

Forest Preserve worker: Bosses made me hire a drunk guy

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A Cook County Forest Preserve administrator wanted to hire the best person for the job. Instead, he was ordered to hire a politically connected applicant who showed up drunk for the interview.

This is one of many findings the Friends of the Forest Preserves and Friends of the Parks presented Wednesday in their report on the state of the Cook County Forest Preserves.

The group interviewed scores of forest preserve administrators, employees and county commissioners over the last year.

They concluded that the main problem paralyzing the Forest Preserve District is a political protocol that requires all decisions to go through County Board President John Stroger's office.

"It appears that the president's primary interest in the district is as a source of jobs for friends," the report says. "The district has for years ignored repeated requests from civic groups--and from its own auditors--for clarity, timeliness and transparency in its budget."

Stroger, who met with the groups Monday morning, will review the report before offering a comment, his spokeswoman said. He plans to hold a public hearing on it, she said.

Friends of the Parks member Stephen Packard said the group found morale among the employees and administrators interviewed "dismal--the best people are leaving."

A year ago he interviewed Terry Lavenhagen, the long-time deputy chief of the Forest Preserve Police.

Though they are teased as the "tree police," and several of the new commissioners set to join the County Board call for disbanding the \$7 million-a-year force, Lavenhagen tried to keep the department professional, Packard said. Lavenhagen has since left the department for the Cook County sheriff's office and been replaced by Chicago Ald. Edward Burke's (14th) 28-year-old son, Emmet, who earns \$62,000 a year.

When the state's attorney began investigating an overtime scandal at the Forest Preserve police this year, Stroger's response was to hire a fellow 8th Warder at \$83,000 a year to advise him, Packard said.

The Forest Preserve payroll is full of familiar names of Chicago political families such as Cullerton, Viverito and Lechowicz, with employees earning up to \$90,000 a year. The highest-paid official is Supt. Joseph Nevius, a career official who, the groups said Wednesday, is only the titular leader because power rests with Stroger.

Many department heads complained they were not allowed to fill vacancies, so they had to function with staffs only 70 percent to 80 percent full.

They cannot hire the people they want. They cannot even take advantage of a state grant to buy a piece of land until Stroger sends one of his favored appraisers to look the land over, said Friends of the Forest Preserve member Debra Shore.

"Everything has to go through downtown" the report says. The report offered quotes from forest preserve administrators who wished to remain unidentified, including the one who had to hire the clouted drunk applicant. Others included:

"It takes forever to fill a position. All the openings have to go through the president's office. The county and the Forest Preserve District were advertising for the same professional people--the county filled its positions in three months, but it took us nine months. By then, the top applicants had all moved on."

"I've heard one secretary at headquarters tell people, 'I don't have to work--I have a government job.'"

The groups' prescriptions for relief include opening up the budget process; hiring a qualified professional to run the district free from political interference from the County Board president's office, and refocusing on what the groups contend should be the forest preserve's central mission: forestry and conservation.