



FRIENDS  
OF THE FORE



Friends of  
the Parks

# THE FOREST PRESERVE DISTRICT OF COOK COUNTY

*Study and Recommendations*

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# Preface

Friends of the Forest Preserves is a citizen group dedicated to supporting the Forest Preserve District of Cook County in its mission of protecting land for conservation, recreation, and education. Friends of the Forest Preserves has brought together picnic grove users, hikers, bike and horseback riders, birders, boaters, restoration volunteers, and many others to advocate good conservation and recreation in our forest preserves. Friends of the Forest Preserves researches problems and opportunities and has produced a variety of reports and testified at District at many board meetings on a variety of issues. Friends of the Forest Preserves was incorporated as an Illinois not-for-profit organization in 1998. It is a member of the Chicago Wilderness consortium.

Friends of the Parks is a 25 year-old environmental organization whose mission is to protect, preserve, and improve parks and open spaces. As part of the CitySpace task force, Friends of the Parks has been obtaining information about Forest Preserve District holdings and operations to determine how city residents can benefit further from the District. Friends of the Parks is also a member of the Chicago Wilderness consortium.

Nearly two years ago Friends of the Forest Preserves and Friends of the Parks began a joint study of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County. Our intention was to review

## PREFACE

preserving them? Restoring and restocking them? How well is the District fulfilling its mission?

The goal of this study was to conduct a comprehensive review and to present recommendations that will lead to improved land conditions, operations, programs, educational opportunities, and access. We have released our report in two phases. The first contained our review and findings on land acquisition, land management, and public use. The second phase, presented here, addresses the District's board, organizational structure, outreach programs, and budget.

Stephen F. Christy, Jr., has served as principal author of the report. Christy has been the Executive Director of the Lake Forest Land Foundation since 1999. Prior to this, he was the Executive Director of the Lake Forest Open Lands Association, starting in 1985. From 1978 to 1984 he served as Supervisor of Planning and Design for the Lake County Forest Preserve District. A Chicago resident since 1977, Christy has been active in numerous open space issues over the decades. He has written extensively about the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, the Chicago Park District, and land preservation issues in the Chicago region.

We owe thanks to many people who have contributed to this report. At the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, General Superintendent Joseph Nevius gave us his time and allowed us access to District staff. His assistant P.J. Cullerton arranged times for our interviews. The staff members themselves and almost all of the commissioners generously contributed their time to this effort. We also thank people in various agencies and conservation groups, former District employees, and interested citizens who provided information for this report.

We thank the staff and commissioners of the Forest Preserve Districts in DuPage, Kane, Lake, and Will Counties for granting us interviews and numerous follow-up calls.

We appreciate a grant from the Bridgestone/Firestone Trust Fund that supported this report.

# Executive Summary

This report, nearly two years in the making, has been issued in two phases. In the first phase, issued in March 2002, we examined the history of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County (“the District”), users’ perceptions, land acquisition, and land management. In this phase we have reviewed:

- ◆ **The Board:** How do the Commissioners of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County see the District—its mission, opportunities, and problems?
- ◆ **Staff and operations:** How is the staff organized, and what do they see as the accomplishments and the problems of the District?
- ◆ **Public outreach:** How well is the District doing in communicating with its owners, the public?
- ◆ **Budget:** Where does money come from and go? Wh-9.7( D( W)8.1(h)3.9j/TTT7.3((n)3.9(d)11d)11d)1

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- ◆ **Operations** are focused primarily on maintenance: grass mowing, garbage collection, and facility repair. The Maintenance Department makes up well over half the District staff. Law Enforcement is the second largest department. The third-largest department, Recreation, runs the golf courses, swimming pools, and toboggan slides. Very few jobs in the District are focused on the core mission of acquiring and protecting natural lands.
- ◆ **Public outreach** is nearly nonexistent. Unlike all the surrounding counties, Cook receives almost exclusively negative press. While all the surrounding counties







# Foreword

If you visit the Cook County Forest Preserve District headquarters today in River Forest, you will see a strange apparition the moment you walk in the door. This ghostly image is a large portrait dominating the vestibule.

The subject of this portrait is Dwight Perkins. Dwight Perkins is largely forgotten today, but he is the person who, more than anyone, created the Forest Preserve District of Cook County. His vision, energy, and devotion to the District spanned nearly a half-century,

## FOREWORD

# *Chapter One*

# **The Board**

## *Introduction*

The Board of Commissioners of Cook County is also charged, by law, with the responsibilities of being the Board of Commissioners of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County. And also, by law, the District's board president must be the same as the president of the county board. Thus the same board wears two hats.

We sought to interview all Forest Preserve District commissioners about their work and views on the District. The results are a snapshot of their daily life in this effort, and are certainly tailored in some cases by political posturing. Nonetheless, the answers are revealing and, in many cases, clearly show the understanding and care these elected officials have for the District—and their own frustration with its current state.

The process began with a generic written request for an interview. Several commissioners answered this letter immediately, setting up appointments. Telephone calls by the author secured, after some time, personal interviews with twelve of the other commissioners, either at the County Building or at their district offices. Three additional interviews were conducted by telephone. Commissioner Lechowicz was too busy to schedule time for an interview. His aide Gary Weintraub kindly spoke for him. Commissioner Hansen flatly declined to be interviewed.

President Stroger was mailed the generic letter requesting an interview in the beginning of the process. There was no response. At the end of the process a personal letter was

## THE BOARD

Forest Preserve board committees are as follows:

- ◆ Annexation
- ◆ Botanic Garden
- ◆ Finance
- ◆ Litigation
- ◆ Industrial Claims
- ◆ Law Enforcement
- ◆ Legislation and Governmental Affairs
- ◆ Real Estate
- ◆ Recreation
- ◆ Rules
- ◆ Zoological

### *Interview questions and answers*

The interview process involved twelve questions. The first question was factual, being an attempt to determine the length of that person's service on the board. The statistics of length of service on the board are:

- ◆ 3–10 years: 10 board members
- ◆ 11–20 years: 5
- ◆ Over 20 years: 2

The rest of the questions involved opinions. These questions, and the answers, follow.<sup>5</sup> Some of our initial observations follow each question; final views appear at the end of the chapter.

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<sup>5</sup> Interviews on file were conducted as follows:

Butler: Telephone, November 28, 2001.

