)

Using science-based, collaborative approaches, the Seed Amplification Program aims to produce 2,000 pounds of seed annually by 2030 while monitoring ecological outcomes. In 2025, the program produced 315 pounds of seed, representing more than 100 species of native plants, and planted more than 14,700 plugs. This program is a critical strategy for improving regional restoration capacity, and it also serves as a scalable model for native seed conservation nationwide.

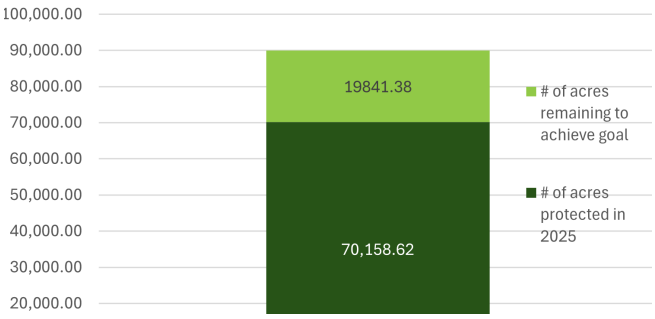
Number of Acres Under Active Restoration Management and Number of Acres Remaining to Achieve Goal



Data through December 31, 2025

Expanding the Forest Preserves to 90,000 acres remains the most ambitious NCCP goal. In 2025, the Forest Preserves added 184.34 acres to its holdings, bringing the total protected acres to 70,168.52. Referendum funding, along with grants and partnerships, has supported the Forest Preserves' land-acquisition accomplishments. Expanding the Forest Preserves to 90,000 acres is also the most expensive NCCP goal. Acquiring the remaining 20,000 acres is estimated to cost more than $1.7 billion, which, at current funding levels, would take more than 100 years to achieve. The Forest Preserves continues to pursue grants and other opportunities to protect remaining open space, while also working with the Council, partners, and advocates to explore additional strategies for conserving natural lands through a variety of means.

Number of Acres Protected and Number of Acres Remaining to Achieve Goal



Data through December 31, 2025

ACQUISITION AND DISPOSITION OF LAND

The Council believes that the use of Forest Preserve land should align with its mission. The disposition of land by sale or other means should not be allowed, and the use of land that does not align with the Forest Preserves' mission should be forbidden. New challenges on the horizon include increased water use and demands on Lake Michigan, as well as the development of data centers and other energy- and water-intensive commercial and industrial facilities, all of which may require significant construction that could impact the Preserves and their use.

Develop and follow guidelines to limit land disposition to rare and extreme instances

The Council's 2020 position paper, "Acquisition and

Disposition of Land," recommended convening a land use task force to develop guidelines to strictly limit land disposition (via conveyance or functional disposition) and to further study other unresolved land use issues. The External Land Use Task Force, formed in 2021, includes Council members, Forest Preserve staff, and representatives from Friends of the Forest Preserves and Openlands. The External Land Use Committee advised on high-impact land-use requests and encroachment issues at meetings held throughout 2025.

Also, in 2025, the Forest Preserves' Planning & Development Department continued to update the Land Use Application Tracker on its website. This tool allows the public to view ongoing construction projects and pending land use requests. The Planning & Development Department is also continuing to track the volume of land use requests and approvals or denials related to licenses, easements and Intergovernmental Agreements and report to the Board of Commissioners regarding denied requests as required under the land use code. The new authority to require supplemental mitigation, adopted as part of land use code reforms in 2024, has been important in on-going negotiations on a few higher-impact land use requests.



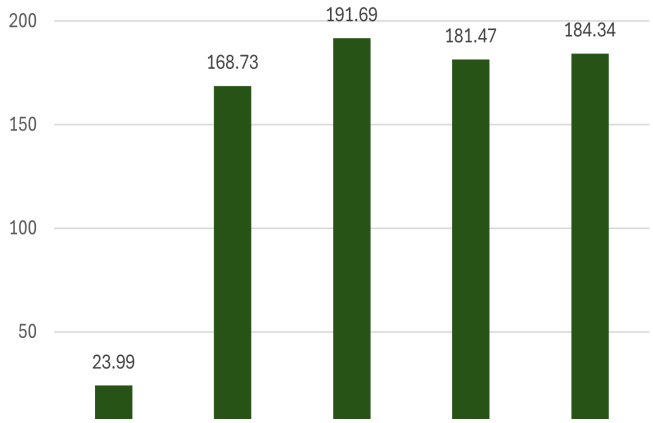
Indigo bunting (*photo by David Jacobs*)

Ensure no net loss of land over time

The Land Use Task Force recommends that the Forest Preserves track and report total holdings over time to ensure no net loss of land. There was no net loss of land in 2025, and no acres disposed of and the Forest Preserves continues to add new acres to its holdings every year, with 184.34 acres added in 2025:

- 0.14 acres near Cermak Woods (Central)
- 7.59 acres near Beaubien Woods (South)
- 26.71 acres near McGinnis Slough (Southwest)
- 68.17 acres near Sweet Woods (South)
- 25.50 acres near Sweet Woods (South)
- 19.19 acres near Sweet Woods (South)
- 37.04 acres near Sweet Woods (South)
- 0.14 acres near Cermak Woods (Central)

