

Forest preserve district in dire need of reform

Chicago Daily Herald, Daily Southtown and Chicago Sun-Times,
January 24, 2002, Letter to the Editor

This week in all likelihood, the board of commissioners of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County will pass a balanced budget for 2002. In April, it is almost virtually certain, the district's auditors will issue a report showing a \$9 million to \$10 million deficit for the district.

The commissioners know this, but they are required to pass a balanced budget - and so they will. They will conduct this annual exercise in fuzzy math because, well, this is business as usual for the forest preserves. Last week at budget hearings, Interim Chief Financial Officer Sharon Gist Gilliam noted that, when attempting to get forest preserve district accounts in order, she had found a number of forest preserve employees "floating in space" - people being paid but not appearing anywhere on the books. This year, one of these floaters has now landed in the Conservation Department - a storeroom supervisor being paid \$47,000 a year. (No one has yet managed to explain where the storeroom is, what is being supervised and what on earth this has to do with conservation.)

We admire Gilliam's efforts to bring rigor and accountability to the district's finances. But the truth is, unless there are major changes at the forest preserve district - changes in leadership, in attitude, in direction - the district will remain a dysfunctional agency far more concerned with protecting patronage jobs for political friends and contracts for cronies than in protecting its forests and meadows.

Year after year, the forest preserve district has raided the land-acquisition fund to cover expenses in other accounts, and it has presented no credible plan to pay it back. Departments that focus on the district's core mission have been shrinking, or are padded with workers who aren't doing the job that is needed. The time for many reforms is long overdue.

Commissioners Mike Quigley and Herb Schumann have offered budget amendments that would both save the district money and help reverse some of the deterioration we have seen in recent years. We urge Finance Chairman Bobbie Steele and President John Stroger to consider them carefully. The public is impatient.

John Sheerin

Board Member
Friends of the Forest Preserves