

**Forest Preserve District of Cook County  
Green Paper on Key Policy Issues  
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**PRESENTED BY:**

**Audubon-Chicago Region  
Stephen Packard, Director**

**Friends of the Chicago River  
Margaret Frisbie, Executive Director**

**Friends of the Forest Preserves  
Benjamin Cox, Executive Director**

**Openlands  
Jerry Adelman, Executive Director**

**Friends of the Parks  
Erma Tranter, President**

**Sierra Club – Illinois Chapter  
Jack Darin, Director**

**Forest Preserve District of Cook County Conservation Agenda**

**BACKGROUND**

The Forest Preserve District of Cook County was formed in 1913, and is the first and largest government of its kind. It includes:

- 68,000 acres or 11% of the county’s land area, which would cover nearly half of the City of Chicago
- ~55,000 (80%) in undeveloped/natural state, ~13,000 acres (20%) developed for parking lots, nature centers, etc.
- 173 threaten and endangered species
- 300 miles of marked trails, more than 200 picnic groves, 40 fishing lakes, and 10 golf courses
- 6 nature centers

**PARKS compared to FOREST PRESERVES**

The principal function of parks is 1) to provide a pleasant green landscape for relaxation and a bit of nature and 2) to provide recreational facilities (and staff to facilitate their use) for sports.

The principal function of forest preserves, according to their charter, is to preserve and restore natural lands for the pleasure, recreation, and education of the public. Picnic grounds and trails provide access and introduction, but most land is there to be appreciated in its natural state. These larger acreages of the forest preserves also

provide substantial “ecosystem services” including flood control, water purification, biodiversity conservation, air purification, carbon sequestration, etc.

## **KEY ISSUES**

### **1. LAND POLICY**

The recently updated FPD Land Policy and Ordinance are the cornerstone of protection for the preserves. Since the preserves were founded in 1913 neighboring entities ranging from schools and businesses to highway departments and the federal government have come asking for forest preserve land as an “easy” (to them) alternative. In almost all cases they should find alternatives. Natural land is held by this generation as a sacred trust for broad public benefit and for future generations.

### **2. LAND ACQUISITION**

The FPD prepared a land acquisition plan in 1994, but has never pursued funding to implement the plan. Over the last decade, the other five counties in the Chicago region have collectively raised more than \$1.1 billion to acquire land for their forest preserves (and one conservation district) – largely through successfully passing 16 of 16 bond referenda. Cook County has never pursued a land acquisition referendum. Nor has it aggressively sought funding from other sources for acquisition, or land donations. It has largely been absent from efforts to raise new state funds that could be a source of funding for the FPD.

The FPD should recommit itself to its land acquisition plan, and update it as needed. It should then identify a mix of options for implementing the plan, including a referendum, pursuit of grants and land donations, and advocacy for new state and federal conservation funding. An encouraging new development this year is the District's request for \$45 million in bond funds to pursue land acquisition; however that simply is not nearly enough. To successfully achieve the District's goal of 75,000 acres, approximately \$350 million (\$50,000 per acre/7,000 acres) is needed. The time to buy land is now, while the market is down.

### **3. RESTORATION**

What's called “land management” or “restoration” has emerged in recent decades as a key mission of the District. “Leave it alone” or “let nature take its course” no longer works. Unmanaged land is deteriorating in quality at about 3% per year. Natural forest preserve land (55,000 acres of woodlands, grasslands and wetlands)

needs protection from invasive species and other modern threats to protect its value to the public. For beauty, recreation, biodiversity conservation and ecosystem services (clean air and water, carbon sequestration, etc.) – most natural lands need occasional brush cutting, weed removal, controlled burns, deer population management and other measures. The District has many partner organizations (not-for-profits, volunteers and other government agencies) who are eager to help the District once again be a leader in this field. Leadership from the general superintendent and the president is needed to counter inertia, misinformation, counterproductive turf-ism and isolation from some staff, and other counterproductive politics around this issue.

#### **4. SUPERINTENDENT RUNS DAY-TO-DAY OPERATIONS**

Forest preserve lore brings us a story of the highly-regarded General Superintendent Charles “Cap” Sauers, who ran the District for 35 years, had his own system for handling patronage, which was already present in the District as early as 1929. “Send me as many men as you want, as long as they’ll work. If they won’t I’ll send them back, and you can send some more,” was his general motto. As well-known columnist Mike Royko recalled in a personal interview: “They know that if they are going to receive a full day’s pay, they must give me at least a half day’s work.” Unfortunately, even this low bar is not met across the board today. The Superintendent needs to be empowered with full control of the day to day operations of the District, including a full human resources department, a regular annual review process for each and every employee, and the ability to hire and fire qualified individuals.

#### **5. YOUTH PROGRAMMING**

The FPD offers unique venues for environmental education throughout the county. Nearby schools could use the forest preserves as extensions of the classroom for ongoing visits throughout the seasons tied to interdisciplinary curricula. Chicago and suburban school districts and many not-for-profit organizations could partner with the FPD for teacher training and hands-on experiences for students of nature and ecological restoration. For instance, the Green Teacher Network has a goal of connecting natural areas and gardens to the classroom and many school campuses have little more to offer than asphalt and concrete environments. Good partnerships already exist (for example Mighty Acorns), but most initiative and funding come from outside the District. FPD staff and resources should play equal roles in these partnerships.

## 6. PARTNERSHIPS

Local, state and national public and not-for-profit organizations have played a significant role in leveraging resources for the forest preserves. Over the last 30 years, we have provided:

- Millions of dollars for restoration and maintenance of natural lands,
- Tens of thousands of volunteers who have restored native landscapes, trails, and the rivers and streams that flow through our preserves, and
- Hundreds of program opportunities for youth and adults to learn about and enjoy the educational, spiritual and recreational assets of our preserves while fostering awareness, engagement and a stewardship ethic.

Such partnership opportunities are often only grudgingly accepted by District staff and poorly staffed in ways that discourage rather than facilitate. The District's scientific and land management technical staff is the principal problem here. Leadership from the president and the general superintendent could help the District build on its partnerships to increasingly leverage resources, insure better outputs, and foster more public involvement and respect for the District.