Number of New Acres Acquired: 2021–2025



Data through December 31, 2025

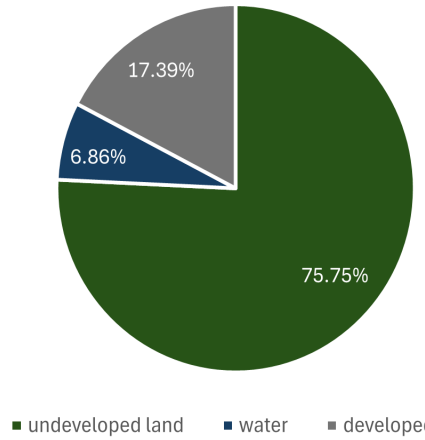
Ensure at least 80% of holdings remain in a natural state over time

In 1929, an advisory committee recommended that the Forest Preserves adhere to an 80/20 land use balance. Under this framework, at least 80% of Forest Preserves' land would remain in a natural condition (including 5% designated for rivers, lakes and marshlands), while no more than 20% allocated for more intensive recreational uses such as camping, picnic groves, and golf, with up to 2% for a zoo and botanic gardens.

The 2021 Nature-Compatible Recreation position paper reaffirms this longstanding 80/20 principle as a guiding framework for land stewardship. The Land Use Task Force continues to monitor both natural areas and developed or built infrastructure

across the preserves to ensure that a minimum of 80% of the land remains dedicated to protecting biodiversity, delivering essential ecosystem services, and ensuring that Cook County residents and visitors have access to thriving nature and its many accompanying physical and mental health benefits.

2025 Distribution of Land Holdings



Data through December 31, 2024

SCALING UP VOLUNTEERS

A robust network of volunteers helps to support the Forest Preserves in a variety of ways—restoring natural areas, monitoring plant and animal populations, tracking trail conditions, and supporting public programs. Volunteers have a tremendous positive impact on and in the Forest Preserves. According to Forest Preserves records, in 2025, they reported 63,771 hours in restoration work, equivalent to over $2,218,593 (at a 2025 value of $34.79 per hour). Volunteers very likely contributed many more hours than the Forest Preserves' volunteer database captured. Additionally, volunteers recorded an additional 31,458 volunteer hours for programs outside of stewardship, including trail monitoring and maintenance, community science, tree care, engagement, and more, equivalent to an incremental $1,094,425 (at a 2025 value of $34.79 per hour).

Recruit 50 volunteers per year from communities throughout Cook County for leadership roles in ecological stewardship

The Council's 2021 Scaling Up Volunteers position paper states that in order for the Forest Preserves to maintain the health of our natural areas, it is critical to support, commit to, and collaborate with volunteers.

Finding and sustaining leaders among ecological restoration volunteers is an important step in building long-term restoration but is also challenging. Recruiting more volunteers for stewardship roles throughout Cook County has long been a priority for the Forest Preserves and partner organizations. The Volunteer Resources section continues to provide pathways for volunteers to serve in diverse leadership roles.

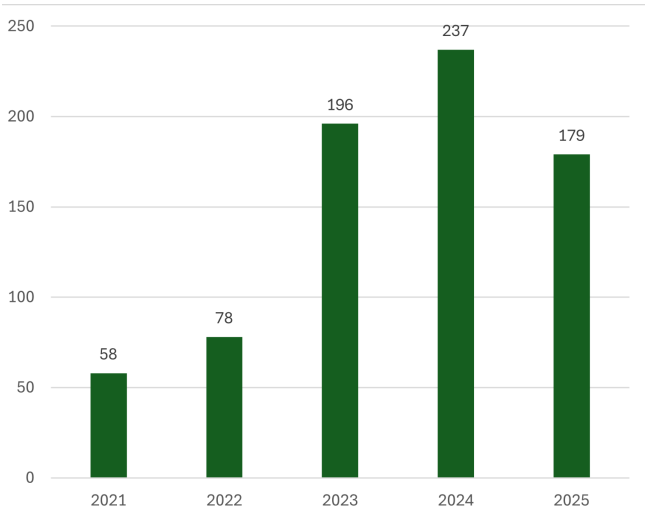
In 2025, volunteers earned 179 new leadership certifications in areas including seed collection leader, invasive plant monitor, brush pile burn management, chainsaw usage, and herbicide application. A map in Appendix A shows the geographic distribution of current volunteers with leadership certifications by zip code, totaling 531 volunteers across 508 unique zip codes.



Volunteer sedge identification class *(photo by Forest Preserves)*

The total number of new leadership certifications in 2024 was higher than in 2025, but that is not the norm, as the 2024 surge was due to adding a new position, chainsaw mentor, and a revamped training for chainsaw safety assistant.

