

Forest Preserves lost in the woods

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Cook County Forest Preserve commissioners expressed surprise the other day that some creative bookkeeping was behind the, ahem, balanced budgets since 1993. If their reactions were designed to put distance between themselves and the revelation that the district actually has a deficit of at least \$16 million, it had the opposite effect.

Is it not part of the job to keep abreast of the Forest Preserve's bottom line? In an incredibly brazen statement, John Stroger, the Cook County Board president who serves double duty as head of the Forest Preserve Board, said, "I think we need some strength in leadership at the Forest Preserve." Stroger is the one who named Mezell Williams chief financial officer. Williams quit Monday.

Cook County residents did not need Tuesday's meeting to learn that the forest preserves aren't up to snuff. Evidence is there in the ankle-high grass and the unwanted plants, the often overflowing garbage cans, the sub-par golf courses and the pools that open late in the summer, then close within weeks. These are the very real conditions of the facilities that constituents have come to know and loathe. At 1,150 employees, the payroll is bloated. Privatization would be a significant improvement. The board finally (and reluctantly) has put the operations of its golf courses out for private bid. By going the privatization route, the Chicago Park District managed to turn a \$530,000 annual loss into a \$550,000 yearly profit-and golfers are by and large satisfied.

It also has been suggested that cost savings could come through disbanding the forest preserve police, a 152-officer force that costs the district about \$7.5 million per year. Commissioner Mike Quigley suggests that the Cook County sheriff's office may be able to squeeze in patrols when traveling from one unincorporated area to another. He notes that the area the sheriff's police are responsible for has been halved in the last 25 years as the county has developed. Sheriff's police already are responsible for patrolling some of the crossroads near forest preserve sites and are regularly called for handling disturbances. Beefing up the force with part-timers during the busy summer months seems a cost-saving alternative. Let's see a feasibility study from Sheriff Michael Sheahan.

It's time to get professional in other ways as well. In a thoughtful report on the state of the Forest Preserve, Quigley notes that non-tax revenue projections are down. Sponsorships, exclusive vendor contracts, advertising and foundation dollars are revenue streams that other park districts in other places have tapped into with success. That in 2001 the Cook County Forest preserve has to look to the Skokie Park District for ideas says a lot about how the county has been snoozing. Lack of leadership? Indeed.

It's unfair to paint the preserve's entire work force with the same brush-there are some good people employed there, many as frustrated with the system as Cook County residents themselves. But when even Stroger admits problems in the Forest Preserve operations, it's time to take a serious and professional assessment of where we're at. Some, such as the watchdog organization Friends of the Forest Preserve, are calling for a blue-ribbon panel. One group that seems qualified to shepherd such an initiative is Chicago Wilderness, a well-respected organization that includes more than 100 government agencies and ecological groups with expertise in conservation and park management.