

Fests to feel forest ban on parking: Ravinia, Irish fetes among affected

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A newfound respect for grass is leaving organizers of outdoor concerts, festivals and sporting events in Cook County forest preserves scrambling to figure out just where the heck all their patrons are supposed to park.

Thousands of Ravinia visitors will be shuttled to the concert grounds from remote parking lots this summer because a new rule prohibiting parking on forest preserve grass means neighboring groves may not be rented for overflow parking--something that has been done for 28 years.

This Sunday, the 1,400 canoeists and kayakers in a Des Plaines River marathon will face delays loading their boats at the finish line. And a June fishing derby for kids has been moved from forest preserve land to a private lake.

As organizers hustle to make alternate parking arrangements, they say they're frustrated that decades-old arrangements were changed with little or no notice.

"I have seen the district property abused over and over, but that's not what we're doing," said Ralph Frese, 77, founder of the 47-year-old Des Plaines River Canoe Marathon. "The vast number of our paddlers love the outdoors--that's why we're not out here with a 100-horsepower outboard motor."

In previous years, race participants could pull their vehicles into a grove near the finish line and load their boats. This year, forest preserve police officers will direct them a few at a time onto paved parking areas.

Forest preserve officials acknowledge the inconvenience, but defend the new policy, rolled out quietly last year and strictly enforced since Jan. 1, as an important step toward a commitment to protecting natural areas.

"If you're preaching a great number of environmental practices and concerns, then parking vehicles on grass seems to me counter to that philosophy," said Forest Preserve District of Cook County General

Supt. Steven Bylina.

For more than a year, forest preserve officials have been engaged in a spirited public debate about land use and management, with elected commissioners limiting all sorts of once-routine exceptions to district rules and easements onto preserve property. Starting in January, anyone applying for a forest preserve permit was notified of the zero-tolerance policy for parking on unpaved surfaces.

Benjamin Cox, executive director of Friends of the Forest Preserves, supports the policy, even though the group has been critical of some of the preserve's past land management policies.

"Parking on non-paved areas of the preserves can be very damaging, even if it's a one-time use," Cox said.

But many longtime users, including Chicago Gaelic Park in Oak Forest, point out they've always paid to use grass fields for parking and have carried insurance in case of damage.

"Nobody ever complained to us," said Frank Bradley, chairman of Irish Fest, which rented fields in nearby Rubio Woods to accommodate some of the 20,000 people who attend the Memorial Day weekend event. "We have been getting a permit for 17 years. We have never damaged it."

Ravinia officials said they didn't learn of the new policy until an annual permit application to use several groves in Turnbull Woods was rejected without warning this spring.

"We're disappointed, because it's been a long-standing policy we've had with them. We've paid for the spaces, we've paid for improvements--and to be given such short notice was not ideal," said spokesman Nick Pullia.

Without access to that space for as many as 800 cars, Ravinia officials are making arrangements for parking in Highland Park and shuttle buses, Pullia said.

Ravinia officials still want to use the groves during the summer's 10 largest concerts, including Don Henley in July and Tony Bennett in August, Pullia said.

But unless the district board changes its mind, there will be no

exceptions, Bylina said. So far, elected officials have voiced support for stricter land-use rules.

"Perhaps the most important message is we have limits for what we can handle," said Cook County Commissioner Mike Quigley, a Chicago Democrat. "We need to do what we have to [in order to] protect our land."

And Evanston Democrat Larry Suffredin said granting exceptions is a bad idea.

"Once we get into making the first exception, we'll be making them everywhere," Suffredin said. "What we need in the forest preserves is consistency in policy."

The change has cost the forest preserves at least one south suburban institution--the annual Free For Kids Only Fishing Derby at Tampier Lake near Palos Park. Organized 17 years ago, the one-day event regularly draws up to 1,000 children in early June.

Forest preserve staffers offered two parking plans that included shuttle buses, but founder Duke O'Malley said the hassle outweighed the perceived benefits of protecting grass. The event has been moved to a municipal lake in Orland Park.

"Their grass is not the grass on the 15th or 18th hole of any golf course. It's as rough a grass as you could plant," O'Malley said of the forest preserves. "Just because some new blood comes in and wants to sweep [things] clean, don't sweep out the good things that happen."

A few commissioners have expressed concern the parking policy may do just that. "We're not talking about the last sequoia on Earth when we park in those lots," said Carl Hansen, a Republican from Mt. Prospect.

Michael Lorge, founder of the Greater Chicago Jewish Folk Arts Festival, said his group was denied an exemption for next month when as many as 30,000 people are expected at St. Paul Woods. After hours of negotiations with forest preserve officials and business and village leaders in Morton Grove, Lorge said parking has been arranged on nearby commercial properties.

"It's worked out, but it's taken tremendous effort. It should have been

incumbent on the part of Cook County to think it through to the point of saying, "Our mission is to bring people in to enjoy the forest preserves. Having large-scale events introduces many people to our land," Lorge said.

Bylina remains steadfastly determined to enforce the parking policy.

"Someone has to take a stand that ultimately this is better for all concerned," he said. "We're not trying to disenfranchise some of our users. We're trying to make it more open and inviting."