

New forest preserve map kick off: Discovering fun, recreation just around corner

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The white tents on the plaza outside the Daley Center, where Christmas ornaments are sold in December, contained different goodies Tuesday. The Forest Preserve District of Cook County declared its own holiday.

As pedestrians absorbed sunshine on lunch breaks, officials handed out freebie fishing guides, water bottles, brochures and a new map pinpointing the agency's 68,000 acres of woods, lakes, golf courses, nature centers and recreational sites.

To get more locals to come to them, Forest Preserve officials invaded the world of concrete, high-rises and government buildings. The task was to remind citizens that neither all of Chicago nor the rest of the county is paved. The calling card was the foldout map that identifies 310 locations in Cook County where men, women and their families can go play. The theme on the front is "Live Healthy, Discover Nature."

"In essence, it's an awareness program," district superintendent Steven Bylina Jr. said. "We want to get the word out to a variety of users that this is in your own backyard. There are a great number of people who don't realize what there is in their county."

The map, funded by a grant from the U.S. Forest Service, was the showpiece giveaway. It is a tightly packed guide to all of the woods and waters under district county supervision and a handy list of year-round activities available in the forest preserves.

"Convenience is the big thing," Bylina said of the map as a source to point residents to places near where they live. "With gas prices the way they are, people are going to stay close to home. At least you will be aware of it."

During the two-hour promotion, people streamed past the tents to pick up maps and discuss where to bicycle, fish or picnic.

Some visitors who already use the district obtained tips on where to find more enticing spots for their recreational inclinations.

Jermaine Young, 29, said he camps within the forest preserves on

family trips and fishes at Wolf Lake. He said he doesn't even know where he camps because he just sleeps on the way.

"They say, `Get yourself out of the car and set up,'" Young said while laughing. "I'm a worker bee."

Young said he hopes studying the map will give him new ideas for using the forest preserves.

Map-carrying Fabian Ayala, 35, of Chicago, said he plays tennis and soccer, but is always open to new suggestions for using bicycle trails.

"I just jump on my bike and go," he said. "I have the outdoors schedule I want to check at home."

One popular display showed off fish swimming in aquariums, everything from Northern pike, largemouth bass, walleye and channel catfish to black crappie, bluegill, white crappie, black bullhead and sunfish.

"It's surprising how many people think we have piranha or barracuda in there," district biologist Jim Phillips said. "They're surprised when they find out they all came out of the forest preserves."

Benjamin Cox, executive director of the Friends of the Forest Preserves, works closely with the district to coordinate volunteer projects. The district relies heavily on about 7,000 volunteers who participate in cleanup and restoration projects.

"A big part of our role is to education people that we have preserves," Cox said. "They think parks. We tell them we're preserving nature first. They go, `Oh, I see.'"

Still, Bylina said improvements throughout the district are underway. About 300 miles of trails have been freshly marked, old wooden outhouses replaced and, just possibly, the district might introduce a new species of fish in some bodies of water over the next few years.

Bylina said the forest preserves are studying the possibility of stocking striped bass or muskie.

"Wouldn't it be nice to wake up in the morning and catch a muskie within 25 miles of your home?" he said.

Bylina said the probability of stocking muskie in the Skokie Lagoon or Tampier Lake is the more likely.

"It's not going to happen overnight," he said.

Kathi Steinbert, 48, a lifelong angler from Chicago, is not sure if she should get excited about that.

"All I ever catch is bluegill, wherever I go," she said. "Since I'm a little kid that's all I've ever caught."

However, 15 years ago, at Saganshkee Slough in Willow Springs--a forest preserves site--one guy proposed marriage to her. Did she say yes?

"Of course," Steinbert said. "It's the only proposal I ever got."

The Forest Preserve District of Cook County's new recreational map can be obtained at district nature centers and the district headquarters in River Forest. It also will be made available through the district Web site at fpdcc.com.