Carr: Telephone, October 16, 2001.

Collins: Personal at County Building, December 18, 2001.

Daley: Personal at County Building, October 23, 2001.

Goslin: Personal at County Building, December 3, 2001.

Lechowicz (by Gary Weintraub): Personal at County Building, November 6, 2001.

Maldonado: Personal at his district office, 2615 W. Division St., Chicago, October 31, 2001.

Moran: Telephone, January 10, 2002.

Moreno: Personal at his law office, 55 W. Monroe St., Chicago, October 31, 2001.

Quigley: Personal at County Building, October 25, 2001.



**THE BOARD**

**Observations:** While this is a tough question to answer in a few minutes, nearly all the commissioners showed a good grasp of the District's purpose and expressed interest in its operations.



“It really varies.” (Commissioner Maldonado)

“50%” (Commissioner Silvestri)

“I am a full-time county commissioner and District commissioner. I estimate I devote 15–20% of my time to District matters.” (Commissioner Sutker)

“A mix. April to October takes more time to ensure areas are clean and ready. Some weeks 50%; some 5–10%.” (Commissioner Daley)

**Observations:** A wide range of estimates; in general, about 30% of time. The time reported is surprisingly large for an operation with 1/40th of the county’s total budget.

***How do you work with other commissioners on forest preserve matters?***

“If there are other District matters near a commissioner’s district, or if he or she has an issue, they may come to me, discuss it, and I may agree to support what they want. Most matters are handled by consensus.” (Commissioner Butler)

“I have good relationships with all commissioners: a pragmatic committee philosophy to keep the greenery going.” (Commissioner Steele)

“We are commissioners of the whole [Forest Preserve] District, but often commissioners get mad if you come into their own district.” (Commissioner Moran)

“It is a different game, since commissioners went to their own districts—now everyone guards their own turf.” (Commissioner Carr)

“The District has pretty broad support among commissioners. There is no Republican vs. Democrat stuff; but now commissioners are beginning to think ‘how does it affect my own district?’ In general, the more District lands in one’s own [voting] district, the greater the interest on the part of the commissioner.” (Commissioner Schumann)

“The board as a whole tries to work on a consensus basis rather than along partisan lines.” (Commissioner Maldonado)

“Through committees.” (Commissioner Moreno)

“No problem. We all work together.” (Commissioner Collins)

“Very cooperative interaction.” (Commissioner Goslin)

“Fairly well.” (Commissioner Sims)

“Collegial” (Commissioner Sutker)

## THE BOARD

“If a problem comes up, it goes to committee. All of us are out to help the District. If something helps one commissioner, it helps the entire county.” (Commissioner Daley)

“I counsel, advise, cajole, beg, and educate.” (Commissioner Quigley)

**Observations:** On the face of it, there appears to be surprisingly good cooperation among the commissioners on District matters. Some have little or no District land in their areas, but all represent citizens who use the preserves. District issues do not seem to be caught up in politics, as is sometimes the case in other counties. However, if one accepts the commonly held belief that the District is an excellent source of jobs, it certainly would be in the interest of the commissioners to keep it on a steady course.

### ***Do you think the District supplies you with adequate information to make decisions regarding its operation?***

“Not enough information, and often a *fait accompli*.” (Commissioner Quigley)

“No, due to budget fiasco: garbage in, garbage out.” (Commissioner Butler)

“Yes, I get information every two weeks in a meeting with President Stroger.” (Commissioner Steele)

“In general, financial information bad, but operational information good.” (Commissioner Lechowicz, through his aide Gary Weintraub)

“**No**, they always keep you in the dark until the last minute.” (Commissioner Moran)

“On a scale of one to ten, a four.” (Commissioner Moreno)

“**No**, absolutely—especially in a timely fashion.” (Commissioner Collins)

“When they have it, they will share it—but I’ve never had a lot of confidence in what they’re giving me.” (Commissioner Goslin)

“Yes, except for budget matters.” (Commissioner Maldonado)

“I believe so; I call for extra information if I need it.” (Commissioner Silvestri)

“Sometimes.” (Commissioner Sims)

“Whenever I call General Superintendent Joe Nevius, he responds.” (Commissioner Sutker)

“I always get good information. If I don’t have the information, the District will get back to me.” (Commissioner Daley)



## THE BOARD

“Not ranked high—I have no [forest preserve] land in my area.” (Commissioner Maldonado)

“Very important.” (Commissioner Silvestri)

“The District is not on the upper concerns in my area.” (Commissioner Sims)

“Very important—but not the only issue. The District is a jewel. We are here to protect the environment, not sell it.” (Commissioner Sutker)

**Observations:** Here we see the fact that the District has no physical presence in nearly half the commissioners’ districts. Thus for some, support for the District is more a reflection of personal or constituent interest. In general the commissioners evinced good public support for the District.

The constituents of some commissioners’ districts with no forest preserve land use the preserves heavily. In other districts that’s less true. The District itself, as shown in Chapter 3, “Public Outreach and Involvement,” has virtually no outreach or programs that make the District physically or culturally accessible.

### ***Do you have many District inquiries, and how do you promote District awareness in your area?***

“Not a whole lot.” (Commissioner Sims)

“Constant inquiries. Literature in my home office is always being taken.” (Commissioner Sutker)

“I talk about it a lot at local meetings.” (Commissioner Steele)

“I talk about the District at two to three meetings a night, and I also promote it in my newsletter.” (Commissioner Quigley)

“I have 33 towns in my district, and we will distribute District literature in my booth at each town’s special events. I get a lot of inquiries by telephone too.” (Commissioner Carr)

“Lots of inquiries. It’s easy for me to promote, as I know a lot about District history and its current problems.” (Commissioner Schumann)

“I do two clean-ups of District land per year. I send out flyers, have a van, and go out to District land and work with people.” (Commissioner Moran)

“He distributes monthly District activity pamphlets to all local committeemen.”  
(Commissioner Lechowicz, through his aide Gary Weintraub)

“I have a weekly column in the local paper and promote the District there.”  
(Commissioner Moreno)

“Mostly through phone calls. We don’t get much money for mailings, etc.—we really have no way to communicate.” (Commissioner Collins)

“I promote a number of events at the Zoo and Botanic Garden. I promote the District at community groups, and have done property walk-throughs with District staff.”  
(Commissioner Goslin)

“It fluctuates.” (Commissioner Daley)

**Observations:** Again, interest varies depending on the presence of District holdings in commissioners’ areas or proximity thereto. One standout was Commissioner Moreno who, despite having no forest preserves in his district, has organized a youth event called “Fish with the Comish.” The event is run completely by volunteers, and sporting goods stores donate rods and reels. About 300 children come out, and all t8tinTwn call t8tpr inugnguvy)

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hear both sides is a great act of democracy. The commissioners over-reacted to them, and we shied away from our original position. We are not doing a good job in persuading people of the correctness of this approach. The truth is not going to be

**THE BOARD**

commissioners to educate themselves and form opinions on this matter, but changes have come slowly.

