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Groups to call for separation of Cook County boards

Watchdogs want forest district apart from county

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Two civic watchdog groups Monday will call for breaking off the [Cook County Forest Preserve](#) Board from the rest of county government, arguing that a separately elected group overseeing nearly 69,000 acres of open space would do far more to protect, expand and improve the land -- most of which is in poor shape.

[Cook County Board](#) commissioners and President [Todd Stroger](#) now wear two hats, overseeing county government and the Forest Preserve District, the same as all other Illinois counties except DuPage. That dual role is fraught with conflict, according to the Civic Federation and Friends of the Forest Preserves.

"The commissioners have a very difficult time separating the interests of the forest preserve," Civic Federation President Laurence Msall said. "It's treated as an afterthought, unfortunately, and the condition of the forest preserves speaks to that issue."

The joint report cites a 2001 study concluding that 68 percent of forest preserve land was "poor quality," largely due to inadequate management. Critics have blasted the high grass, overflowing garbage cans and filthy restrooms, although the report notes improvement under the current superintendent.

It also noted past conflicts: shifting millions of dollars between the county and Forest Preserve District, the sale of 2.4 preserve acres to [Rosemont](#) to expand the village's convention center and allowing preserve land to be used for a road in [Morton Grove](#).

Though Stroger and the commissioners on Friday had yet to see the report calling for separation, a pair of unusual political bedfellows reacted coolly to the idea.

"I am aware of its central premise and do not support separation of the boards," Stroger said. "On this issue, we simply agree to disagree."

Commissioner Forrest Claypool (D-Chicago), a frequent critic of Stroger, "patronage-laden" forest preserve operations and the status quo in county government, also said he did not believe a separation was in order.



"By keeping [the governments] together, there's an opportunity to use the sister resources of Cook County government, which is much larger, to benefit the forest preserve," Claypool said.

Benjamin Cox, executive director of Friends of the Forest Preserves, disagreed. "His good intentions are woefully misdirected," Cox said. A currently shared human-resources department leads to the hiring of people "who don't begin to have the specialties that are required for the Forest Preserve District," Cox said.

He pointed to DuPage as "a great success." In 1996 and 2000, legislation was passed in Springfield to separate the DuPage County Board from its Forest Preserve Commission while keeping the same overall number of elected officials and maintaining the same taxing powers.

The legislation does not apply to Cook, however, so a new state law is required to make the change.

The report recommends five commissioners be elected countywide in a non-partisan election for 6-year terms. They, in turn, would elect a president from among their own ranks.

County Commissioner Mike Quigley (D-Chicago) said the change is needed.

"Cook County is almost parasitic of the smaller branch, and it makes sense to focus on each government separately," he said, noting the county budget is \$3.2 billion a year and the Forest Preserve District's \$175 million.

"There are very few environmentalists on the board," he added. "The forest preserve is an afterthought to most commissioners."

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