

Politics hurting Forest Preserve District: watchdogs

COOK COUNTY | But Stroger rejects plea to give up control

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In a blistering report, two watchdog groups say politics is unnecessarily hindering environmental progress, calling on Cook County government to break itself from the Forest Preserve District it runs.

Board President Todd Stroger said he appreciates the advice but isn't taking it. But because Stroger and the county's 17-member board continue to run both the \$3 billion government and \$175 million Forest Preserve District, preserving and acquiring land becomes less of a priority, the report concludes.

While the board met 33 times last year to talk about county issues, it met only 11 times for forest preserve matters. Contrast that to DuPage County, where the board is separately elected and its forest preserve board met 50 times last year for a district that is one-third the size of Cook County's, according to the Friends of the Forest Preserves and the Civic Federation.

In addition, while DuPage has added 2,516 acres of land since 1998, Cook has added only 639 acres since 1993 -- with 40,000 acres identified as "undeveloped" and available.

State approval needed

The Civic Federation's Laurence Msall said that, combined with questionable financial moves, is a sign of "serious neglect" to Cook County's 68,523 acres of district land.

The Forest Preserve District has long served as a patronage dumping ground, and the report cites many examples of politics interfering in decisions, as well as conflicts between a county board seeking to expand economic development opportunities and the same board acting as a forest preserve board, preserving and protecting lands.

But separation would require state approval, and Stroger said he won't back that, pointing to recent improvements and progress in operations of the district.

Though he supports both group's activism, "we simply agree to disagree," he said.

To view the report, go to www.civicfed.org.