***Name three things you would do to improve the organization and operations of the District.***

Note: Golf course privatization has been effected since the date of these interviews.

Commissioner Butler

1. "Privatize golf courses, but you may lose quality when you do that. Everything is tied together, as in the budget: if you cut somewhere, you have to make it up somewhere else."
2. "Take a real hard look at how we collect funds for things we do, as in cash transactions at golf courses. If you give an honest man the key to your purse, you make him a thief."
3. "Take a hard look at what the District charges for services. Study carefully; it's a balancing act."

Commissioner Carr

1. "Privatize the golf courses. The Chicago Park District is very successful at this. They don't make a lot of money, but aren't supposed to, and are better run and maintained."
2. "Abolish the District police, and have the county take over. When you are sitting on the county board and see all these duplicate bills coming in, you wonder, 'Why are we doing this?'"

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Commissioner Goslin

1. "We need to professionalize our financial management."
2. "Let's improve the maintenance and care of District facilities."
3. "Improve volunteer operations."

Commissioner Hansen

(Declined to be interviewed; see start of chapter.)

Aide Weintraub for Commissioner Lechowicz

(For obvious reasons he correctly refused to answer for the commissioner but said he would have Mr. Lechowicz send us his own answers. Nothing was received.)

Commissioner Maldonado

1. "We need much more recreation at the District: soccer, special events, skating, and so on."
2. "We need to increase revenue sources. We should raise the costs of tobogganing, skating, golf, and increase the fees at the Zoo and Botanic Garden."
3. "We need to buy more land in Chicago. I don't believe it should necessarily be land connecting other preserves, but two- to five-acre parcels for forests and sports."

Commissioner Moran

1. "Get rid of the general superintendent and all supervisors; clean house and start from the beginning. How can you be captain of the ship and not know what your crew is doing?"
2. "Reinvigorate the committee structure, and have the board focus more on its work."
3. "Golf courses must be self-sufficient, but do not privatize them. Keep the courses, and show we can make a profit and get back on our feet. I want to put pride back in the District."

Commissioner Moreno

1. "I want more financial information and regular reports to the board from various District departments."
2. "I want management reports on our campgrounds, picnic groves, lakes, concessions. Let's see what's really happening—who is using the District and why, and why others are not."
3. We need to continue to expand the District. We need a more aggressive approach to buy more land, particularly in Chicago. We need to put nature back in the city, which would promote more use of nature by inner-city folk."

Commissioner Quigley

1. "We need to merge more functions with the county."
2. "We need better public information. How can folks get involved?"
3. "We need to focus more efforts in Chicago."

**THE BOARD**

Commissioner Schumann

1. "We need new sources of money from corporations and public/private partnerships. But we need to get our house in order so the public will support improvements and the acquisition of more land."
2. "We need to eliminate most of the rules that currently limit restoration work. Let's get restoration out from under policy control and into the hands of experts, to free it up for volunteers to do their work."
3. " We need to learn from other forest preserve districts surrounding us. We are not even a follower anymore."

Commissioner Silvestri

1. "We need to transfer nonessential and duplicative District efforts to the county, such as finance and maintenance. The county should also manage our books."
2. "The Zoo and Botanic Garden should be more than a county issue. They need a broader base of tax support."
3. "We need to improve the cleanliness of the District's bathrooms, shelters, and parking lots, and protect and restore the District's WPA/CCC-era shelters."

Commissioner Sims

1. "Let's take a look at how we do things and what our ei(Bpitloy(e)-10.4(e)-10.4sa)-0.2( ar)-72(we)-10.4( d  
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Commissioner Sutker

1. “We should insist on quarterly reports on every activity in the District, and special reports on the condition of bike trails, horse trails, and other specialized activities such as swimming pools and golf ranges.”
2. “We need regular audits on the fees we get and periodic review of all fees.”
3. “We need more hands-on involvement with District bureaucracy, emphasizing their obligation to keep us informed.”

## *Discussion*

Many of the commissioners’ comments are well informed and wise, and they demonstrate a commitment to improving the District. The media love to gore the board, and not without reason. Typical is this vivid description of the commissioners: “...sitting wide-eyed in their big blue leather chairs, [looking] shell-shocked as new disclosures of financial mischief made them feel clueless.”<sup>6</sup>

But as the above commissioner interviews show, there is clearly a wealth of good ideas and interest among these people. Most commissioners are not “snoring loudly at the switch,” as the media have described them.<sup>7</sup> So why do their good ideas seem not to be reflected by the actual function of the board? Why, for instance, do nearly all the commissioners show strong support for increased land management, but there is little change? Why do so many want to see more land bought, yet have never been able to place a referendum before the public?

An observer of District board meetings would think this group of people to be one big, happy family. “Consensus” rules. The commissioners effusively compliment each other and the leadership of their president.

The explanation? We cannot mince words here. The District’s operations are a closed club, in this case controlled by a president who has demonstrated little interest in the District’s mission.

Interestingly, change may be in the air. The March 19, 2002, primary saw the *de facto* unseating of five commissioners, and at least three of their probable replacements have expressed strong concern over how the District is currently run.

## **Committees**

On paper, the place seems well organized, with an extensive committee structure.

However, these committees rarely meet. An active board member of the Brookfield Zoo, for instance, had no idea who the chairman of the Zoological Committee was, or what if

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<sup>6</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, Editorial, March 4, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, Editorial, January 7, 2002.

anything the committee did.<sup>8</sup> A former District commissioner reports that committee chairs cannot set their own agendas for meetings: “The president controls everything.”<sup>9</sup> The large number of committees—nearly three times the number operating the forest preserves in Lake and DuPage County, for instance—also may be so cumbersome as to create an institutional inertia by itself.

