

## Activists pin forest woes on Stroger: Study alleges lack of public input

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A pair of advocacy groups issued a report Wednesday criticizing the management and operations of the Cook County Forest Preserve District, largely blaming its financial woes, low employee morale and other ills on President John Stroger.

The groups, Friends of the Forest Preserves and Friends of the Parks, said the district has essentially closed itself off from public input while most of its day-to-day decisions are made in Stroger's office and not by professional staff members.

The report was a follow-up to one issued in March that examined the district's physical holdings and found much of its land in poor condition.

"The district's operations are a closed club, in this case controlled by a president who has demonstrated little interest in the district's mission," the report says.

While criticizing Stroger and also the entire 17-member Cook County Board, the groups stopped short of calling for the resignation of Joseph Nevius, the district's general superintendent.

"We don't know whether it's his own lack of will and leadership or that he just has not been given the freedom and authority to do the job," said Debra Shore of Friends of the Forest Preserves.

Commissioner Mike Quigley, however, called for a new boss.

"The head of the Forest Preserve District lacks the will and the capability to incorporate the changes the district so desperately needs," Quigley said. "We need an influx of talent rather than an influx of money."

Quigley said the board is also to blame for the district's well-documented problems and, as head of the board, so is Stroger.

County spokeswoman Caryn Stancik said Nevius would not comment. She said the criticism that Stroger was disinterested was "wholly false and his actions over the last couple of years have demonstrated that."

Stancik said Stroger's commitment to the district has been demonstrated through the privatization of its golf courses, elimination of 138 positions in the 2002 budget and fee increases to cover the cost of operations.

The district has grown into a significant political issue ever since auditors discovered a major budget deficit in early 2001. Last month, the county government gave the district, a separate government entity run by the same board, another \$5 million to prop up its operations.

The advocacy groups commended the board for privatizing the golf courses but said many more steps are needed.

For example, they said a separate commissioner should be president of the district so it gets more focused attention. Stroger is head of both the County Board and the Forest Preserve District.

The groups called for a staff reorganization with the creation of a new land management department so the district could refocus on its core mission of conservation and forestry.

The district should hand over its swimming pools to local park districts and stop operating the costly toboggan slides, the groups said.