

Plants, bathrooms stink in preserves, groups say

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The Cook County Forest Preserves are overgrown with invasive shrubs and the bathrooms leave much to be desired, according to a first-of-its-kind study by two nonprofit groups.

"The woods should be full of life, full of birds, full of butterflies, but now they are dark and choked with buckthorn," said Debra Shore, a board member of Friends of the Forest Preserves, which conducted the study with Friends of the Parks.

Members of the groups randomly chose 87 sites around the forest preserves and found 68 percent of them to be in "poor shape." That means that native species such as mature oak trees were declining while non-native invasive species such as buckthorn were thriving and soil was eroding.

In addition to the scientific study of the forest preserve's natural state, the groups undertook a less scientific survey of 395 forest preserve users, who gave high marks to nature center staff but low marks to the bathrooms and golf course clubhouses.

"The outhouses are dirty, smelly and probably not up to code," one forest preserve user told them.

The forest preserves' land acquisition has all but come to a standstill, the report also charges.

"During the Great Depression and World War II, they were buying land in a very aggressive way," Shore said. "But in the booming '90s, we were moving backwards."

In the 1960s, the forest preserves bought 15,798 acres. The amount dropped to 3,537 acres in the 1970s, 1,668 acres in the 1980s, 755 in the 1990s and 137 acres so far this decade.

The district missed a chance to acquire a large plot of open space owned by a cemetery next to Labagh Woods in the last few years. A shopping center and condominiums now cover the land.

"First, the district must start to acquire land as soon as possible," Friends of the Parks President Erma Tranter said. "Every year that goes by, the cost is going up."

Cook County Commissioner Mike Quigley agreed. "These people are right on: We lost track of our mission, which is to acquire and hold lands in their natural state," he said.

But suggestions from Quigley and Tranter that the district get out of the toboggan business and focus less on recreation have been rejected by other commissioners.

Forest preserves spokesman Steve Mayberry took issue with the report.

"At 68 percent, you're talking about 46,000 acres of land and that's simply not true," Mayberry said. "Our staff are out there all year, working to make sure that all of our lands are in good shape."

Mayberry also wondered how 75 percent of the survey respondents could say they don't care much about swimming, toboggan and golf facilities at the preserves when 691,000 people used them last year.