Instead, everything is settled by the famous “consensus,” meaning that nothing is brought out for discussion unless it is sure to pass. Committees seem rather to serve as a “graveyard” for independent or controversial ideas.

Some commissioners have a deep interest in the District, but they have little power to accomplish anything. The feelings of an anonymous District employee expressed in Phase I of this report apply here too: “Everything has to go through downtown.”

Do other forest preserve districts operate this way? No, they don’t. The president of the Lake County Forest Preserve District notes, “50% of our commissioners run for office out of forest-preserve interests.”<sup>10</sup> The current chairman of the DuPage County board was the past head of The Conservation Fund, a nonprofit group supporting that district. During that time he raised \$100,000, working through the Republican Party, to support the successful passage of a \$75 million land-acquisition referendum. In 1998 he ran for the county board, using open space as one of his main issues. He received 58% of the vote. Today he plays a major role as a forest preserve commissioner.<sup>11</sup>

All other forest preserve districts have active committee structures that regularly work on issues and present them to the board for open debate. These committees are training areas for future forest-preserve leadership: the current district president in Lake County was formerly chair of the Land Acquisition Committee, a powerful and active committee that under his tenure recommended to the board (which debated and approved) the purchase of thousands of acres.<sup>12</sup> In other districts, those commissioners with special forest preserve interests chair committees such as recreation and land management that recommend real decisions and expenditures, again for public debate by their respective boards.

## Public participation

Citizens play a larger role in the activities of other forest preserve districts than they do in Cook, and they have easy access to commissioners who have an interest in forest preserve matters. A long-time observer of the region sums this up nicely:

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It's a whole different situation in DuPage and Lake Counties. There you

## THE BOARD

District is currently in, where its president has little apparent interest in most forest preserve affairs.

This action would also encourage those considering running for political office to consider the affairs of the District more thoroughly in their campaigns, even making them a central part of their platform.

This action would require a change in the state law.

### *Recommendations*

- ◆ **Reinvigorate the District's committee structure.** Having committees with real teeth, that can make decisions and recommend action on the board floor, would go a long way toward changing what is now a very centralized and tightly controlled decision-making structure at the District board. Committees would also give the commissioners with specific District interests a chance to participate. Too often, we observed that excellent commissioner ideas are ignored because the commissioner may not be an "insider" and may not have access to a committee with actual power to carry an idea through. The board should reduce the number of committees as well. There are almost enough committees so that every commissioner could be a chair! This kind of complexity sets the stage for fiat-style decision-making at the top.
- ◆ **Have board meetings that focus on District business, and invite the public to participate.** In all the surrounding counties, county commissioners hold separate, "stand-alone" board meetings for their forest preserve business. Usually these are held at forest preserve headquarters, where staff and commissioners can interact and where additional information for making decisions is close at hand. As in other counties, the board should solicit input from citizens *before* the decisions are made.
- ◆ **Require the District to have a president who is different from the county board president.** The current format provides the same president for both the county

board on busses for field trips and even send board members to national land-preservation conferences.

- ! Many commissioners need to refresh their understanding of the District's mission and goals. For instance, District commissioners must learn, as have commissioners for outlying forest preserves districts, to "just say no" to the numerous land and special use requests from municipalities and other special interest groups. Inconsistent responses by commissioners, and the letters and requests they forward for their friends, could be deflected from the start if the commissioners had a clearer understanding of why the District





## *Chapter Two*

# **Staffing and Operations**

### *Staff interviews*

A crucial part of this report was to meet with District staff, understand their operations, and get their opinions about the current state of the District. We appreciate the cooperation of General Superintendent Joe Nevius and Executive Assistant P. J. Cullerton in scheduling a series of interviews with all the upper-level professional staff.

A year has passed since most of these interviews were conducted, but we believe most of the findings to still be current. We caution, however, that the following comments reflect the staff's opinions on itself. The reader must judge the accuracy of these comments.

Following the section on staff interviews (pp. 28–46), certain staff comments are anonymously noted (pp. 46–48).

### **Methods**

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**STAFFING AND OPERATIONS**

In general, Forestry currently removes only diseased and hazardous trees. The department is discouraged from thinning invasive trees from forests due to current moratorium rules.

Forestry operates a river crew as well, which spends eight months of the year removing downed trees, picnic tables, automobiles, and other trash to ensure flow on major waterways through District lands.<sup>16</sup> Logs from all work are contracted out for chipping and disposal.

The position of restoration forester originated from a grant for restoration work at the Swallow Cliff restoration effort in the Palos area. The restoration forester is responsible for woodland burning and the maintenance of restored areas, including mowing, burning, and herbiciding. In 1999 Forestry also received its first (and only) ecologist to help with this work.

Routine equipment maintenance is handled by the District's central garage, which can require a long wait. Forestry's own preventive maintenance employees service other equipment. If maintenance is required on specialized equipment such as aerial boom trucks, these are sent out to private firms.

Forestry works regularly with Planning & Development, Maintenance, and Conservation. Newhard and Raudenbush shared the same frustration expressed in interviews with both the Planning & Development and Conservation departments over the slow pace of the District's land restoration and management efforts.

Raudenbush was quite vocal about recent Forestry accomplishments, citing Swallow Cliff as the finest restoration project, encompassing over 500 acres—although the results of the moratorium have set this effort back. He had high praise for Newhard, noting “he has led this department into land management.”

**Observations:** This is a dedicated department with a long employment record in its leaders. The department obviously understands the modern role of forestry as it relates to land management and restoration, a key mission of the District. Like a number of departments we interviewed, however, Forestry is operating at about 70% of its budgeted capacity. Lack of funding, coupled with resistance by some commissioners to land restoration, is blunting the goals and enthusiasm of this department. Outlying forest preserve districts with one-third to one-half the acreage have many times the land management personnel.

## Law Enforcement

On July 25, 2001, we interviewed Chief of Police Charles Coleman, Jr., and Deputy Chief Terrence Lavenhagen. Coleman has been with the District 27 years, starting as a ranger and now holding an FPD 7 position, the equivalent of a Grade 23, according to him. Lavenhagen started as a ranger 33 years ago and held an FPD 6 position, the equivalent of a Grade 21. At the time of the interview he was also training at the Chicago Police Academy, but he has since left the District.

