

Old foes hail forest budget: Groups applaud county preserves for turnaround

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Advocacy groups that have harshly criticized the Cook County Forest Preserve District in recent years expressed broad support Monday for its 2005 budget.

Organizations such as Friends of the Forest Preserves and the Sierra Club said the district has made significant improvements under General Supt. Steven Bylina and appears now to have its priorities largely directed in the right places.

"We congratulate the district for increasing the focus on the most vital part of its statutory mission--to preserve and protect, restock and restore natural lands for the education, recreation and pleasure of the public," Benjamin Cox, executive director of Friends of the Forest Preserve, said at a public hearing.

Cox's group, along with Friends of the Parks, issued two scathing reports in 2002 that said the district's lands were in bad shape and its management was poor, conditions it blamed on Cook County Board President John Stroger, who also heads the Forest District Board.

Since then, Stroger hired Bylina, who has focused on basic tasks such as replacing toilets and cleaning up picnic groves while opening up the district to volunteer work and reaching out to critics.

The strategy, so far, appears to be working.

"This budget is a good one and I urge you to support it," Debra Shore, who worked on the 2002 reports, told commissioners. She said the district's renewed focus on its primary mission "is cause for celebration and praise."

The budget is not without its critics. The spending plan raises the tax levy by 13.5 percent, largely to pay off bonds the board issued late last year. The district's levy amounts to about 1 percent of a typical property-tax bill.

Several citizens from the Chicago's North Side spoke out against raising property taxes, saying the District should first cut from its ranks of politically connected upper management.

The Civic Federation, a tax watchdog, opposed the budget, raising questions about the document's lack of transparency and the public-hearing process.

Laurence Msall, the organization's president, criticized the lack of a detailed plan for how the district intends to spend the bond proceeds.

"The total lack of transparency of this budget draws into question what is really going on here," Msall said.

Msall's criticism drew sharp responses from several commissioners. Commissioner John Daley noted that four public hearings were held to get public views on the proposed budget.

Commissioners are expected to vote on the budget next week.