

County may chop forests' snow slides, police units

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Drastic budget cuts proposed for the Cook County Forest Preserves mean the toboggan slides at Deer Park in Palatine and Bemis Woods in Westchester would be closed, and the Forest Preserve Police canine and mounted units would be disbanded.

In all, the Forest Preserve work force would be slashed from 644 to 540. The police force alone would be slashed from 127 to 94. That would be on top of 150 golf employees losing their jobs as the county privatizes the Forest Preserve golf courses.

"These are bold changes that reflect my commitment to get the district back on its feet," said County Board President John Stroger.

Years of financial mismanagement in which Stroger's finance staff at the district raided the land acquisition and maintenance funds, among others, to pay daily expenses have left the district with a deficit that exceeds \$10 million, despite a \$13 million county bailout.

The county government and the Forest Preserve district are run as two separate units of government, even though Stroger and the Cook County Board administer both.

The county can raise property taxes to its heart's content, though it hasn't in years and will not this year. Commissioners would like to raise property taxes to help the more politically popular Forest Preserves, but are forbidden by a state-mandated tax cap.

Instead, the budget proposes only the 2.85 percent tax hike allowed under the caps for Cook County property owners to pay for the Forest Preserves. That may add a dollar to the average homeowner's tax bill in 2004.

While the \$137 million proposed Forest Preserve budget was controversial, the much larger \$2.9 billion county government budget was quite painless by comparison.

Creative use of federal Medicaid reimbursements for patients at the soon-to-open Stroger Hospital are expected to bring in an extra \$88 million next year, sparing the county painful cuts suffered by other governments.

"Every one of these elected officials should light a candle to the God of Medicaid funding," said County Commissioner Mike Quigley (D-Chicago).

The county would also hike the price of filing a case in Cook County Circuit Court from \$190 to \$240. That would raise \$10 million. Forest Preserve officers--none wanting to be quoted by name--said slashing the force would make the preserves less safe.

"We can barely patrol the Forest Preserves with our manpower now," one senior officer said.

Lt. Michael Albrecht, who criticized the proposal in a Daily Southtown article over the weekend, was called into a disciplinary hearing Monday morning for speaking out against the proposal.

James Whigham, Stroger's point man on the Forest Preserve Police, said he knew the changes were not popular with officers, but they are the right thing to do. Even now, when a body is found in the woods, the Cook County sheriff's police are called in.

"We may be able to solve some things that don't take an Einstein to solve," Stroger said. "But we have to confer with some people who are more knowledgeable than we are."

Stroger said he has talked with Sheriff Michael Sheahan about helping more in the Forest Preserves. But Sheahan said he has not heard from Stroger.

The Forest Preserve Police mostly tackle teen drinking.

"Of all the arrests in 2001, less than 1 percent were for felonies," Whigham said. He'd rather have officers on foot or bikes patrolling the preserves than at headquarters trying to crack big drug cases.

If enough officers don't take early retirement, there could be layoffs, he said. The district would hire more part-time help in the busy summer months instead of keeping a full-time staff all through the lonely winter.

That change and a planned redeployment of workers to clean up broken bottles and smelly bathrooms answer complaints by groups such as the Friends of the Forest Preserves, which praised the proposed changes Wednesday.

A financial audit last year showed it cost the county \$53 per toboggan ride. To avoid killing the tradition completely, the district plans to keep open the two most popular toboggans, at Caldwell Woods on the Northwest Side and Swallow Cliff in Palos Township.

Public hearings will be held on these proposed cuts at 6:30 p.m. Nov. 12, 13 and 14 in the county courthouses in Markham, Maywood and Rolling Meadows, respectively.