Number of New Leadership Certifications Earned by Volunteers Each Year



Data through December 31, 2025

Involve a variety of partners to attract and enlist volunteers that reflect the diversity of Cook County

The Forest Preserves partners with a wide range of organizations on the engagement and recruitment of volunteers and ecological stewardship leaders from throughout Cook County. Additionally, companies come out throughout the year to participate in corporate workdays and team building activities led by Forest Preserves staff, volunteers, and partners. A monthly newsletter, The Volunteer Ecosystem, is sent out to nearly 14,000 people and highlights training and volunteer events, celebrates volunteers, and includes articles on native plants and animals.

In 2025, the Council asked the Forest Preserves to reconsider its practice of not allowing unaccompanied teens to participate in volunteer-led stewardship days. The Forest Preserves launched the Minors Volunteering in the Forest Preserves Task Force, which held three meetings between July and November 2025. The Task Force consisted of three Conservation & Policy Council members and staff from Commissioner Morita's office, Friends of the Forest Preserves, Shedd Aquarium, and the Forest Preserves. The Task Force identified that there are numerous programs for accompanied minors (8 years and up) to participate in ecological stewardship activities and that unaccompanied teens (ages 15–17) can participate in Forest Preserves' staff-led restoration days, as well as various monitoring activities. The Task Force concluded that future programming decisions were beyond the group's scope and recommended creating a smaller working group to review current offerings for teens and to engage teens directly to understand their needs and interests better. This working group began meeting in March 2026 and will provide updates at Council meetings.



Morgan Park Academy youth volunteering at Sundown Meadow (*photo by Forest Preserves*)

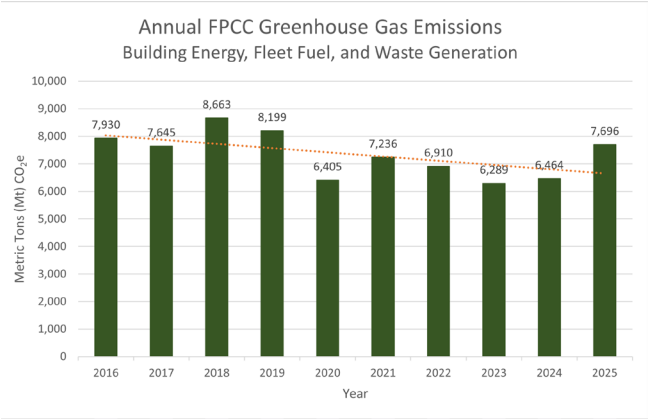
SUSTAINABILITY AND CLIMATE RESILIENCE

The Forest Preserves of Cook County is implementing sustainability strategies to minimize the Preserves' contributions to climate change and to embrace adaptive land management practices to create greater resilience for Cook County's human and natural communities. In 2025, the Preserves' GHG emissions increased from 2024, 7,696 Mt CO2e compared to 6,464 Mt CO2e, but remained below 2016 baseline levels, 7,930 Mt CO2e. The increase was due to an emergency power issue at a facility and higher fuel use in vehicles compared to the previous year. The additional fuel use is due to specialized diesel fuel vehicles that support conservation and maintenance work conducted throughout the forest preserves: these dies fuel vehicles do not have alternative fuel



New Salt Creek Landscape Maintenance facility (*photo by Forest Preserves*)

Greenhouse Gas Emissions



Data through December 31, 2025

options. As the Forest Preserves improves its ability to accurately track its GHG emissions, including transition to a new system to track fuel usage that will provide better data.

Despite the increase, the Forest Preserves remains on track to meet its GHG reduction goals of a 45% reduction by 2030 and to be net zero by 2050. To continue to meet the 2030 and 2050 goals, the Forest Preserves will continue to pursue major energy efficiency upgrades to facilities included in the Capital Improvement Plan and Clean Energy Action Plan, as well as pursue the generation of renewable power.

For the 2025 calendar year, the Forest Preserves is reporting, for the first time, the amount of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions removed from the atmosphere by its natural areas, including woodlands and prairies. These natural areas remove an estimated 96,840 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent per year, meaning they act as a significant carbon sink that helps offset emissions. This is equivalent to approximately 96.8 million kilograms (or 213.5 million pounds) of CO2e removed annually. This estimate reflects the net amount of carbon absorbed annually, accounting for both carbon uptake from plant growth and emissions related to land use changes and is calculated using standardized greenhouse gas accounting methods.

In 2025, the Forest Preserves also made progress in its zero-waste focus are, an initiative aimed at reducing waste sent to landfills, with a recycling rate of 11.5%. The agency recorded its lowest emissions from municipal solid waste since its 2016 baseline year.

PEOPLE

Everyone in Cook County will feel welcome at the Forest Preserves—and will seek them out for discovery, renewal and fun.

The Forest Preserves is committed to creating welcoming spaces where everyone can connect with and enjoy nature. Each year, the preserves receive an estimated 62 million visits, with patrons exploring nature, trails, and nature centers, attending picnics, an participating in organized programs and special events. Beyond the preserves, staff members engage thousands of students and Cook County residents by bringing nature-based education directly to schools and community events. The Forest Preserves' website and social media channels generate millions of interactions annually. The overarching goal is for every Cook County resident and visitor to feel invited, welcomed, and inspired to experience the forest preserves.