Both people agreed that the purpose of the District is to manage its lands in their natural state and that visitors' activities must be appropriate to that goal.

The District founded the Ranger Department in 1918, thus hiring its first employees. This department predates the formation of the Illinois State Police by four years and is thus one of the oldest law-enforcement agencies in the state. By 1929 the department had 50 officers: 25 on horseback and 25 on motorcycles. In 1955 it was incorporated into the Maintenance Department, but in 1980, following increasing abuse of District lands, it became its own department again.

As of July 2001, Law Enforcement department had 164 authorized positions. Of these, 15 are "non-sworn" or administrative positions, and 149 are police officers—31 ranking and

There is also an investigations unit. Thirty officers are trained in ground search and rescue. In the first six months of 2001 alone, Law Enforcement had to deal with 23 dead bodies found on District lands, mostly dumped there after foul play.

Officers are also trained in the use of mountain bikes, watercraft, and snowmobiles. Others are trained in DUI enforcement, juvenile law, tactical operations, internal affairs, and drug investigations. Several officers are assigned full-time to cooperate with the county sheriff's gang and drug unit, since these problems often spill over into District lands.

District officers patrol all facilities and staff all District special events. They check and enforce hundreds of picnic permits each year.

Both men indicated the department is under-funded. "The Forest Preserve District is the



lower than any other department head and, we believe, indicative of the lack of commitment by the district to the care of its lands.

In theory the Conservation Department has 85 positions, of which 29 are part-time. However at the time of this interview, 16 positions were vacant, showing a department operating at about 80% of capacity, which was troublesome to Merenowicz: "I have nature center directors cleaning toilets right now." A year later he had 83 positions, 15 of which were still unfilled, leaving him with 81% of capacity. However four employees were also on long-term leave or disability, leaving him at about 77%.<sup>18</sup>

We should note that the 2002 budget added to the Conservation budget a "storeroom supervisor" that had been a "free-floating" position with little or no connection to the Conservation Department. That position has a \$47,000 per year salary and is held, according to some reports, by a commissioner's brother.<sup>19</sup>

The department has its administrative office at District headquarters. It also runs six nature centers. Four—Crabtree, Little Red Schoolhouse, Sand Ridge, and River Trail—are "full service" operations with educational programs, displays, and education trails. Camp Sagawau operates by appointment only for school events and weeklong programs, teacher training, and cross-country skiing. Trailside Museum, the oldest department nature center, specializes in wildlife rehabilitation.

Conservation's wildlife division manages deer, goose, and beaver populations and has cooperated with universities on study of the West Nile virus, raccoon rabies, and Lyme disease. The fisheries division handles fish stocking, working directly with the state hatchery in Spring Grove, and all related water-quality issues. Merenowicz believes the District's fish program is "one of the best in the country for the size of the region's population."

Land Management is a more recent division within the Conservation Department, begun in 1992. This division includes the District's sole Volunteer Coordinator. There are 60 land-management sites. The Land Management division must also inspect all requests for easements and inventory all new properties.

An odd aspect of Conservation's work is its management of the District's in-house print shop, which produces all District letterhead, bike maps, and brochures. This activity's location in Conservation doubtless dates to the founding of this department in 1945, when there was a need to produce the frequent wildlife and nature bulletins routinely published for outdoor education.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Chris Merenowicz, telephone interview, August 25, 2002.

<sup>19</sup> See District's 2002 budget.

<sup>20</sup> See the site [www.newton.dep.anl.gov/natbltn/natbltn.htm](http://www.newton.dep.anl.gov/natbltn/natbltn.htm) for a large and interesting sample of these early

## STAFFING AND OPERATIONS

Merenowicz was amusingly brief when asked what he did: “Keep all the balls in the air.” On top of managing the entire department, he also handles all departmental purchasing as well as District relations with the President’s Community Advisory Council.

This department works very closely with both Forestry and Planning & Development. Employees from both Conservation and Recreation are often assigned to winter sports activities: Recreation handles the toboggan slides, and Conservation handles skiing and ice-skating. Law Enforcement helps with deer road-kill problems, and Maintenance is called on as needed. Conservation is also the clearinghouse for all trail problems.

Merenowicz is proud of his accomplishments since his recent takeover. “I have seen everything, since I began at the bottom of the ladder and worked my way up.” Accordingly he has put Conservation in a better working relationship with the other departments. “I have a more realistic approach about what I can get done, along the lines of ‘Cap’ Sauers’s thinking,” says Merenowicz, referring to the practical nature of the District’s legendary first general superintendent. He has redirected and reformed the wildlife rehabilitation practices at the Trailside Museum, focusing efforts on the care of native animals needp



**Observations:** Merenowicz is known and respected for his frank and down-to-earth style. He appears to be dedicated and hard-driving. He knows his way around the District from having started at the bottom. Unfortunately Conservation, like Forestry, is severely understaffed. This department houses the District's one Land Manager and one Volunteer Coordinator, although most of the on-the-ground land management staff is in Forestry.

## Maintenance

## STAFFING AND OPERATIONS

On August 13, 2002, we asked Ponziano for updated information on staffing and position vacancy. He spoke with General Superintendent Nevius, who asked us to call his office directly. An assistant there said she would provide such information, but we never received anything.

Maintenance has primary responsibility for the District's 13,000 acres of developed land—its picnic grounds, 240 buildings, and 900 pieces of equipment. It manufactures many items such as outhouses. As of 2000, tables are now delivered pre-cut and only assembled by Maintenance. With 4,500 tables in inventory, this is still a major task.

Maintenance removes about 33,400 tons of garbage a year in total from all District facilities. This is the equivalent of nearly 20,000 residences per year.<sup>21</sup> In 2000 this took 44,500 paid hours, 16,000 community service hours, and an additional 5,500 volunteer and paid hours removing cans, bottles, and other trash from the woods.

Picnic management is the biggest challenge for Maintenance. All three interviewees were outspoken about this. Picnic groves are mostly designed for a maximum of 500 people, but many groups book multiple shelters, thereby excluding other users.

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Mole used an example to illustrate what the District should be doing, but isn't: "We have only three men to maintain the District headquarters and grounds, and we need six—we are 50% short. It's the same all over the District."

