

Vote on open spaces urged; Conservation groups seek to curb sprawl

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Five conservation groups are pressing Cook County Board President John Stroger to let voters decide whether to spend \$ 150 million to buy and preserve dwindling open spaces, just as the collar counties are doing.

"The available land is fast disappearing," said Bruce Boyd, director of the Nature Conservancy of Illinois.

"In a couple years, there will be no remaining land that can be protected as open space. It will all be developed. We feel we would be remiss not to secure these last remaining lands for future generations."

DuPage County voters approved a \$ 75 million referendum proposal in November 1997 to buy land for their forest preserve district. Voters in Kane, Lake and Will counties will vote April 13 in referendums for forest preserves.

Boyd was among five conservationists who met with Stroger two weeks ago for 45 minutes, pleading for quick expansion of the Cook County Forest Preserve District from its 67,700 acres to its legal limit of 75,000 acres.

Stroger agreed the forest preserves should grow if money is available. Tax caps prevent the forest preserve district from issuing bonds to buy land without voter approval, and Stroger refuses to ask the voters because it would cause property taxes to rise.

"He did assure them he was committed to acquiring as much land as is feasible for the forest preserve district," Stroger spokesman Jack Beary said. Stroger "has talked about seeking assistance from Springfield in the form of grants or other funding to enhance our land-acquisition efforts."

Stroger's opposition to a referendum puzzles conservationists and some County Board members, including Herb Schumann.

"It seems President Stroger is a bit hung up on a possible referendum because people would view it as President Stroger supporting a

possible tax increase," Boyd said. "We see it as letting the people decide as to whether or not it is important to preserve these last remaining parcels and whether or not they're willing to vote for a modest tax increase."

Commissioner Herb Schumann, a Republican from Palos Heights, pushed for a referendum last year, but Stroger let the proposal die in committee. The earliest a referendum can be held is spring of 2000.

"Every time I bring it up, it's like an irritant to Stroger," Schumann said. "The County Board shouldn't be allowed to ignore an issue because it may be controversial."

Cook County's land-acquisition efforts have been abysmal, according to conservationists, because there is only \$ 10 million available to buy land and prices are rising as suburban sprawl continues.

"Our society was buying more land for forest preserves during the Depression than we did last year, when all we got was 35 acres through a donation," said John Sheerin, an Oak Lawn resident and board member of Friends of the Forest Preserve.

"The other counties are going out to bond referenda, and the people vote for it. People like open space."

About 11 percent of Cook County's land is owned by the forest preserve, but most was obtained decades ago. The last two acquisitions -- 25 acres on Chicago's Far South Side and 34 acres in Calumet City -- were gifts.

Joseph Nevius, superintendent of the Cook County forest preserves, said he hopes to acquire some 200 acres this year by spending half of his \$ 10 million land-acquisition fund, a \$ 400,000 state grant and a donation from the Chicago Department of Transportation.

"We have very little money and we want to make it go as far as possible," Nevius said.

The land Nevius hopes to acquire is primarily in the northwest, southwest and south suburbs. Those parcels are contained in a 1994 land-acquisition plan that Stroger's administration has never approved, further upsetting conservationists.

The plan prepared under former County Board President Richard

Phelan identified 40,000 acres, primarily in outlying suburbs, but a few in Chicago, that could be acquired by the forest preserve district. Since that plan was created, conservationists believe as much as 20,000 acres have been lost to development, including the Glenview Naval Air Station.