GOAL 4 / LEADERSHIP

Visionary conservation leaders will safeguard, expand and bring increased resources to the Forest Preserves.

Thanks to recent reforms and thoughtful leadership, the Forest Preserves’ operational efficiency is increasing. But to achieve this plan’s ambitious goals for a vibrant future, the agency needs additional resources and expert guidance.

To fully engage the public and restore the land, the Forest Preserves must have more financial resources. Other forest preserve districts in northeastern Illinois counties invest more per acre and per capita in their land. And our property tax contributions in Cook County don’t measure up—per person or per acre—to the amounts neighboring counties devote to their preserves. The Forest Preserves’ track record of relatively low taxes, conservative spending and light debt load position them well to consider measures that will increase revenues.

Conservation management is a complex and long-term activity. Restoration investments made today will require continuous conservation expertise to pay off in the future. The president and board have an opportunity now to make systemic changes that can enable the forest preserves to flourish for many decades to come.
But in order for the public to feel confident that a long-term investment will pay off with significant habitat and quality-of-life benefits, the Forest Preserves needs the advice and active participation of skilled conservation leaders who have a singular focus on the long-term ecological and financial health of the forest preserves.

GOAL 4 PRIORITIES

4.1 Manage with excellence, transparency and sound financial practice.

4.2 Provide enduring, focused conservation leadership and increased accountability.

**BIG IDEA: Implementing the Forest Preserves Conservation and Policy Council**

4.3 Maximize public and private resources and use them wisely to achieve the vision for future growth and restoration.
Manage with excellence, transparency and sound financial practice.

The Forest Preserves of Cook County belong to the public. But in the Forest Preserves’ hundred-year history, management decisions have not consistently reflected the public’s best long-term interest. At some points, sites in the forest preserves received inadequate care, safety became a significant issue, and even trash pick-up was erratic. Overall, land was not properly cared for, as good science was often abandoned to respond to vocal citizens. Stewardship of the prairies and woodlands was taken over by volunteers, and while there was huge progress on some sites, coordination with Forest Preserves’ staff was often lacking.

Restoring Trust with 21st-Century Practices

The current administration has achieved excellent progress in making the Forest Preserves’ operations more efficient. For the first time in decades, a series of operational plans have been developed with extensive public input. The U.S. District Court has recognized the new employment policies and procedures that are in place to prevent unlawful political discrimination in hiring and has released the Forest Preserves from court oversight. With new accountability and transparency, the Forest Preserves are on a path to restoring public trust.

The Forest Preserves’ administrators will maintain and build this improved reputation by relying on practices that respond to the needs and expectations of a 21st-century public. In the 21st century, the public expects governments to show innovation by using state-of-the-art technologies, sharing data and considering opportunities to engage public-private partnerships with appropriate safeguards in place. The public increasingly trusts governments that are\textit{i}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{anticipatory and strategic}, by establishing a long-term vision to guide decision-making and making day-to-day decisions based upon these agreed upon long-term priorities;
  \item \textbf{results-oriented}, ensuring that plans are based on good data and that performance is measured to evaluate success;
  \item \textbf{collaborative}, both within government, across agencies and with the broader community; and
\end{itemize}
- **transparent**, with clear public access and information mechanisms that are open and friendly to anyone.

The Forest Preserves will fulfill the public’s expectations of good governance by taking the following actions to build trust, measure performance, and demonstrate the wise investment of public dollars.
**PRIORITY 4.1: Action Steps**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Summary</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maximize operational efficiency by using metrics to set baselines, and evaluate performance of all operations.</td>
<td>Voters in other counties and around the nation have generally been very supportive of increased investment in conservation — but only if they trust the government agency that will manage these investments. If the Forest Preserves emphasizes its accountability to the public and uses performance measures to manage resources efficiently, the agency can gain public support for future increased investment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform plans and decisions with market analysis, such as survey data that provides insight into the needs and interest of users.</td>
<td>To fulfill its responsibility to taxpayers and build an enthusiastic constituency, the Forest Preserves needs to better understand its “customers,” the people of Cook County. The agency can do this by developing a rich customer database through market analysis that reflects changing demographics. (Current data is available only from picnic permits and occasional surveys performed in association with a plan.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Base investments and actions on plans, data and mission-driven policies.</td>
<td>The Forest Preserves has a clear mission to “protect and preserve” nature, and its plans and policies must be evaluated based on the agency’s ability to support this mission. For proposed land-use guidelines, see the <strong>BIG IDEA: Land Use Decision-Making Framework</strong> in Goal 1.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Capitalize on partnerships with the Chicago Zoological Society, Chicago Botanic Garden and Cook County government to achieve mutual goals.