Where would these men like to see the District in five to ten years? Granberry cited a "viable deferred maintenance program."

Ponziano, however, took a broader view. "We do a good job. Anyone can be on the outside looking in, but with what we have, we do a tremendous job....The District needs to progress as any business does. Our 'customers' used to come to the District mostly on weekends, but now it's full-time during the week too. As gas prices go up, more and more people will keep coming. The entire system is overused and overtaxed."

**Observations:** Granberry, blunt and forceful, is the classic "front man" one would expect to find running a maintenance department. Mole, quieter and more reserved, represents the other classic maintenance archetype: the organizer and scheduler. Ponziano, with a longer history at the District, projected a more philosophic tone.

Maintenance is an enormous division with a difficult-to-pierce façade. Horror stories abound about it being the "last refuge" for patronage dregs, about the Byzantine workings of the central garage and warehouse, about the non-existent workers, about the endless card games going on during working hours. For this report we did not have the means to delve to this level, for instance by following workers around for a day, going into divisional headquarters, etc. Our experience suggests that some of the horror stories probably are true. It is widely believed both within and outside the District that, when the Chicago Park District reorganized itself in the late 1980's, many patronage workers were simply hired by the Cook Count Forest Preserve District.<sup>22</sup> However we also believe that most maintenance employees want to do a good and honest job but, like most District personnel, are frustrated by the system itself.

It would probably be more efficient, both in time and cost, if many repairs were outsourced to competent local tradesmen instead of waiting for a centrally controlled staff person. The Chicago Park District has successfully adopted this approach.

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<sup>22</sup> Anonymous interviews with field personnel, December 6, 2001, February 7, 2001; March 6, 2001; April 23, 2001.



philosophy: “Do things right the first time, and spend money like it is our own.” A partial review of year 2000 department accomplishments shows a wide range of projects:

- ◆ Developed a complete database of the \$65 million in deferred maintenance projects
- ◆ Wrote a successful proposal for the initial \$31.5 million awarded under Illinois First
- ◆ Secured nearly \$6,000,000 in other grants
- ◆ Completed the 100<sup>th</sup> mile of paved District bicycle trails
- ◆ Worked on land purchases at Thorn Creek and Tampier
- ◆ Worked on joint projects with over a dozen other agencies and non-profits
- ◆ Continued to work on full implementation of in-house GIS database

A review of goals for 2002 shows a similar level of detail and organization. Of greater interest, however, are the long-range goals this department put forth, again having a vision:

- ◆ Create and instill an approved vision for the District, consistent with the District’s mission, to make it the best in the country.
- ◆ Prioritize all projects with respect to the vision.
- ◆ Expand the emphasis on land acquisition and restoration.
- ◆ Develop computerized asset inventory, finance, and work order systems with a GIS and IT (information technology) plan.
- ◆ Determine the actual costs to bring District facilities and operations up to an acceptable standard, and then develop a ten-year budget plan to accomplish this.
- ◆ Determine the realistic number and allocation of required employees.
- ◆ Pursue additional funding sources, especially for maintenance, land purchases, and new projects.
- ◆ Increase commissioner and public involvement in setting District priorities.
- ◆ Get the decision-making process down to lower staff levels, and expedite it.
- ◆ Publicize the District’s programs, facilities, and accomplishments.

As an example of a specific and important accomplishment, P&D had been working on a new District policy on utility easements at the time of this interview. In the past, utility companies routinely destroyed District lands with little liability on their part. The department was drafting a new policy that would call for much larger security deposits and stringent restoration work based on quantifying the value of destroyed trees and landscapes. The board adopted this policy in early 2002.

Mellis and his crew also were specific as to the problems currently facing the District. Some concerns are summarized below.

- ◆ One manager in Maintenance was operating with just 13 filled positions out of his 30 available positions.

- ◆ The District is doing well with traditional grant resources, even though it has only one person assigned to this effort. (The Shedd Aquarium, for instance, retains 19 employees for fundraising.)
- ◆ The District could start going to private foundations, with the help of a Friends group. (Geraghty is still developing this idea, and as of June 2002 she was beginning to discuss it with board members of other similar successful foundations.)
- ◆ “The District still views computers as an expense, not a tool. The District has no IT manager, no IT plan.” The District should have the equivalent of the County’s Chief Information Officer.
- ◆ The District opened a web site in April of 2002. It also has no e-mail system (unless provided by the employees themselves).
- ◆ The District has no automated work order system. It missed the mandatory deadline for the GASB Order #34 requiring a tracking system for all facilities and repair requests.
- ◆ All items over \$10,000 must go to bid. This has been the same rule since 1984, and the threshold needs to be raised to allow more flexibility. Also, according to Mellis, “The District must take the low bidder, over and over, even if he or she is incompetent or has not completed past work on time.”
- ◆ There is no obvious long-range source for maintaining new regional District projects, such as the Centennial Trail.
- ◆ The District should spend more time planning, so that it has projects “on the shelves” and ready to go if specific funding is offered.

The promise of P&D, but its current reality as well, was perhaps best summarized by Maue, the GIS manager: “The GIS program is only partly done; we have only one person to load data for 67,000 acres. Yet when completed, this could be a policy-changing tool. It provides maps instantly for everything: hot spots, encroachments, land management, recreation. We’re just not there yet.”

**Observations:** Doubtless the most articulate and thoughtful interview, but this is to be expected given the nature of the interv5.5(tea75.5(t0o671 -2.4348 TD0.0028 Tcculate)

Development (OSLAD) program for projects such as bike trails, because it

no longer condone due to ever-increasing levels of pollution. Both pools were deteriorating after 50 years of service. Whelan Pool was completely rebuilt in 1999; Cermak is being studied for renovation right now and may, according to Benigno, have some historic significance.

The third pool, Green Lake, is more recent and actually resembles a swimming “lagoon” similar to the one the Chicago Park District built in Humboldt Park in the 1980s. It has a sandy beach and lakeside atmosphere, but the lagoon water is actually on a closed, filtered circuit. Green Lake is also currently out of service and being studied for renovation or replacement, possibly specifically for families with preteen children, according to Benigno. We note that \$3,000,000 in Illinois First funds has been allocated for this.

