

Forest preserve managers lambasted in groups' report

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Once a national model for forest preservation, the Forest Preserve District of Cook County now has woods choked by invasive plants and an administration choked by bureaucracy and inefficiency, according to a two-year study released Wednesday by a pair of groups.

The scathing report of the Friends of the Forest Preserves and the Friends of the Parks highlighted a "bottleneck" at the top of the district that left its administration "essentially paralyzed" and unable to properly protect its valuable land.

The report pointed to Cook County Board President John Stroger, who also serves as president of the forest preserve district, as a key problem because he seems "disinterested" in the district but has power on all decisions - from jobs to public policy.

"It appears that the president's primary interest in the district is as a source of jobs for friends," the report said.

Stroger spokeswoman Caryn Stancik said the district just received the 85-page report Tuesday and "it would be inappropriate to comment in detail until staff has time to review it." But she did dispute the "jobs for friends" allegation, noting that only 4 percent of district jobs are allowed to be filled by appointment because of a long-standing federal consent decree restricting patronage jobs.

The report was the second to come from a lengthy study of both the district's administration and its land.

The groups' first report came out in February. It focused on the condition of the actual preserves and found that some 68 percent of the woods are in "poor shape," choked by invasive thickets or bare from lack of sunlight.

The administration didn't fare much better Wednesday.

"Now we find that the district is hemorrhaging money, its employees are demoralized, the board has not asked for accountability and there is a glaring leadership gap," said John Sheerin of Friends of the Forest Preserves.

The groups issued a series of recommendations including: making the budget process more transparent for the public, reorganizing the district's large committee system to better get public input on pending issues, giving more power to a general superintendent, transferring operation of swimming pools to suburban park districts and replacing police officers with forest rangers.

Stancik said the report and its recommendations will be reviewed by the district board, which is made up of the county's commissioners. But she did note that some of the recommendations appeared to involve increased spending - something not desirable for a district that has been nearly \$20 million in the hole recently.

"At first glance, we find it interesting that while the president has spent the last two years trying to reduce expenses at the forest preserve, this group would make recommendations that would only increase our costs," she said.