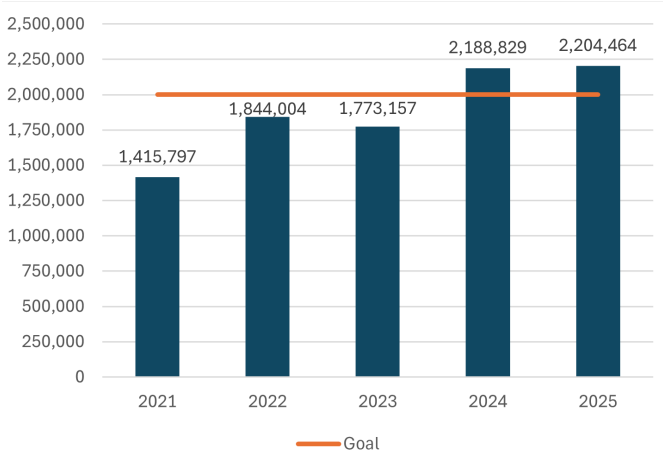
Greater Maywood Paddling program participants
(photo by Forest Preserves)

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

A primary annual goal for the Forest Preserves is to engage with people and inspire them to explore and connect with their public lands. Each year, the Forest Preserves aims to have two million individuals participate in one or more of its diverse onsite programs, events, or activities. This key performance indicator includes attendance at Forest Preserves' events and Nature Center programs; visits to pools, campgrounds, golf courses, and other outdoor recreational amenities; and participation in permitted picnics and events. In 2025, the Forest Preserves estimates a total of 2,204,464 individuals participated in onsite programs, events, and activities compared to 2024 (2,188,829). While this is a modest increase, it shows continued growth in this area, likely triggered by expanded advertising and marketing and the addition of program staff, both of which were made possible by referendum funding. The Conservation & Experiential Programming Department is also focusing on outreach and community-building efforts to increase participation in the Forest Preserves' onsite programs and events.

2025 did see a decrease in some onsite participation, which impacted the overall number, including aquatic center visitors (24% decrease) and watercraft rentals (34% decrease). Cool and rainy weather delayed the opening of all three aquatic centers in the spring, and the Whelan Aquatic Center required unanticipated maintenance repairs. Watercraft rentals were also down in 2025 due to weather-related events and an algal bloom at Maple Lake.

Number of People Engaged in Onsite Programs, Events, and Activities at the Forest Preserves



Data through December 31, 2025

Each year, the Forest Preserves' offsite programs, activities, and digital communications aim to generate

four million connections with people. These efforts strengthen awareness of and access to Forest Preserves resources, ensuring that all Cook County residents and visitors feel welcomed and encouraged to experience nature and outdoor recreation. This key performance indicator measures social media impressions, website sessions, newsletter opens, engagement at community events, school programs, and community leadership workshops. In 2025, the Forest Preserves recorded 5,324,607 engagements with people in offsite programs, events, activities, and digital communications. This figure includes 5,295,703 (3,723,389 in 2024) in social media impressions, website sessions, and newsletter opens, a 42% increase, and 30,966 (22,643 in 2024) participants in community events, workshops, and programs at schools, a 36% increase, which combined is a 43% increase over 2024. In 2025, thanks to the referendum-supported increased staff capacity, the Forest Preserves was able to create more social media content, more deeply researched content and make forays into using video, with several posts garnering significant engagement.

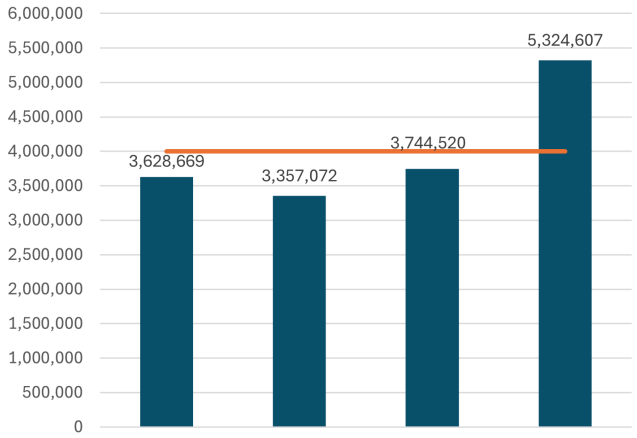


2025 Green Teacher Gathering *(photo by Openlands)*

To expand outreach and tap into new networks, the Forest Preserves is partnering with a wide variety of organizations on events. One example of this is its support of the Green Teacher Network, which hosted the Green Teacher Gathering in April 2025. This event aims to bolster the environmental and sustainability education movement in the Chicagoland area. The Forest Preserves, Openlands, Garfield Park Conservatory Alliance, Cultivate Collective, and the Chicago Botanic Garden organized the event, which was held at the Academy for Global Citizenship on Chicago's Southwest Side and drew more than 200 participants, including formal and informal educators, community members, gardeners, students, parents, artists, and more.

