

Buds poisoning forest preserves

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Cronyism is a common weed in Chicago politics, but its flowers have rarely been more unsightly than the ones springing from the Cook County Forest Preserve District. It's no secret that the district is in woeful shape. Plagued by neglect, deterioration of its lands and financial duress--\$13 million in bailouts were required the last two years--it has been a thorn in the side of the County Board.

Now, it is charged, one of the main reasons the forest preserve has been unable to turn things around is that Cook County Board President John Stroger's patronage system has blocked efforts to put skilled workers in place. Reporting this week on the state of the district, the Friends of the Forest Preserves and Friends of the Parks revealed that the situation is so bad that one administrator was ordered to hire a connected applicant who showed up drunk for his interview.

Meanwhile, civic groups calling for budget reforms have been ignored, while members of the public have been allowed to be heard at County Board meetings only after votes have been taken and their objections are moot. Stroger showed little urgency in responding to the advocacy groups' findings--he had a spokeswoman say that a public hearing would be held on the issues at some point. He may have a comfortable enough lead in pre-election polls to duck the issues, but Stroger would be wrong to count on this issue going away after the election.

Furthermore, this is the kind of festering conflict that can rise up and bite even a prohibitive favorite.