

Plan would ax top forest jobs

Chicago Sun-Times, December 8, 2003, by Jim Ritter

The Cook County Forest Preserve District employs 24 people and spends \$1.1 million a year to hand out picnic permits and operate one swimming pool and two toboggan slides.

There's a \$79,000 recreation superintendent and \$69,000 assistant, and a \$69,000 special-events director -- even though the district doesn't hold special events anymore.

These are among the jobs that would be eliminated under an alternative budget proposed Sunday by four county commissioners opposed to County Board President John Stroger's \$56.8 million budget.

They say their alternative plan would add dozens of lower-paid employees while laying off many of their bosses.

"We can put in real workers who get their hands dirty," said Commissioner Forrest Claypool.

The alternative budget also would lay off Frank Damato, the intergovernmental affairs director who has been nicknamed "the Ed McMahon of County Government." Opposition commissioners question what Damato does for \$81,000 a year, other than laugh at Stroger's jokes.

Damato, who could not be reached for comment Sunday, is among the highly paid, politically connected Forest Preserve administrators profiled in the Chicago Sun-Times on Sunday. Several other clout-heavy administrators would keep their jobs.

The alternative budget also would save money by merging the finance and administration department with the Cook County Bureau of Finance.

Like Stroger, the opposition commissioners would issue bonds to pay for capital improvements at Brookfield Zoo, Chicago Botanic Garden and the Forest Preserves.

Claypool estimated that Forest Preserve departments now have one to three workers for each supervisor. Under the alternative budget, there would be seven to nine workers for each supervisor.

Joining Claypool are fellow Democrats Larry Suffredin and Mike Quigley and Republican Anthony Peraica. They'll need to pick up five more votes by Wednesday, when Stroger's budget is scheduled for a vote. The opposition hopes to pick up the four other Republican commissioners and one additional Democrat.

To make their budget more acceptable to suburban Republicans, opposition commissioners dropped earlier proposals to eliminate the Forest Preserve Police. Instead, they now propose adding 10 patrolmen while reducing the top brass.

The alternative budget would add 31 laborers to clean toilets, pick up litter, etc., and 36 rangers to guide and educate visitors.

Among the groups that support the alternative budget are the Sierra Club, Friends of the Forest Preserves, Open Lands Project and Chicago Area Mountain Bikers.

But Stroger is sticking with his budget, which "continues to make innovative changes," said his spokeswoman, Caryn Stancik.

Aides said it is unrealistic to expect other county departments to absorb all of the work being done by managers who would be laid off by the alternative budget.

Forest Preserve District Supt. Steven Bylina Jr. said Stroger's budget would increase taxes by only 32 cents on a \$150,000 home. It would add 12 police officers, replace outhouses with portable toilets maintained by a private contractor and establish a volunteer center. Recently privatized golf courses are expected to earn \$900,000 for the district in 2004.

"It is a sound and responsible financial blueprint," Bylina said.