Building on the year-over-year growth from 2025, the Forest Preserves will continue to expand social media outreach, deepen partnerships with community organizations, and refine its advertising, marketing, and editorial strategies to connect with more Cook County residents and visitors.

Number of People Engaged in Offsite Programs, Events, and Activities at the Forest Preserves



Data through December 31, 2025

MOVING TOWARD RACIAL EQUITY AND AMPLIFYING DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

The 2020 *Moving Towards Racial Equity* and 2022 *Amplifying Diversity & Inclusion* position papers developed by the Council recognize that the Forest Preserves operates within a broader system shaped by structural racism, which has contributed to longstanding and persistent inequalities. These papers call on the Forest Preserves to deepen engagement with historically excluded communities, including by building meaningful relationships with Native American communities and improving access

to the preserves for individuals with disabilities. excluded, including developing relationships with the Native American community, and continuing to improve access to the preserves for individuals with disabilities.

Continue efforts to expand outreach and engage residents and extend these strategies to engage more people who have been historically excluded

Through its Conservation & Experiential Programming Department, the Forest Preserves partners with community organizations, schools, park districts, and other entities to broaden access to nature-based experiences. Each year, the Forest Preserves collaborates with hundreds of new and returning partners through programs, special events, guided talks and walks, school group activities, and community leader trainings.



Makin' Music Community Jam at Caldwell Woods *(photo by Forest Preserves)*

While 325 new community groups were introduced to Forest Preserves by participating in an event or program, similar to the total in 2024 (322), there was a 94% increase in the number of community groups that were engaged in partnerships and collaborations with the Forest Preserves in 2025 (1,012) compared to 2024 (521), helping increase capacity, leverage resources, connect to new audiences and diversify programming. One of the most successful examples of this is a partnership with the Chinese-American community for the Lunar New Year program at Little Red Schoolhouse, which has increased attendance by over three times, from 580 in 2024 to more than 2,500 in 2025.



Lunar New Year program at Little Red Schoolhouse *(photo by Forest Preserves)*

This community-led event drew more than 24 organizations and more than 40 volunteers, with minimal staff support, and featured activities such as dancing, calligraphy, and games.

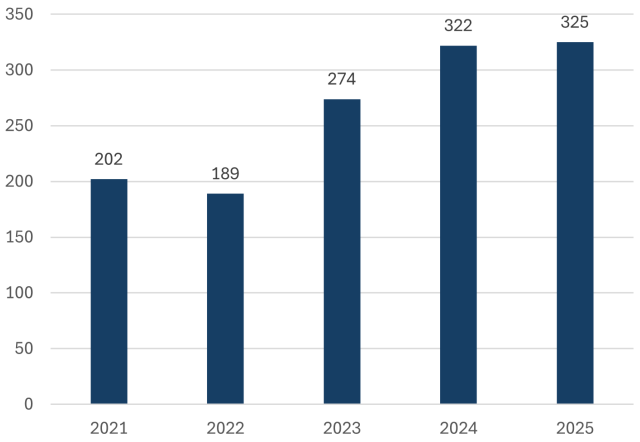
Collaboration remains central to achieving the Forest Preserves' goal of connecting more people to nature. The Forest Preserves supports partners through joint programming and events, funding assistance, transportation to Forest Preserves' programs and activities, and education permits that allow organizations to host events independently within the Forest Preserves' spaces.

One of the Forest Preserves' longest partnerships is with NeighborSpace, Chicago's only nonprofit urban land trust, established to address the lack of open space within the city. The Forest Preserves, along with the Chicago Park District and the City of Chicago, helped to found NeighborSpace in 1996. Today more than 109 community gardens provide residents with opportunities to grow food and flowers, to socialize, and to enjoy the outdoors. These gardens are an important source of community open space and nature, allowing land uses with different priorities than in the Forest Preserves' natural landscapes. The gardens provide nature for neighborhoods that often

lack access to green spaces and can be a stepping stone for people to become inspired to explore the Forest Preserves.

The Forest Preserves will continue to diversify its program offerings and work alongside community organizations to create meaningful connections to culturally significant places, such as Underground Railroad sites, and to events such as Black History Month, Women's History Month, Pride, and Hispanic Heritage Month.

Number of New Community Groups Introduced to the Forest Preserves by Participating in Events and Activities



Data through December 31, 2025

Recognize the special obligation to Native Americans who have a historic and ongoing relationship with the lands within the Forest Preserves

In 2025, the Forest Preserves continued to strengthen its partnerships with the Native American community through various activities. These included installing a pollinator garden at Rolling Knolls Preserve in Elgin. The garden is co-stewarded by the Trickster Cultural Center and has the potential to serve as a collaborative model for other sites and other agencies. The Forest Preserves' Tribal Liaison Fellow deepened the relationship with the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation, Illinois' first federally recognized tribal nation since the expulsion of Native Americans from Illinois 200 years ago.



