

Saving forest preserves by chopping, replanting

Crain's Chicago Business, March 5, 2001

Nearly everything that's wrong about government-run businesses can be found in the Cook County Forest Preserve's unfolding financial mismanagement disaster.

The agency, which is charged with tending the county's forests and related enterprises, is peering at a \$20-million shortfall. In an apparent quest for "balanced budgets," the Forest Preserve District Board raided land acquisition and construction accounts, plowing that money into day-to-day operations and putting off a day of reckoning for nearly eight years.

During that time, however, the district's leadership saw fit to keep patronage workers on the payroll, defer necessary maintenance, limit the acquisition of new land and dodge opportunities to enhance revenues by selling sponsorships of selected events.

Cook County Board President John Stroger and board members say the Forest Preserve District's director kept them in the dark about the agency's deteriorating financial condition and that they were shocked by the recent revelation.

Talk about not seeing the forest for the trees.

If Mr. Stroger and board members didn't know what was going on, they should have. There were plenty of signs: auditors' warnings in 1998, complaints by Friends of the Forest Preserves that not enough land was being acquired, two bond rating downgrades in the 1990s and a rash of annual operating deficits. And while other park districts took in revenues by selling corporate event sponsorships, this district did not.

It is not enough for Mr. Stroger and the board to voice outrage. They must move quickly to clean house and modernize management of the Forest Preserve District, where a break from the outrages of the past is sorely needed. Already, one of the district's top financial managers is gone, and others should go, too.

Increasing the revenue stream and cutting costs are the next priorities. That means laying workers off, tightening the belt, finding appropriate corporate sponsorships and privatizing services when

possible.

Most of all, there needs to be greater oversight of operations and the bottom line by Mr. Stroger and the board, who ultimately are responsible for this mess, and for cleaning it up.