

Forest district shouldn't fix county shortfall

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I am writing in response to "Budget plan to seek forest district payback" (Metro, Feb. 1). The Forest Preserve District of Cook County is a separate governmental agency established by state law. It is not a department of Cook County. It has its own tax levy that county residents pay as a separate line item on their property tax bills. The same commissioners who serve on the Cook County Board also serve as forest preserve commissioners, per the state statute that formed the Forest Preserve District in 1915. Yet again the responsibilities of wearing these two hats have once again created an egregious conflict of interest.

When the commissioners are wearing their Cook County hats, they are managing a \$3 billion operating budget. Their forest preserve hat requires them to think about a \$45 million operating budget. The proposal by some commissioners to take \$11 million from the forest preserve to help reduce the county's debt would slash 25 percent from the forest preserve budget—a mere 2 percent of the sucking hole that is the \$500 million budget shortfall in the county's budget.

The previous county administration had a strangle hold on the forest preserve hiring process. By controlling it through the county, which is supposed to be a separate government, it prevented the district from filling vacant positions, thereby creating a 25 percent vacancy rate and the current "surplus." It is an understatement to say the forest preserves could use a few more people to help maintain, police and operate them. To their great credit, beginning in 2002 the commissioners were able to reorganize the district when it had a \$15 million budget deficit. They cut jobs from almost 1,200 to fewer than 500.

They reorganized duplicative departments. They privatized the district's golf courses, turning a money-losing operation into a money-making operation. The district was created in 1915 to preserve and protect native plants, animals and natural lands for the education, pleasure and recreation of the people of Cook County in perpetuity. Since then, more than 68,000 acres (11 percent of the county) have been preserved for us and future generations to enjoy. Nowhere in the district's mission does it direct the commissioners to provide debt relief to the county by robbing district funds. To do so would be a colossal disregard of their fiduciary responsibility as forest preserve

commissioners. The budget "surplus" should be used to fill the gaping whole of deferred maintenance left by years of mismanagement prior to 2002. Or to acquire more land. Or to help nurse the lands back to health. It should not be given to the county for a one-time, shortsighted fix.

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