January 2025 Native-Led Climate Summit at Thatcher Woods Pavilion *(photo by Forest Preserves)*

The Resource Management Department created a process with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources that supports the conveyance of whole deer to native-led organizations for cultural practices. And the Conservation and Experiential Programming Department organized and coordinated public programs and events with the American Indian Center, American Indian Health Services, St. Kateri Center of Chicago, Gichigamiin Indigenous Nations Museum, and others.

Learn from the Universal Design, disability rights and disability justice communities to improve access to the preserves for individuals with disabilities and others

The Forest Preserves strives to be inclusive of all people and to ensure that everyone can explore and enjoy the preserves. Under the guidance of the Accessibility Coordinator, hired in 2023, the Forest Preserves highlighted two new and improved accessible options for Cook County residents in 2025. First, the Forest Preserves debuted a fleet of GRIT Freedom Chairs at a Nature is Accessible event held at Little Red Schoolhouse in May. Funded in part through a grant from the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, the GRIT Freedom Chars increase opportunities for those with mobility impairments to access trails in the preserves. These chairs are available at all nature centers and select campgrounds and are free to reserve for the public.



GRIT Freedom Chairs *(photo by Forest Preserves)*

The second amenity—an accessible canoe and kayak launch available to the public—was celebrated at the reopening of the Beaubien Woods Boat Launch in October. The Boardsafe Dock is a state-of-the-art accessible launch and is only the fourth of its kind in Illinois. Beaubien Woods also features accessible fishing locations along the pier. Both events received significant coverage from local news outlets, highlighting the interest in and importance of adaptive recreation.



Beaubien Woods Boat Launch press event
(photo by Forest Preserves)

Sharing accurate trail and facility data is an often-overlooked important informational resource for the accessibility community. Understanding what trail conditions to expect allows potential trail users to make informed decisions about what is accessible to them. To address this challenge, the Forest Preserves acquired and deployed a High Efficiency Trail Assessment Process (HETAP) cart, funded in part through line-item funding from the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity. The HETAP cart provides data on trail cross slope, running slope, obstacles, and surface. The Forest Preserves will translate this information into more precise data that will be made available to trail users.

To share knowledge and streamline accessibility efforts better across the county, the Forest Preserves has participated on the the Accessibility Working Group within the Offices of the President of Cook County. The group meets to share experiences and accessibility-related policies and guidance, as needed, increasing capacity to improve accessibility throughout Cook County and the Forest Preserves.

NATURE-COMPATIBLE RECREATION

Over time, certain recreational programs and facilities that do not align with the Forest Preserves' mission were introduced. The Council's 2021 Nature-Compatible Recreation position paper recommends evaluating and, when possible, transforming these "legacy uses" to ensure mission alignment and long-term sustainability.

Complete pilot studies for golf courses, pools, and model airplane fields to re-align these sites as nature-compatible uses and to ensure environmental and economic sustainability.

In 2023, the Forest Preserves endeavored to launch pilot studies to realign golf courses, aquatic centers, and model airplane fields with its mission. The golf course realignment study is furthest along, with community engagement meetings completed and a new golf concession agreement approved by the Forest Preserves' Board of Commissioners in December 2024. The new agreement ensures that the golf courses will install energy-efficient equipment and will incorporate nature-compatible course design and native plantings. Additionally, a committee consisting of the concessionaire and Forest Preserve staff will develop a plan for the future of the Forest Preserves' golf portfolio, which includes ten courses and four driving ranges. The model airplane fields and aquatic center studies are on hold and will be re-evaluated in 2026; this will allow staff and new Forest Preserves leadership to better understand current visitor use of these facilities.

ECONOMY

Communities will value the economic benefits of protected lands.

Research has long shown that natural areas contribute to economic vitality. According to the 2023 *Economic Impact of Local Parks* report produced by the National Recreation and Park Association, parks and green spaces increase property values, attract businesses, and boost local economies by drawing tourism and recreation spending. The report also found that local parks generate more than $201 billion in economic activity and support more than 1.1 million jobs in the United States. The Forest Preserves' remarkable nature and outdoor recreation amenities provide significant benefits to neighboring communities and support local tourism and outdoor recreation businesses.



Historical photo of people walking in the forest preserves (circa 1920s/1930s) *(photo by Forest Preserves)*

Additionally, the Forest Preserves support healthy economies by cleaning air and water and reducing flooding. Natural areas capture and store carbon and help to decrease the economic impacts of climate change by limiting damages from extreme weather and storm events (as documented in the U.S. Global Change Research Program's *Fifth National Climate Assessment).* Past estimates show that the forest preserves absorb more than 1.5 million tons of CO2 annually.

By improving air quality, these landscapes help reduce healthcare costs associated with pollution related illnesses and help prevent premature mortality, as documented by the United States Environmental Protection Agency's *The Benefits and Costs of the Clean Air Act from 1990 to 2020*. Similarly, by filtering and protecting water resources, natural areas reduce the need for costly water treatment, generating long-term economic savings for communities as demonstrated by *Land Conservation and the Future of America's Drinking Water*, a Trust for Public Land report that highlights the importance of conserving watershed land to help communities avoid the high costs of treating contaminated water.



