

Don't uproot forest preserve's funding

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Plans by some county commissioners to raid \$11 million in Forest Preserve District of Cook County funds to help fill the \$500 million hole in the county budget are a breach of their fiduciary responsibility and the oath of office that they took as forest preserve commissioners.

The Forest Preserve District is a separate governmental agency established by state law. It has its own tax levy that county residents pay as a separate line item on their property tax bill. The same commissioners who serve on the Cook County Board also serve as forest preserve commissioners.

The responsibilities of wearing these two hats have created a conflict of interest. When the commissioners are wearing their Cook County hats they are managing a \$3 billion operating budget. Their forest preserve hat requires them to think about a \$45 million operating budget.

The proposal to take \$11 million from the forest preserve to help reduce the county's debt would represent a slash of 25 percent of the forest preserve budget -- a mere 2 percent of the \$500 million budget shortfall in the county's budget.

The previous county administration had a stranglehold on the forest preserve hiring process. By controlling it through the county -- which is supposed to be a separate government -- it prevented the district from filling vacant positions, thereby creating a 25 percent vacancy rate and the current "surplus." It is an understatement to say the forest preserves could use a few more people to help maintain, police and operate them.

To their great credit, beginning in 2002 the commissioners were able to reorganize the district when it had a \$15 million budget deficit. They cut jobs from almost 1,200 to fewer than 500. They reorganized duplicative departments. And, yes, they privatized the district's golf courses so that professional management has turned a money-losing operation into a money-making operation -- and a far better experience for players.

The district was created in 1915 to preserve and protect native plants,

animals and natural lands for the education, pleasure and recreation of the people of Cook County. Since then, more than 68,000 acres (11 percent of the county) have been preserved for us and future generations to enjoy. Nowhere in the district's mission does it direct the commissioners to provide debt relief to the county by robbing district funds.

The founders of the district wanted to provide urban residents the opportunity to enjoy nature. Now the primary use of the forest preserves by far is for family picnics and reunions. Those of us who live in neighborhoods of bricks and mortar need somewhere to go to enjoy natural lands and Mother Nature.

In a time of crisis for our environment with global warming looming, childhood asthma at an all-time high, obesity levels off the charts and the destruction of natural lands ever increasing, we should be taking Herculean measures to save this wonderful institution and the lands it protects – not cut it by 25 percent.

After years of hard work and better management, the district has finally reached a point of fiscal health. The budget "surplus" should be used to fill the gaping hole of deferred maintenance left by years of mismanagement prior to 2002. Or to acquire more land. Or to help nurse the lands back to health. It should not be given to the county for a one-time fix.

We are entirely sympathetic with the enormous hardship that the county is placing upon so many -- the result of years of mismanagement and bad decisions. But you don't solve a fiscal problem at home by robbing the bank down the street.

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