

Cook's trashy forest preserves and flabby patronage army

Chicago Tribune, September 27, 2002, Editorial

Once again, independent auditors have weighed in with their annual critique of the financial debacle at the Cook County Forest Preserve District. Once again, the auditors cite numerous problems, many of them labeled REPEAT to signify that, year after year, the district's managers and its overseers on the Cook County Board have failed to fix the mess they've made and tolerated. Examples: a chronic multimillion-dollar deficit, slipshod inventory records, inadequate internal auditing of operations--even a few employees who kept getting paid after they quit working at the district.

Meanwhile, the forest preserves continue to deteriorate while the County Board fiddles. Maintenance is an ongoing disaster orchestrated by patronage hacks. Garbage cans overflow, restrooms reek of filth. And yet, earlier this month, the County Board voted to pour another \$5 million down this rathole rather than demand that the Forest Preserve District--which County Board members directly control--overhaul operations and cut expenses to meet its budget.

Yes, county taxpayers, that's right: Cook County is handing out free money to a completely separate unit of government. As county commissioner Carl Hansen protested, "We're giving the impression that county government is a bank for other governments--and it's not."

Consider: In 2000, County Board President John Stroger insisted he needed a \$19 million parking tax just to balance the county's strapped budget. Last year, though, the County Board somehow felt flush enough to give \$8 million to the Forest Preserve District, which was (as usual) swimming in red ink. This month's \$5 million donation means the county has wasted a total of \$13 million to shore up the mismanaged district. And there are clues that many more millions of county dollars will go to the district after the November election--the better to trick voters who might want vengeance for the County Board's addiction to heaving good money after bad.

Stroger appears to realize that his board's fast-spreading disaster at the Forest Preserve District may well stand as a sour legacy of his career. In addition to its well-documented squandering of public money and its lousy upkeep of the forest preserves, the district has

been plagued by a court judgment of sexual harassment and allegations of overtime fraud by several of its own police officers. The district's biggest scandal, though, is a payroll fat with political loyalists.

Stroger now advocates folding the Forest Preserve District into the rest of county government, a change the Tribune advocated in August. Unfortunately, though, Stroger continues to blame state-mandated tax caps for the district's problems. That's ridiculous and pointless; tax caps won't soon disappear. The problems are mismanagement, cronyism, failure to privatize services and chronic neglect--for which Stroger's County Board bears full responsibility. If folding the district into county government is just an excuse for raising taxes rather than truly streamlining the district, then the fix would be as bad as the problem.

Important voices such as Friends of the Forest Preserves and Friends of the Parks, both advocacy groups, urge examination of alternatives, such as creating a separate board, with a separate president, to oversee the Forest Preserve District. They fear that the forest preserves would get lost in the much larger county government--and also that it might be easier, in a financial crunch, for future County Board members to stealthily sell or trade away parts of the district's irreplaceable lands.

What's unarguable, though, is that Cook County needs a thorough discussion of how best to clean house, downsize and hire new managers to run the forest preserves. The primary election upsets of several incumbents will put some talented new members on the County Board, including Forrest Claypool, who previously reformed the moribund Chicago Park District. May he and others work similar magic here.

The latest report from independent auditors is evidence enough that the Cook County Board remains asleep--maybe comatose is a better word--at the switch. And yet, as users of the increasingly dilapidated forest preserves know, financial failings are just one part of the growing crisis that Stroger and his board must confront.