Building more active and effective partnerships with partner institutions and government agencies will maximize the return on investment of tax dollars.

The Forest Preserves has a rich tradition of collaboration with the Chicago Zoological Society and the Chicago Botanic Garden, two institutions that have significant conservation and education expertise and are willing to help shape expanded programming and plans for the Forest Preserves.

Collaborating with other government agencies—on sustainability or health initiatives, for example—will allow the Forest Preserves to expand purchasing power, reduce costs, and increase services to the public.

### Create a culture of customer service.

The Forest Preserves staff is employed by taxpayers and relies on public commitment. To make the preserves welcoming to the public, the maintenance staff, for example, should be trained in customer service and prepared to answer basic questions that visitors ask.

### Maximize effective operations through cross-training and integration of management responsibilities.

The Forest Preserves should continue to evaluate its departmental structure to ensure that staffing is organized effectively to accomplish its restoration and education mission.
Make information and data easily accessible to the public.

The Forest Preserves will increase transparency and potentially boost public confidence and engagement by making information clear and accessible through modern means. Ideas include cutting-edge applications with maps for visitors or websites with data for research scientists who are studying ecology and climate change.

NOTES

i. For example see http://transition2008.wordpress.com/2008/10/14/what-does-a-21st-century-government-look-like/
PRIORITY 4.2

Provide enduring, focused conservation leadership and public accountability.

Ensuring the Best Long-Term Management for Nature and People

Public investment in conservation demands a long-term commitment in restoration efforts. If the public is going to make a dramatic investment in restoration, it needs assurance that conservation experts are directing the management and stewardship of the Forest Preserves.

WORKING WITHIN A COMPLEX GOVERNING STRUCTURE

The Forest Preserves of Cook County has a complex governing structure: it was created as a distinct unit of government, but its original legislation establishes the Cook County Board of Commissioners as the same board responsible for governing the agency. While such oversight may have been sufficient in the Forest Preserves’ early history, it poses two concerns for the Forest Preserves today.

The first issue is one of limited time and conservation expertise among commissioners. The Forest Preserves’ budget of $197 million is slightly more than 6 percent of the of the county’s total budget. These numbers indicate that even those commissioners interested in conservation must give most of their attention (the remaining 94 percent of their budgetary responsibility) to county concerns other than the Forest Preserves.

The second issue, raised by the Civic Federation and Friends of the Forest Preserves, is that the board’s dual commitment to Forest Preserves and the county at large can pose conflicts of interest. Specifically, these groups have argued that the Board of Commissioners has, at points in its history, neglected the mission of the Forest Preserves, made decisions contrary to best conservation practices and failed to provide proper oversight.

An Opportunity for Steady, Committed Expertise

The commitment of the current administration to protecting nature, advancing restoration and engaging new constituencies makes this an opportune time to put a system in place for ensuring conservation leadership over the long term, no matter who is in public office.
Historically, the Forest Preserves has addressed the issue of expertise by establishing a plan commission, and later advisory committees, but the implementation of these structures has been inconsistent. There have also been legislative proposals to separate the boards, but the creation of different yet similarly elected board does not solve the problem of finding people with critical expertise. Instead, the Forest Preserves can look to its history for a model and create a truly robust advisory Forest Preserves Conservation and Policy Council. Key elements of this Council to address concerns raised in the past include nomination of members by expert outside advisor organizations, staggered terms and responsible staffing to ensure that the Council has resources to do its work.

**PRIORITY 4.2: Action Steps**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Summary</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Create a “Forest Preserves Conservation and Policy Council” to provide continuous conservation leadership and expertise to the president and Forest Preserve District Board of Commissioners.</td>
<td>For further information and implementation guidelines, see the BIG IDEA: Forest Preserves Conservation and Policy Council in Goal 4.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTES**

ii. For example, in 2007, the Commissioners approved transfer of $13.3 million from the Forest Preserve Capital Improvement Fund to the County to help balance the County’s budget. See The Civic Federation and Friends of the Forest Preserves, *Forest Preserve District of Cook County: A Call for A Separate Board of Commissioners*, Chicago: March 17, 2008, p.7. After the outcry of advocacy groups this was later remedied with the transfer of County land to the Forest Preserve to create the Oak Forest Heritage Preserve.
BIG IDEA: Implementing the Forest Preserves Conservation and Policy Council

The President of the Forest Preserves of Cook County should appoint a “Forest Preserves Conservation and Policy Council” to provide continuous conservation leadership and expertise to the president and Board of Commissioners.

