

Forest district wins over most critics: But Civic Federation not

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Five years ago, environmental groups and community activists rallied to harshly criticize operations and management of the Cook County Forest Preserve District.

Tuesday, however, those one-time critics were nearly unanimous in singing the district's praises -- even though property taxes will be increased to cover 2006 operations.

The Civic Federation, however, continued to criticize a plan to spend \$100 million on capital improvements since the improvements aren't laid out, project-by-project, with cost amounts.

Commissioner Forrest Claypool joined that criticism, saying "this capital budget is so thin and vague" that it's "almost a joke."

Claypool said there weren't "sufficient details to justify back- to-back, double-digit property tax increases" as is being proposed.

But through four public hearings on the \$143 million budget, district officials said 60 people and organizations spoke in support of the budget, while only the Civic Federation spoke against it.

\$2.74 TAX INCREASE

Commissioner John Daley called it "a very excellent budget" and the \$100 million plan for capital improvements "the best thing that's happened in the forest preserves in a very long time."

With that, the county board is expected to approve a tax increase shortly, adding about \$2.74 to a \$200,000 house, to support operations at the preserves, Chicago Botanic Gardens and Brookfield Zoo.

Among those singing the budget's praises were Friends of the Forest Preserves, Friends of the Parks and other organizations that once criticized the district as being poorly managed.