

Tax hike for forest district called waste of money

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The Cook County Forest Preserve District's proposed 2005 budget would raise property taxes 13.6 percent but spend money on unneeded jobs and do little to improve the condition of often shabby woods and groves, a watchdog group argues.

The Civic Federation says forest preserve commissioners treat these public lands like an afterthought because the men and women also are county board members -- and county business seems to take first priority with them.

"A separate Forest Preserve District Board of Commissioners should be elected," the Civic Federation concludes in a report being released during today's budget hearing. "A separate board would focus solely on district issues, allowing commissioners to independently and adequately review the district's finances and operations. Separating the two governments would substantially improve the oversight and accountability of both governments."

Vote coming next week

The group calls for elimination of the forest preserve police force, the development of a long-range financial plan and a more detailed explanation of how the district plans to spend \$100 million in capital improvement bonds.

The Forest Preserve District has been slammed in recent years for wasting money, packing patronage hacks in jobs and failing to keep up the lands.

But commissioners and even some critics say they've noticed substantial improvements at the beleaguered district and plan to speak in support of the budget. The Friends of the Forest Preserves calls it "a very good budget overall."

The spending plan, which will be voted on next week, comprises about 1 percent of an overall Cook County tax bill.