Bullfrog at Deer Grove *(photo by Derek Jordan)*

The public lands that Forest Preserves manage provide important cost savings by controlling stormwater naturally. According to a stormwater plan developed by the Forest Preserves in 2007, "replacing the floodwater storage provided by the FPDCC with engineered flood control structures would cost between $1.0 and $2.6 billion (in 2007 dollars)." Overall, the research shows that investing in natural areas is an investment in economic stability and prosperity. The Forest Preserves play a critical role in supporting both community wellbeing and ecological health by reducing costs, preventing damage, and strengthening the long-term resilience of Cook County communities.

LEADERSHIP

Visionary conservation leaders will safeguard, expand and bring increased resources to the Forest Preserves.

The Forest Preserves of Cook County's Next Century Conservation Plan emphasizes building strong, enduring conservation leadership that can protect and grow the Forest Preserves over time while ensuring accountability and financial sustainability. Specifically, it calls for visionary leaders and governance structures that provide consistent direction across political or administrative changes, strengthen transparency and management practices, and secure sufficient public and private resources to expand restoration and operations. This goal highlights that long-term success depends not just on ecological restoration, but on sustained leadership capacity, effective oversight, and reliable funding to scale conservation efforts and maintain public trust.



Adam Bianchi *(photo by Forest Preserves)*

In 2025, President Toni Preckwinkle and the Forest Preserve District of Cook County Board of Commissioners conducted a nationwide search for its new General Superintendent. Council members and representatives from organizations that have long partnered with the Forest Preserves on conservation and engagement efforts were consulted as part of the process. Out of a pool of strong candidates, Adam Bianchi, then-U.S. Forest Service District Ranger for the Dillon Ranger District of the White River National Forest, stood out for his experience in managing a complex natural system with significant recreational use; in engaging with community organizations and members; in managing large contracts, budget, and staff; in implementing innovative programs; and in his commitment the values of the NCCP and the Forest Preserves. On July 1, 2025, President Preckwinkle nominated Bianchi as the Forest Preserves new General Superintendent, and the Forest Preserves Board of Commissioners unanimously approved his nomination.

Bianchi has nearly 20 years of experience in public land and natural resource management at the U.S. Forest Service and brings seasoned leadership, innovation, and collaborative conservation to this position. Previously, he served as District Ranger for Colorado's Dillon Ranger District in the White River National Forest, where he oversaw 312,000 acres, including wilderness areas, reservoirs, 14 campgrounds, and four renowned ski resorts. He led strategic planning to balance environmental protection with recreation, secured funding through creative partnerships, and helped guide policies for the broader 2.3 million-acre forest. An Iowa State University graduate, his accolades include the 2022 U.S. Forest Service Chief Honor Award and the 2023 Forester's Ranger District of the Year.

Since his start with the Forest Preserves, Bianchi has demonstrated his commitment to collaboration, engagement, innovation, and thoughtful leadership. Council members have observed him participating in multiple events, during which he has gotten to know the Preserves, volunteers, and those who enjoy them better. The Council recently benefited from hearing Bianchi's perspectives on the Forest Preserves' strengths, as well as some initial thoughts on what the next level of excellence could entail.

Building on recent changes in agency leadership, the addition of new members to the Conservation & Policy Council brings fresh perspectives and strengthens its role in guiding the Forest Preserves' future by including leaders from diverse sectors and communities, including conservation, business, education, and community advocacy, the Council ensures its guidance reflects a wide range of experiences and priorities. In 2025, the Council welcomed three new members. Brandon Hayes is the founder of Bold Bison Communications and Consulting, a national firm he launched in 2019 to deliver strategic communications, facilitation, and training services to nonprofits focused on conservation, climate, and local food systems. Kim Ruffin, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor and Program Director of English at Roosevelt University whose work bridges environmental literature, health and wellness, and racial equity. Alaka Wali is curator emerita of North American Anthropology at the Field Museum, where she has led groundbreaking work in conservation, cultural resources, and inclusive community engagement.



Conservation & Policy Council Meeting
(*photo by Forest Preserves)*

Along with welcoming new voices to its membership ranks, the Council is also strengthening its governance through a dedicated committee focused on oversight, accountability, and strategic guidance. The Council's Governance Committee is playing a central role in clarifying expectations for Council member engagement and strengthening overall accountability in 2025. The Committee established a set of core responsibilities, including attending quarterly Council meetings held across the Forest Preserves' holdings, participating in at least one Board of Commissioners meeting, and engaging in Forest Preserves' events attended by Board leadership. Looking ahead to 2026, the Governance Committee plans to focus on proposed ordinance updates and refining the annual report to reflect better the full scope and impact of the Council's work.

