

If forest preserve woods could vote ...Old troubles an issue in race for Cook County Board president

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Several years ago, it didn't take a genius to see there serious were flaws on one of the jewels of the suburbs: the Cook County forest preserves.

Trash piles and run-down picnic shelters seemed to be multiplying, while native species and nonputrid toilets seemed to be endangered. Funds for improvements were being raided to cover operating costs and no one in charge seemed to have a plan for how to manage the actual natural resources - the flora and fauna - that lies at the heart of the agency's mission.

"It was a train wreck," said Ben Cox, executive director of the nonpartisan Friends of the Forest Preserves. The group authored two reports in 2002 highly critical of the district's management.

Much of the heat came on Cook County Board President John Stroger. He and the 17 commissioners who make up the county board also run the Cook County Forest Preserve District, a separate governmental body.

Commissioner Forrest Claypool, who took office in 2002, soon became one of the loudest critics.

Now Stroger and Claypool are facing off in Tuesday's Democratic primary.

Stroger said he's turned things around. Claypool said things went bad under Stroger, and could go bad again if he keeps his job.

Most of the attention has been paid to the battle between the two for control of the county board and its \$3 billion annual budget.

But whether fishing in Busse Lake or just having lunch in a parking lot of a picnic grove, many residents of the Northwest suburbs might have more day-to-day contact with the forest preserves and its 68,000 acres than county services. Its operating budget is \$143.1 million this year.

Stroger doesn't deny the woods were troubled.

"Some of those outhouses had been there since the forest preserves started," he said in an interview with the Daily Herald before a stroke earlier this week left him hospitalized. "For years, we had no revenue. It was difficult to manage."

Things came to a head in 2003 and General Superintendent Joe Nevius, following intense criticism, retired. Later that year, Stroger appointed Steven Bylina to take over.

That began to turn things around, Stroger said.

"For the last two years, we've been able to run the district responsibly," he said.

Indeed, many agree that since Bylina, things have gotten better.

"Things have been going up and up and up," said Cox. "The main reason is the general superintendent. Many great improvements have been made. The picnic groves are better, the trails are getting new signs, the trash is getting picked up."

But Claypool said Stroger has no clear vision for the forest preserves - and that little would have improved were it not for him, ally Commissioner Mike Quigley, and several other self-described "reform" commissioners who called for hearings into the agency.

"Yes, things have gotten a little better in the last year because Forrest and Quigley and other reformers were able to force the CEO (Nevius) out," said Claypool spokesman Ken Davis. "By all accounts, Bylina has done a good job."

"But the fundamental politics of the situation still hasn't changed," Davis said, adding Claypool's standing allegation that there are four supervisors for each employee. "The situation is pretty grim for the long-term future."

Chuck Thompson, a Mount Prospect resident who helped form Friends of Busse Woods in 1987 in response to gradually worsening conditions in the forest preserves, agreed. He said his group put on a slide show for Stroger in 1998 showing the disheveled lands and facilities.

"He didn't do hardly anything for the first few years," said Thompson, who supports Claypool. "Then he hired Bylina and things started

happening. There's no question: It's an improvement. Our thing is why would it take him so long to act?"