

This land is our land: Forest Preserve District targets illegal use of public property

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After decades of playing the role of absentee landlord, the Cook County Forest Preserve District is cracking down on illegal use of its property.

The district has identified more than 150 cases of private and public institutions illegally using forest preserve land.

A report released this month highlights 11 of the worst offenders, including six in the South Suburbs.

In neighboring Will County, which owns far less forest land, officials say encroachment has not been much of an issue.

The most egregious offenders in Cook County were contacted in October and ordered off district property, said P.K. Parker, real estate administrator with the forest preserve district. None have complied. "These really need to be resolved quickly," Parker said, noting that the district is legally responsible for what happens on its land. "We are not going to roll over, play dead and allow them to use our land. It belongs to the people of Cook County," she said.

Parker conducted the study, which found school districts using forest preserve land for parking space, park districts operating baseball fields on county land, and private companies dumping horse manure, building marinas and cutting down county trees all on forest preserve property.

Land that belongs to the people of Cook County is inundated with "no trespassing signs" hung by people who do not own the property. Some businesses are making money using tax-exempt county land.

"No one should benefit financially from using public land," Cook County Forest Preserve District Commissioner Mike Quigley said. "It's an abomination."

The Riverdale Marina, located just west of Halsted Street and north of Jackson along the Little Calumet River, is one of the more "outrageous" examples of encroachment, Parker said.

The private company illegally removed trees, constructed buildings, installed signs, dumped materials and parked boats on district property, she said.

"They are using tax-exempt property for their profits," she said. A spokeswoman for the Riverdale Marina declined to comment. The village of Steger and the Chicago Heights Park District found themselves on the list because they operate baseball fields on forest preserve district property.

"If a child got hit by a baseball, who do you think they are going to sue?" Parker asked.

In both cases, the baseball fields are locked when not in use, a move that especially irks district officials.

"To lock up the area so no other citizen can use it is offensive," Parker said.

The village and park district have been asked to find other places to play. They are anxious to come to agreements with the county that would allow them to stay, but Parker said that would not comply with the district's mission.

The forest preserve is not a park district. It's job is to preserve land, not provide communities with baseball fields and tennis courts, she said.

Not all the forest preserve commissioners, who are elected to their posts, are anxious to kick Little League teams off the property, though.

"We don't want to cut anyone off who has been using the fields for 50 years, especially when they are kids or seniors from public entities who are benefiting from the use," Commissioner Joan Murphy said. The commissioners, who unanimously approved an ordinance to crack down on encroachment, are backpedaling, Parker said. If they want to deter squatters, they have to be firm with everyone, even park districts looking for athletic space.

Outraged by the abundance of encroachments, Quigley and his fellow commissioners unanimously approved an ordinance in November calling for stricter monitoring of the county's 68,000 acres of land. Quigley admits the forest preserve district had lost touch with what was happening on some of its property.

The study released this month, complete with maps and aerial photos, illustrates the widespread problem.

"This land is really important. It is the filter for our water and our air," Quigley said. "It is our break from the urban environment. We need biodiversity. We need natural land. It is critical to our existence." Bloom High School was asked to vacate a triangle of land south of its soccer field currently used for additional parking space.

But the school is not convinced the land belongs to the forest preserve, District 206 business manager Mark Sheahan said. Their attorneys are reviewing the claim.

The land was an "unsightly" eyesore before the district planted bushes and flowers on the site a couple years ago, he said.

"It just looked so bad that it made the rest of our property look bad," he said.

The county's tens of thousands of acres of lush forest and grasslands is inviting to municipalities and private businesses hard pressed for land in the increasingly crowded county.

The forest preserve district needs to take a stand now because the pressure will increase as communities become more desperate for space, Quigley said.

"Those pressures will only get heavier and harder because the county is growing out so fast," he said.

Since its inception 90 years ago, the forest preserve's mission has been to protect pockets of wildlife in an otherwise increasingly urban environment.

The district has a history of staunch opposition to government bodies attempting to wrestle away control of their land. In the 1940's, the district successfully defended an attempt by the federal government's war department to take land for nuclear research.

"(The founders) did not take their role as preservationists lightly," Quigley said.

In the past decade, the forest preserve has failed to live up to those ideals.

It sold three acres of land to Rosemont to be used for a parking lot in 1999, sparking outrage from conservation groups.

Quigley says the district is returning to its conservation roots. Instead of selling land, the commissioners will look to purchase land.

There is a prevalent notion held by municipalities, park districts, schools and private companies that "anything open is fair game," said Benjamin Cox of the Friends of the Forest Preserves.

"Some truly appreciate the forest preserves and recognize they are an important part of the community, others see it as potential solution to their problems of growth," he said.

Whether it's a school looking for new soccer fields or a company asking for more parking space, the county needs to protect its land, he said.

"Every little bit counts," Cox said. "Whether the reasons are good or bad or indifferent, the district needs to vigorously defend its land. If they start to give it away here and there, then there will be nothing left."

The Will County Forest Preserve District, which operates 17,000 acres, has avoided encroachment headaches.

During construction of the Old Plank Road, the district found some owners had built fences or sheds on district property. They were asked to remove them and all complied, according to spokesman Bruce Hodgdon.

Hodgdon said he felt "sympathy" for Cook County. Monitoring 68,000 acres is not an easy task, he said.

"Past stories have shown they don't even know all the property they own," he said.