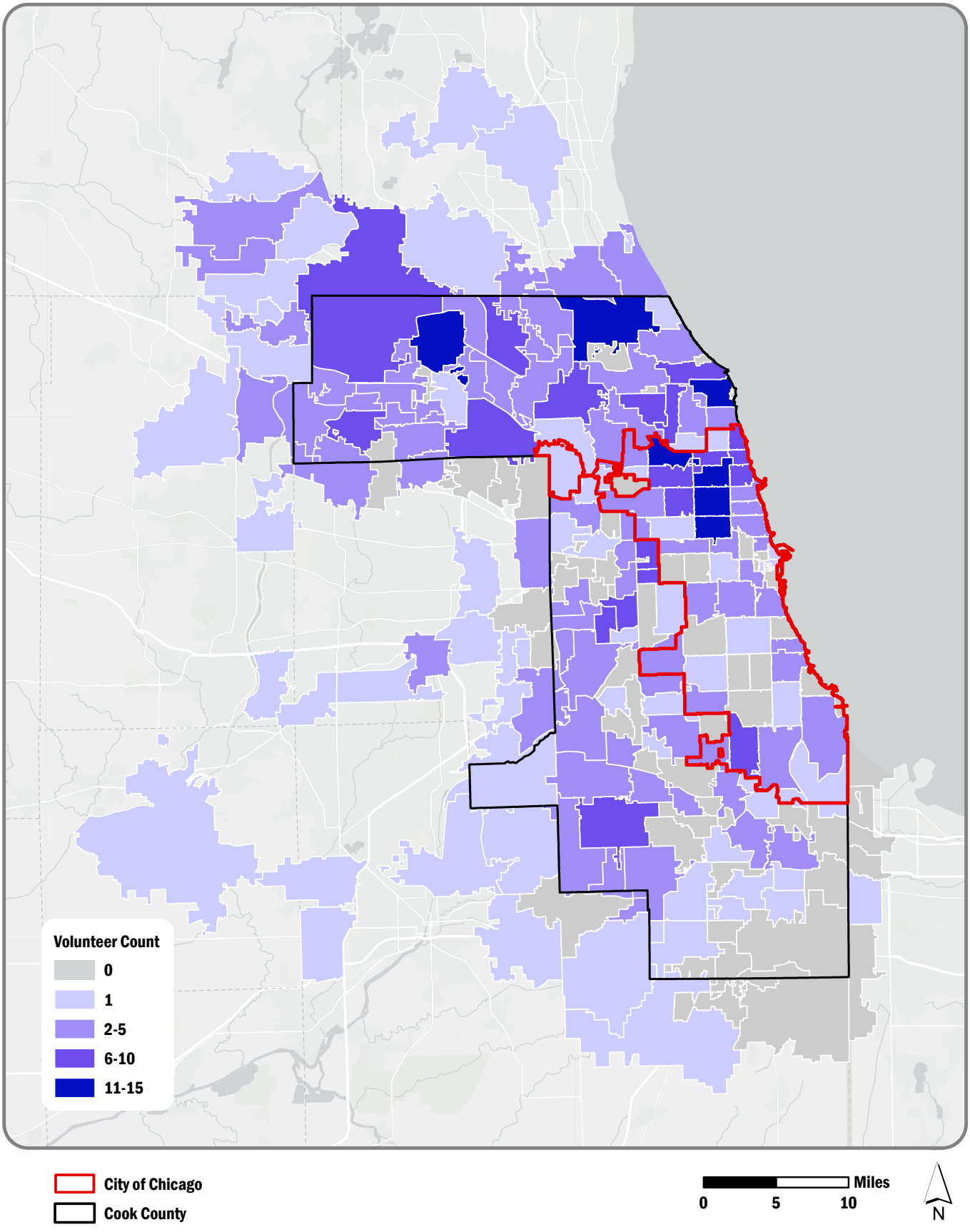
Recognition from local, regional, and national organizations underscores the exceptional work happening across the Forest Preserves. In 2025, the Forest Preserves received acknowledgement for major initiatives and partnerships, including the Des Plaines River Trail Enhancement Project, which received multiple honors including national awards from American Trails, the National Association of Counties, and the National Association of County Park and Recreation Officials. The Forest Preserves also celebrated partner recognition, successfully nominating the Shedd Aquarium as an Outstanding Support Organization by the National Association of County Park and Recreation Officials for its collaborative impact. And Chicago Wilderness Alliance recognized the Forest Preserves' collaborative work on the restoration and reconnection of Powderhorn Lake to Wolf Lake and ultimately Lake Michigan with its Force of Nature Award. The Chicago Wilderness also awarded the Forest Preserves' 1,213-acre Busse Forest Nature Preserve with a Platinum Accreditation in its Excellent in Ecological Restoration Program. These awards are a testament to the talent and commitment of staff, and to the collaborative impact of partners and volunteers who help advance the mission of the Forest Preserves. All awards received in 2025, and previous years, are listed on the Forest Preserves' website.

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APPENDIX

Volunteer Stewardship Leaders

Total Count by Zip Code



Conservation & Policy Council Members

Mark Templeton, Chair

Henrietta “Hank” Saunders, Vice-Chair

Daisy Feidt, Secretary

Commissioner Josina Morita, Ex-officio member

Alan Bell

Brandon Hayes

Dr. Ryen Nagle

Laurel Ross

Dr. Kim Ruffin

Dr. Jacqueline Samuel

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