

## Activists pleased by forest budget

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For the second year, environmental groups heaped praise on the Cook County Forest Preserve District, saying its proposed budget for 2006 continues the agency's turnaround and positive new direction.

The kudos were not universal, however, as the Civic Federation, a budget watchdog, criticized the district, saying it lacked an appropriate capital improvement plan and that the case had not been made for a property tax increase.

Commissioners are expected to vote Dec. 13 on the 2006 budget, which includes an 8.5 percent increase in the property tax levy. District officials said the increase would cost the owner of a \$ 200,000 house an extra \$ 2.74 per year.

In response to the Civic Federation, General Supt. Steven Bylina said consultants and staff next week would present more detail about planned capital improvements to be paid for with \$ 100 million in new bonded debt.

The district previously put forward a broad list of projects, from parking lot improvements to bridge repairs and building renovations.

Benjamin Cox, executive director of Friends of the Forest Preserves, said the district made a dramatic turnaround last year after years of "crises."

"We've seen big improvements in management, physical facilities, delivery of services and great steps toward better management of the natural lands," Cox told commissioners at a public hearing Tuesday.

Stephen Packard, director of the National Audubon Society's Chicago region, called the improvements "quite gratifying."

"Audubon is sincerely impressed by the steadily increasing quality of the district's habitat management and restoration program in the last two years and as demonstrated in the proposed budget," said Packard, who a few years ago was a leading critic of the district.

The Civic Federation, which monitors spending of local governments, opposes the budget.

Lise Valentine, the group's research director, said the district's plan for how the new bonded debt would be spent was "very inadequate."

The organization objected to the district issuing the debt, saying the process lacked transparency and public accountability, Valentine said.

Board President John Stroger defended the district and the process, bristling at Valentine's suggestion that the district follow the City of Chicago's lead by posting its capital improvement plan on its Web site.

"To make us the whipping boy...I think is not fair," Stroger said. "I'm pro-city, but our management of affairs has been as good as any governmental unit in this county and this state."