

Stroger must be a reformer

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Letter to the Editor

The recent resignation of the Cook County Forest Preserve District's general superintendent places the district at a crossroads. Our forest preserves are an irreplaceable regional treasure--they purify our air, protect our water and provide recreation for millions of citizens. They contain the last remnants of our original Midwestern landscape--oak woods, marshes, tallgrass prairies. They harbor rare species, beautiful landscapes and provide solace for busy souls. People love nature. Yet the preserves are a tarnished treasure--sullied by scandal and degraded by neglect.

According to law, Cook County Board President John Stroger is responsible for selecting the person who will be only the fourth general superintendent in the district's long history. Stroger thus has an opportunity to perpetuate the problems of the past or to lead the way to positive change. I urge him to take advantage of the expertise and assistance of Forest Preserve Board members and civic leaders as he starts his search and selection.

In our study of the management and operations of the district, Friends of the Forest Preserves and Friends of the Parks found that responsibility for the current mess lay with the general superintendent, the president and the board. Now the general superintendent has resigned. Further, many board members are showing a keen interest in reform. It's time for the president to show he can lead reform.

The new general superintendent must be empowered to change the district's culture. He or she must have the freedom and authority to reward employees based on performance--as would any top administrator. The new general superintendent should be a proven manager and have the authority, ensured in an employment contract, to hire top aides and bring the district up to professional standards.

Equally important, the new general superintendent should have an enduring passion for nature and a commitment to preserving and restoring natural lands for conservation, education and recreation. The future of our precious forest preserves is riding on Stroger's decision. Will we have more years of turmoil, scandal and decay, or will we have a globally significant resource managed by an agency that is once again a showcase for the nation?

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