Recommendation

The new Forest Preserves Conservation and Policy Council should have the expertise to recommend long-term plans and policies and shorter-term actions. It should be charged with annually evaluating conservation, public engagement and management progress, and recommending strategies and actions to achieve the vision.

The timelines in this plan suggest a new culture of strategic planning with continual evaluation of progress based on agreed upon metrics. The Council will be an invaluable partner in instituting this ongoing planning process. It should be established in close collaboration with expert organizations and institutions, and the general superintendent should assign appropriate staff to work closely with the Council to achieve its responsibilities.

The following guidelines outline the Council’s responsibilities and suggest the appointment process.

Guidelines for Implementation

COUNCIL RESPONSIBILITIES

- With the general superintendent, develop and update rolling five-year strategic and financial plans that implement the Next Century Conservation Plan, for approval by the Forest Preserves Board of Commissioners.
GOAL 4 / Visionary conservation leaders will safeguard, expand and bring increased resources....
BIG IDEA: Implementing the Forest Preserves Conservation and Policy Council

- Review and make recommendations about the annual Forest Preserves budget prior to its presentation to the Forest Preserves Board of Commissioners.

- Review and make recommendations on Forest Preserves policies and practices.

- Recommend steps to maximize and diversify funding from public and private sources.
  - Plan collaboratively with the Forest Preserve Foundation.
  - Recommend principles and opportunities for market-based fees, special purpose rentals, private-public partnerships, etc.

- Advise on how to provide the most effective governance for the Forest Preserves that ensures conservation expertise that spans administrations and that takes into account the needs and opportunities in all areas of the county.

**PROCESS FOR APPOINTING THE COUNCIL**

- The president will request recommendations from expert organizationsiii for Council members who
  - have expertise in conservation, ecology, education, management and finance.
  - reflect the geographic and demographic diversity of Cook County.

- The president will appoint members recommended through this nominating process.

- Council members will be appointed for staggered terms of four years.

- The president will appoint one member of the Forest Preserves Board of Commissioners to serve as a liaison to the Council in an ex officio capacity.

**FIRST STEP**

The president of the Forest Preserves Board of Commissioners will direct the general superintendent to recommend a nominating process, structure and schedule of meetings and activities for a new Forest Preserves Conservation Council. This should include consideration of the best way to give the Council stature and permanence such as an executive order or ordinance. The president will announce Council appointments within three months.
iii. Examples of organizations who should be nominators include but are not limited to Audubon Chicago Region, Civic Federation, Friends of the Forest Preserves, Openlands, and/or other conservation, research and educational institutions.
GOAL 4 / Visionary conservation leaders will safeguard, expand and bring increased resources....
4.3: Maximize public and private resources and use them wisely to achieve the vision....

PRIORITY 4.3

Maximize public and private resources and use them wisely to achieve the vision for future growth and restoration.

Funding the Next Century Conservation Plan

To fully engage the public and restore the land, the Forest Preserves must have more financial resources. Over 25 years, the estimated cost of restoring 30,000 acres and supplementing staff with a Conservation Corps job-training program could reach $1 billion. Further, the Forest Preserves needs to acquire about 21,000 acres of land to conserve areas with high ecological value, save properties under threat of irretrievable loss, protect lands that provide security for our water quality and quantity, and make strategic investments to engage new audiences. The cost of these acquisitions could approach $1 billion over 25 years. Achieved incrementally, these numbers are feasible, but they require ramping up to a much greater level of investment than the Forest Preserves has seen since the 1950s and 1960s when the district expanded its holdings by more than 20,000 acres.

FIGURE 4A: WHAT WILL THE NEXT CENTURY PLAN COST?