The District, which for decades had winked at swimming in its local rivers, went into the pool business with some ambivalence in 1932. Almost fifty years ago (1953) the District’s own Citizens Advisory Committee recommended the District get out of the pool business as soon as the current pools became obsolete. Yet the District has already rebuilt one pool and is studying the other two. Benigno notes, “It is not in the cards right now” to close any pools, but the District is currently looking at co-management of these facilities with local park districts.

When asked what he does in his position, Benigno responded that he oversees the entire department, in particular making sure employees in the above four areas—administration, picnic permits, golf courses, and swimming pools—are doing their jobs. He also serves as a liaison with the public, preparing plans, policies, and procedures.

The Recreation Department works most frequently with the Maintenance Department, which supplies all tradesmen. Recreation hires its own lifeguards and pool laborers and also has one full-time pool laborer to keep track of all pumps and filters. Don Clark, the aquatics supervisor, has been with the District 26 years.

How does Recreation work with other departments? There is close coordination with Conservation in scheduling ice fishing and tobogganing as well as issuing snowmobile permits. Planning & Development gives input for facility improvements as well as compliance with state and health-department regulations. Forestry trims the trees on the golf courses and keeps an eye on potential tree problems.

According to Benigno, other departments “look on what we do favorably, as ours is a big and very necessary operation in

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his department should work with others. “I have an open-door policy. Let’s get the job done.”

Benigno has also upgraded what he calls the “point of sale”: the cash register. Far more transactions are followed by computer, and he has installed security cameras at all golf courses. “Slippage is minimal,” he now claims.

## **STAFFING AND OPERATIONS**

Administration Department will be able to maintain such high standards in the face of all the recent budget fiascoes.

### **The General Superintendent's Assistant**

We had several interviews with General Superintendent Joe Nevius, and most of his remarks have been incorporated in the first phase of this report. However, on June 25, 2001, we did have the opportunity to spend some time with Joe Bishop, administrative assistant (for fieldwork) to the general superintendent. Joe Bishop, holding a grade 23 position, has been at the District since the mid-1990s and showed a clear grasp of the “education, recreation, and pleasure” aspects of the District’s mission to the public. The general superintendent’s department includes the general superintendent, an executive assistant (P.J. Cullerton, who arranged all our interviews), Bishop’s position, and two secretaries. Additional people in this department whom we did not interview were the board secretary, public information officer, and inter-governmental relations officer.

Bishop’s work is interesting: he is the “eyes and ears of the general superintendent” in

**STAFFING AND OPERATIONS**

- ◆ “Employees are not listened to. There is no employee training; the problems at hand are overwhelming. There is no continuing education, no personnel manual.”
- ◆ “The District has a low pay scale, low salary scale—the same positions at the County pay \$10,000–20,000 more. There is no employee recognition, no thanks for employee initiative.”
- ◆ “It takes forever to fill a position. All openings have to go through the president’s office. The County and the FPD were advertising for the same professional people—the County filled its positions in three months, but it took us nine months. By then the top applicants had all moved on!”
- ◆ “Hiring any consultant takes too long.”
- ◆ “Ninety percent of District employees are trying to do the best job they can. Our hands are tied in a lot of respects.”
- ◆ From a recently retired employee: “I remember fairly recently when an administrative assistant to the General Superintendent suggested to a potential

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- ◆ “The board’s Revenue Enhancement Committee had no staff involvement in its work, no review of past staff recommendations, and no tie-in with the District’s own grant people.”

## *Observations from outside*

Our report would not be complete without comments from people who actually use and work with the District. This is the constituency, and it paints a different picture from what we have described above.

### ***Interview with a long-term District volunteer***

“I think all the staff knows, as does the media and the public, that the District has many woefully incompetent staff who are accountable to no one because of the patronage system. There needs to be an awareness of the difference between most of the professional staff and the massive dregs that weigh them down. When I suggested that land restoration crews be built in part from people in the Maintenance Department, my friend in the District said the idea was not worth pursuing because there was hardly a person in Maintenance who was willing to do a day’s work.

“Here’s an example of the day-to-day reality. At Linne Woods, the District asked the North Branch Restoration volunteers to take responsibility for 20 acres. A few agreed to do what they could. The District claimed to be restoring a prairie there, but it was in the hands of Planning & Development rather than Conservation or Forestry ‘until the first phase is over.’ A terribly shoddy job was done, despite a lot of coaching from the volunteers. The topsoil used was full of weed seeds. And ash trees, which cannot withstand the fire needed to manage prairies, were planted in the middle of this area. Not only does the project seem a total failure, but also the weeds will proliferate and reproduce right next to one of the District’s best woodland and savanna areas. This is serious incompetence, but no one from any District division is willing to do anything about it.”<sup>24</sup>

### ***Interview with a volunteer at the Bartel Grasslands restoration site on the south side of the county***

“I thought Forestry now knew the proper trees to plant in the proper places. Why did Forestry recently plant cypress trees, which normally grow in southern swamps, in the middle of a prairie restoration?”<sup>25</sup>

### ***Comment by an older conservationist and District supporter in the Barrington area***

“The real truth is that some of the staff is very good, and have done a good job at the District for a long time. However they are hamstrung by politics, particularly Mr.

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<sup>24</sup> Anonymous interview, August 8, 2002.

<sup>25</sup> Anonymous interview, July 28, 2002.

Stroger's terrible leadership. He has discouraged volunteer work, and the preserves are getting worse and worse."<sup>26</sup>

***Comments by a long-time activist on the north side of the county***

"There is a lack of responsiveness. We cannot get the District police to even attempt to stop the widespread picking of wild leek. At one point we had to go to a commissioner to even get them to talk with us. Now, several years later, they won't even come when we call them to notify them of infractions.

"We cannot get signage. It took months for their "sign department" to produce a few unplastitized signs saying NO PICKING. They gave just a few of them to us, as though they were precious pieces of gold. We finally had to produce and put up our own signs.

"One year, after taking out fifth graders to pull garlic mustard, we notified the District that there were 80 large black garbage bags filled and neatly placed along the bike path, about 1 ½ blocks from a roadway. Many calls and three weeks later, the District still hadn't picked up these bags. They then told us that we had to lug them all the way out to the curb along the roadway, even though their trucks used the bike path regularly. Great thanks for an enormous volunteer effort!"<sup>27</sup>

"We constantly see all the problems with working with a big bureaucracy where it's hard to find someone to take responsibility. You always have to go to the top for the smallest thing."<sup>28</sup>

## *Discussion*

We believe these interviews—the first of their kind conducted for a public study ---are quite revealing both through what they say outright andough whDughely.





