

## Forest Preserve deficit is worse than thought

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Cook County commissioners pumped \$8 million into the withering Forest Preserve budget Tuesday, hoping to cut the district's deficit in half.

But they learned the forest preserve deficit is even worse than they thought: \$21 million instead of \$16 million.

Years of robbing the district's land acquisition and construction funds to cover the payroll have resulted in the \$21 million deficit, according to a study the commissioners received Tuesday from Clark Burrus, former First Chicago bank executive.

Burrus found that district officials have borrowed and failed to repay \$8 million that was supposed to be used to acquire new forest land; \$1.4 million that was supposed to be used for construction and development of forest preserve facilities; and \$11.5 million from other funds.

Burrus also found that district officials inexplicably overestimated revenues in 1999 by \$8 million.

"We have been calling on the board and the district for years to buy more land before it's all gone," said John Sheerin of Friends of the Forest Preserves. "Now we find that money that had been allocated for land acquisition has instead been spent on other things. . . . Is this an agency where jobs and contracts for political friends and cronies have gotten in the way of the public mission?"

Friends of the Forest Preserves announced it was undertaking a joint study with Friends of the Parks to examine the preserves.

Commissioners also approved a \$165,000 contract with Sharon Gist Gilliam to revamp the district's finance office.

"It's a fairly straight-forward contract: I'll do a new 2001 budget, a 2002 budget, a multiyear financial plan," she said. "It's a \$145 million budget, 1,100 employees. It's not rocket science."