

## Nature center, improvements planned at Dan Ryan Woods

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Joe O'Connor favors an ambitious plan to build the Cook County Forest Preserve District's first nature center in Chicago at the Dan Ryan Woods. But before the \$38 million project gets started, the longtime volunteer thinks existing structures in the preserve in the Beverly community could use some attention. A warming shelter, a walking path and three ravines built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s have seen better days, he said.

"It's beautiful limestone construction that's borne the brunt of 70 years of wear and tear," O'Connor said.

The forest preserve district has allotted \$550,000 for infrastructure improvements at the woods, east of Western Avenue between 81st and 90th streets, in preparation for the proposed nature center, district spokesman Steve Mayberry said. He said the district solicited feedback from the Friends of the Forest Preserves.

On Tuesday, O'Connor and Ben Cox, of the Friends of the Forest Preserves, led a walk through the Dan Ryan Woods to compile a list of ways that the money could be spent.

"We're thrilled to have some money to reverse what time has done," O'Connor said.

Money also has been earmarked for other upgrades at the Dan Ryan Woods. Nine picnic shelters will be replaced or repaired, and water and sewer lines will be installed. The district's Calumet Division headquarters, at the Dan Ryan Woods, will get a new heating system and a new roof at its garage, Mayberry said.

The improvement projects are being paid for from a \$50 million bond sale in 2004, he said. Meanwhile, designs for the proposed nature center are in the works, Mayberry said.

Ald. Ginger Rugai (19th) said she's seeking funds from various sources and may consider selling naming rights for the center to raise the money. Rugai said the unique geology of the area — the forest preserve sits on a glacial ridge and is the highest point in the city — makes it ideal for an educational center.

A consultant came up with the \$38 million price tag as part of a study completed in March 2005. The center would include interactive exhibits and activities, such as a mastodon dig, a prairie maze and a butterfly garden.

"It's going to take a lot of time and a lot of input from different groups to make this happen," Rugai said.