

## Forest preserve finances scrutinized

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If the Cook County Forest Preserve District can't find a way to stem a spending deficit that has left it some \$ 20 million in the red, it won't be for a lack of studies.

Embarrassed and angered by the multiyear deficit that county commissioners claim they were never made aware of, the board approved several remedial moves Tuesday, including hiring trouble-shooter Sharon Gist-Gilliam to study the problems and, as board President John Stroger said, "straighten up the mess."

Meanwhile, the independent Friends of the Parks and Friends of the Forest Preserves groups revealed they have launched their own audit of the district's finances and facilities. The groups were particularly angered to learn forest preserve officials have diverted \$ 8.2 million earmarked for land acquisition to help plug the deficit.

"We want to know: Where did the money go?" said Debra Shore of Friends of Forest Preserves. "Why wasn't it used to buy land?"

An internal study commissioned by the board when news of the deficit surfaced earlier this year calls the diversion of those funds "unauthorized loans" to another part of the district's budget. But the fund the money propped up is "insolvent and does not have sufficient resources to repay these loans," according to the report released Tuesday.

The report says the district has been plagued by unrealistic revenue projections that have consistently fallen short in recent years.

To help cover the debt, the county board, which has the same members as the forest preserve board, agreed to immediately ship \$ 8 million from the county coffers to the forest preserve. The money was available, Stroger said, because the county recently received a large grant it was not expecting.

The board also is banking on the help of Gilliam, a former city of Chicago budget director who has served on both the city and state's school boards.