The Next Century Plan is a long-term vision and not an operating plan. Cost estimates will be adjusted based on conditions and actual programs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estimated Range Over 25 Years</th>
<th>(low)</th>
<th>(high)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Restoration of 30,000 acres</td>
<td>$450 million</td>
<td>$900 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservation Corps employing 1000 half-time workers annually</td>
<td>$250 million</td>
<td>$375 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovative acquisition and protection of 21,000 acres</td>
<td>$210 million</td>
<td>$840 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimated totals over 25 years</td>
<td>$760 million</td>
<td>$2.115 billion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Stagnant Income

Based on its current financial position and practices, the Forest Preserves does not have sufficient resources on hand to achieve the results outlined in this plan. However, because of its conservative financial management, it is in a position to prepare a responsible financial plan to raise the funds needed without overburdening taxpayers.

Since most of its lands were acquired many years ago, the agency has relatively low debt, especially in comparison with other counties. Increasing the Forest Preserves debt to finance long term restoration, capital improvements and acquisition costs would still keep debt expenses in line with neighboring counties both per capita and per acre.

Compared to the preserves in neighboring counties, total revenues for the Forest Preserves of Cook County are low, both per capita and per acre of agency-owned land, and have remained relatively flat over the past four years.

Revenue from non-tax sources like user fees is low. In 2011, Cook County brought in $2.6 million from permits, licenses, concessions, land and building rentals, programs and admissions, which represents $1 per capita and $3 per acre excluding the Zoo, Botanic Garden and golf courses. This is lower than all of neighboring counties. There are multiple options to consider for market-based fees, special use permits or rentals. Other counties, for example, charge variable fees that are higher at peak times and lower when demand is less.

Cook County’s taxpayers also devote a much smaller share of their average tax bill to their forest preserves than their neighbors in nearby counties. Compared with similar agencies in the region, property tax levies for the Forest Preserves of Cook County are low: $17 per capita and $1,260 per acre of agency-owned land, by far the lowest among northeast Illinois counties. In contrast, for example, the DuPage County Forest Preserve District’s property tax levies are $57 per capita and $2,066 per acre.
GOAL 4 / Visionary conservation leaders will safeguard, expand and bring increased resources...

4.3: Maximize public and private resources and use them wisely to achieve the vision.

FIGURE 4B

Cook County FPD Total Revenues have Remained Relatively Flat Over the Past Four Years

FIGURE 4C: AN OPPORTUNITY TO INVEST IN THE FOREST PRESERVES

The Forest Preserves is in a good position to prepare a responsible financial plan to raise the funds needed to accomplish this vision. Compared to preserves in neighboring counties, total revenues are low, both per capita and per acre. For example, this graph shows that Cook County’s taxpayers devote a much smaller share of their tax bill to their forest preserves than other counties do.
Appendix 1 has additional information about the Forest Preserves’ finances compared to neighboring counties both per capita and per acre.

Public Support for Referenda

Over and over in our region, the public has expressed willingness to vote to tax themselves in order to protect their water, open and scenic vistas, recreational opportunities and wildlife habitat. Successful campaigns are led by important local leaders and a citizen committee.

Over the past 25 years, multiple referenda for open space and land acquisition—including 18 county-wide referenda—have passed in the northeastern Illinois counties, raising more than $1.3 billion dollars for public open space and preserving nearly 40,000 acres. The votes have shown significant majorities (almost 2 to 1 in some cases) in support of this taxation even in years considered difficult economically, or in election years.

Other Forest Preserve Districts (Will, DuPage, Kane, Kendall and Lake) and Conservation Districts (McHenry) in the region have held bond referenda that are supported through an increase in property taxes. Bond referenda give districts the money up front to invest as acquisition opportunities arise. Another model is the DeKalb County Forest Preserve District which passed a corporate tax increase in 2006 that will generate $5 million over 10 years.

Successful referenda are based on polling and survey work to determine the level of voter support as well as messages that resonate. Agencies develop and implement strategic communications campaigns to deliver those messages and to organize important political leadership and endorsement.

Cook County Forest Preserves have not embarked on a referendum campaign since the very early years. The large population of Cook County voters provides both a challenge and an opportunity. If people feel that the Forest Preserves have value and the amount of the tax per person is considered low, voters are likely to support the measure.

