

Keep forest preserve land preserved

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Anyone looking to buy or trade forest preserve land should stop asking — because the answer is "no." The forest preserves were acquired over many years according to a farsighted plan to provide open space for the people of Cook County in perpetuity. They are not to be sold or traded to accommodate municipalities or private entities that want extra space.

We commend the Forest Preserve District of Cook County for taking a stand to protect its holdings. After many years of inaction, two initiatives deserve praise and support: our new land policy ordinance and the recently released list of encroachments on our public land.

In November, thanks to the leadership of Commissioners Mike Quigley, John Daley, Larry Suffredin, Earlean Collins, and others, the Board of Forest Preserve Commissioners passed a revised land policy and accompanying ordinance to protect our 68,000 acres of natural land from land swaps and private use of our public lands. The policy and ordinance affirm the forest preserve district is not a land bank to be chopped up by special-interest groups or even other government entities.

This new land policy already is being tested. The new owners of the property formerly occupied by Acme Steel in Riverdale (now ISG) are attempting to swap land with the district in order to expand their operations. Despite the new land policy ordinance, there already is murmuring that "policy should be changed when circumstances change." That line of thinking is dangerous and extremely shortsighted. The land policy and ordinance are clear — the land is not for sale or exchange, no matter how compelling the need may seem.

In addition, there is a proposed road expansion in Palos Hills, along 143rd Street. Residents on one side of the road would lose their front yards to the expansion, so local officials are looking — where else? — to forest preserve land on the other side of the road to solve their problem. Proposals like these will come at an increasing rate and will not stop unless the board firmly resists special interests. The forest preserve district and the board of commissioners must stand by their new land policy.

Another recent success is the identification of encroachments on forest preserve district land. In recent months General Supt. Steve Bylina and his staff compiled a list of encroachments (possibly as many as 200) on our public land. District staff recently released a report on 11 of the encroachments "that we feel pose the most extreme liabilities at this point to the preserve." Merely exposing the facts to public and media scrutiny has already remedied many of the encroachments and the others are in line for legal action.

The encroachments include private businesses using district land for parking lots and a marina. We commend the board, Supt. Bylina and district staff for taking solid steps to protect our preserves from encroachment. District land should never be diverted to commercial use, and violators should be both fined and required to pay for restoration of the land to its natural state.

Encroachments made by other public agencies, for example park districts that have carved ball fields out of preserve land, are more difficult. We support the preservation of these existing historic fields, however, for public use of all Cook County citizens. They should be available through the district's permit office, in the same way picnic pavilions and soccer fields are handled. Local municipalities with fields on district land should also be required to obtain permits and pay fees as required by everyone else. These fields should never be locked and must never be expanded further into district land. We also oppose the construction of any new fields on district land.

The new land policy and the identification of the encroachments are good steps in the right direction. The founders of the forest preserves began setting aside natural land for the public in 1915 because they knew that some day unprotected open space would be gone. The future they foresaw is now. We need to honor their legacy by vigilantly protecting our preserves for ourselves and more importantly for future generations to enjoy.

Benjamin Cox
Executive Director
Friends of the Forest Preserves

Alice Brandon
Forest Preserve Project Coordinator
Friends of the Parks
Doug Chien
Conservation Field Representative
Illinois Chapter of the Sierra Club