

Stroger denies he makes all decisions

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Cook County Board President John Stroger on Thursday decried as "character assassination" a report by civic groups claiming Stroger requires all decisions in the Cook County Forest Preserves to be cleared by him.

Contrary to anonymous quotes in the report, released Wednesday, Stroger said no one was ever ordered to hire a clouted job applicant who showed up drunk for a job interview.

"There may be some drunks working for us, but I didn't have them hired," he said. "I don't call all the shots. . . . That's why we have a Forest Preserve superintendent. There are some policy situations that can't be resolved unless a person like me resolves them."

The Friends of the Forest Preserves and the Friends of the Parks spent a year interviewing Forest Preserve employees, administrators and county commissioners. The sense they got was that an unwritten rule requiring Stroger's office to sign off on all hires and actions paralyzed the district.

But Stroger said he lets Supt. Joseph Nevius and other Forest Preserve administrators make their own hires and decisions.

"I have thousands of people working for me," Stroger said. "I only have the power to hire about 40 of them."

Stroger defended his hiring of former U.S. Marshal James Whigham to advise him on reforming the Forest Preserve police. Contrary to a quote in Wednesday's story, Whigham does not live in Stroger's 8th Ward. He lives directly across the street from the ward and attends Stroger's church. But he is not active in the ward organization and Stroger said he was hired for an impressive resume. He was deputy superintendent with the Chicago Police Department.

While the name "Viverito" was mentioned as evidence of clout, Stroger noted that former Forest Preserve Comptroller Dean Viverito, son of Stickney Township Democratic Chairman Louis Viverito, resigned a year ago.