An alternative to a referendum in Cook County would be legislative action. Either route to increasing property tax revenue would require a public information campaign with the support of outside organizations—partners like Friends of the Forest Preserves, Friends of the Parks, Chicago Region Audubon, Openlands and
GOAL 4 / Visionary conservation leaders will safeguard, expand and bring increased resources....
4.3: Maximize public and private resources and use them wisely to achieve the vision....

others, with at least one of these or another expert organization rising to take leadership of an orchestrated effort.
### PRIORITY 4.3: Action Steps

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Expand non-tax financial resources through innovative enterprise operations, market-based fees for special purpose uses (e.g., facility rentals and golf courses), public-private partnerships, sponsorships and donations in collaboration with the Forest Preserve Foundation.</strong></td>
<td>Other county forest preserves have established a range of fee-for-service opportunities. Cook County can review its fee structures and seek new opportunities for facility rentals for weddings, photo shoots and other revenue-generating activities including concessions. The county should conduct an annual review of fees in relation to market conditions, marketing objectives and the cost of providing services, fairness and equity issues, and consider variable fees that are higher at peak times. The Chicago Horticultural Society and Chicago Zoological Society have demonstrated that non-profit organizations operating world-class programs and facilities on Forest Preserves land can leverage significant private funds—in fact, they bring more than two private dollars for every public dollar invested. The Forest Preserve Foundation, Inc. is being revitalized and will be an important partner to realize the goals of this plan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aggressively pursue regional, state and federal government grants.</strong></td>
<td>The Forest Preserves and its partners have a successful track record of securing additional grant funding from a variety of federal and state agencies, and should continue to pursue these opportunities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue new bonds to fund well-planned capital expenditures for new acquisitions and restoration.</td>
<td>The Forest Preserves’ debt capacity provides an opportunity for the agency to finance long-term investments in infrastructure that will provide a return through increased use, higher visitor and taxpayer satisfaction and improvements to community value. In addition, land acquisition is largely opportunity-based in Cook County, as particular parcels become available at an affordable fair market price. Being able to use debt to respond to acquisition opportunities will make the Forest Preserves more nimble in negotiations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Capture the full value of statutorily allowed property tax resources.</td>
<td>To help provide additional funds needed to implement the Next Century Conservation Plan, the Forest Preserves should annually adjust its property taxes at cap levels allowed by law. This would allow the agency to increase its levy in line with the Consumer Price Index (CPI) or 5 percent, whichever is less, plus the levy applied to the value of new development. Assuming that this would mean a 3 percent increase on the current Forest Preserves property tax (which is only 0.08 percent of the tax bill in Cook County), the average homeowner with property assessed at $200,000 would see a $0.77 increase in their annual tax bill.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Seek permission either from the Illinois General Assembly or by public referendum to exceed the tax cap for operations and debt service to achieve the vision of this Next Century Plan.

Land acquisition referenda have been remarkably successful in the Chicago region. If Cook County were to raise its Forest Preserves tax to approximately 2 percent of its tax bill—approaching DuPage’s share, but still less than McHenry, Lake and Kane Counties—the Forest Preserves could generate approximately $80 million additional per year—enough to cover the costs of restoration and acquisition to fulfill the vision of this plan in 25 years. The average homeowner with property assessed at $200,000 would see a their annual tax bill increase by approximately $26—and the Forest Preserves would still represent less than 2 percent of their overall tax bill.
A Timeline of Transformation

How will we measure success? The highlights here provide a sample of all the Forest Preserves should expect to achieve, and the agency should assess progress and set new targets every five years.

NOW
GET STARTED
The president of the Forest Preserves Board of Commissioners will direct the general superintendent to recommend a nominating process, structure and schedule of meetings and activities for a new Forest Preserves Conservation and Policy Council, and the president will announce Council appointments within three months.

Put in place a financial plan that will produce the $40 million annual investment needed to meet long-term restoration goals as well as the acquisition funds.

IN 5 YEARS
MEASURE PROGRESS
The Forest Preserves Conservation Council will have developed a second five-year strategic plan and will be deeply engaged with the general superintendent in recommending strategy and financial measures to ensure maximum return on restoration investment, public engagement and effective operations.

The Forest Preserves will spend $200 million in new financial resources on restoration, and an additional $200 million will be available for the next five-year restoration program as a result of referendum, capital bond issue or other sources.

IN 25 YEARS
CELEBRATE OUTCOMES
Due to excellent governance, increased resources and a 25-year $1-2 billion capital investment program, the Cook County Forest Preserves will have successfully restored 30,000 acres, increased and protected its land to 90,000 acres and be able to document that at least 25 percent of Cook County residents annually visit its improved interpretive facilities and trails.

The Forest Preserves will have in place long-term goals for the next 25 years.