

Forest Preserves need action now

Chicago Sun-Times, July 22, 2003, Crain's Chicago Business, July 28, 2003, Letter to the Editor

Regarding "Forest preserves a mess" [news story, July 6]: The Forest Preserves need real reform.

The Forest Preserve District of Cook County is a small unit of government by any measure except one: land holdings. At 68,000 acres, it may be the single most valuable asset of Cook County.

For decades the Forest Preserve District quietly did its job to few accolades and fewer complaints. So why do we now see many media reports focusing on the Forest Preserve District?

First, over 40 million visitors per year use the Forest Preserves. This incredible demand for enjoying open space is growing with population. Given society's increased appreciation and appetite for recreation and the natural environment, with this many users there will be conflicts, a few poorly behaving patrons and a heavy operating burden.

Second, Forest Preserve users see the dilapidated facilities and are not satisfied. There was the police overtime scandal, the sexual harassment scandal, the land acquisition fund scandal and admitted "mismanagement." We are appalled by the freak dog attacks that the district had been warned against. The district has created its own bad press.

Third, the original approach to managing forest preserves is outdated. We can no longer just buy the land, put in a parking lot and an outhouse and call it "protected." Problems like invasive species that weren't even conceived by the founders 100 years ago are now major concerns. Forest Preserves must be managed and restored to maintain their natural values, including their plants and animals. Sixty-eight percent of the district lands are already in poor natural condition, and the neglect continues.

Finally, because Cook County is building out all available land, we are facing our last opportunities to connect and complete the Forest Preserves. Year by year we are losing irreplaceable chances to leave a legacy, as previous generations left us.

Friends of the Forest Preserves is carefully reviewing the preliminary

proposals to reform the Forest Preserves. It is clear that serious changes need to be made.

The public has no more patience for "business" as usual.

John Sheerin
President
Friends of the Forest Preserves