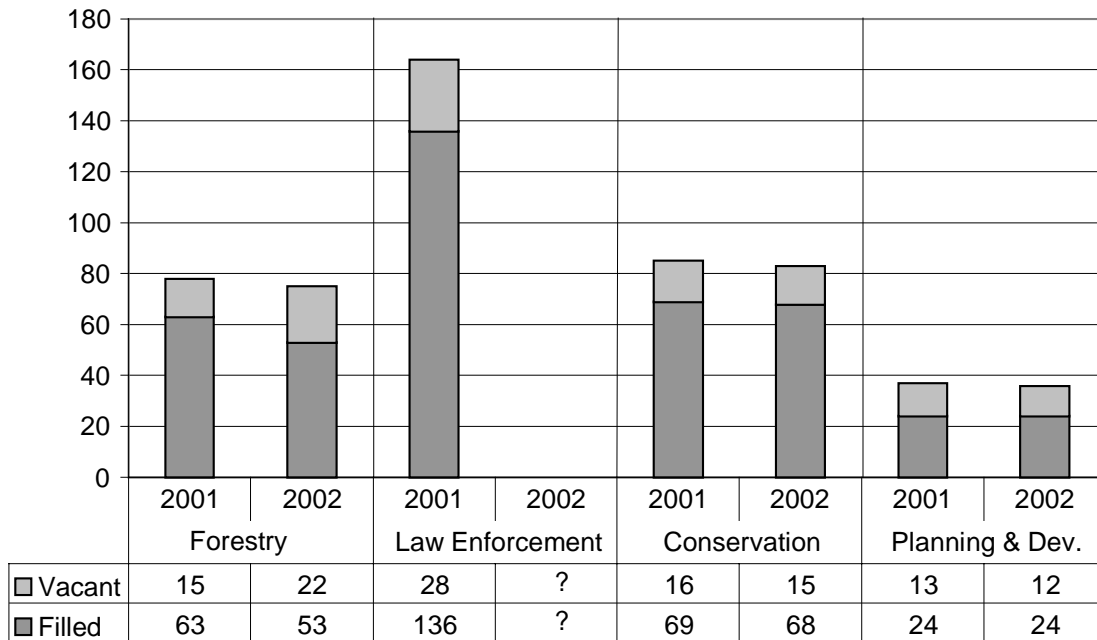


Our research did uncover what appears to be a draft of an *Information Resource Manual* [sic] dated May of 1994. Much of it appears outdated and it sports the usual wide array of crude District maps and graphics.<sup>33</sup>

### Staffing levels

Many positions are unfilled in departments for which we have information. Figure 1 summarizes the numbers.

**Figure 1. Budgeted vs. actual headcount, selected departments**



Looking at the departments for which we have numbers for both years, the overall vacancy rate was 22% in 2001. In 2002, this climbed to 25%.

What happened to the money budgeted for salaries and benefits for unfilled positions?

### Organizational issues

A full organizational study of the District is not within the scope of this report. However, we have found some glaring issues that deserve attention.

#### ***Relationship between Conservation and Forestry***

The Conservation and Forestry Departments already work together, but organizationally their efforts are split. For instance, there is regular confusion about who is in charge of what component of the District’s prescribed burn program. The much-needed work does not get done, and no one is accountable.

<sup>33</sup> Forest Preserve District of Cook County, *Information Resource Manual* [sic], 1994.

Both departments are severely under-funded and understaffed. They are responsible for the care of the 80% of the District's land, the core areas designated as natural landscapes, or nearly 55,000 acres. Yet they have only 7% of total District employees. As mentioned earlier, the District employs less than half the staff of outlying forest preserves to do a job two to three times the size of its suburban counterparts.

***Education and public outreach***

At present, almost all of the District's educational efforts fall under the Conservation Department, mainly through the nature centers. Chapter 3, "Public Outreach and Involvement," discusses the abysmal condition of the District's public outreach efforts,

dynamics of the natural landscape they protect.<sup>34</sup> This appears to be an excellent idea, and many park systems across the country have had good success with it.

That said, there is some room for shrinkage. We also strongly believe that officers should spend less time in vehicles and more time literally in the field. The District should assign more officers to bicycles, ATVs, and actual conservation police activities.

### Hiring procedures

A glance at the back of any local dailies will show that the District generically advertises for jobs, with no specifics about the positions.<sup>35</sup> But how do you find out about the jobs? There is nothing on the new web site.

You must go to District headquarters in River Forest—and then your application takes the long ride downtown to see if the president will approve. We quote again former employee:

There was a tremendous inefficiency in hiring. You were not allowed to advertise a position. The bulletins were posted only at District headquarters and you couldn't make copies of them. It was very restrictive....There would be memos about this: "If anybody calls about the position, you are not to answer them but direct all calls to Personnel." You were instructed to send resumes back to the applicant and tell them to send them to Personnel.<sup>36</sup>

## *Recommendations*

- ◆ **Decentralize the current top-down structure.**
  - ! Put day-to-day authority back in the hands of the general superintendent.
  - ! Have all employment matters handled at a District level, not through downtown, and hire based on merit.
  - ! Do the same for consultant selection and retention, and drastically shorten the time it takes to do this.
  
- ◆ **Give staff more incentives to work hard, and make it more responsible for its actions.**
  - ! Increase salaries to attract well-qualified staff, and bring District salaries up to par with other County positions.
  - ! Establish clear performance standards for all positions and begin to evaluate staff based on these standards. Establish a mechanism to reward achievement and penalize poor performance.

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<sup>34</sup> *Daily Southtown*, "Hybrid of cop, ranger may be introduced," April 24, 2002.

<sup>35</sup> See *Chicago Tribune* classified ads, June 28, 2002, among others—these are routinely issued.

<sup>36</sup> Anonymous interview, May 14, 2001.

- ! Develop and implement employee training, continuing education, and a personnel manual, all of which were TQM initiatives nearly a decade ago.
- ◆ **Restructure the District to improve its efficiency and bring it up-to-date with current public open space agency operating techniques.**
  - ! **Combine Forestry and parts of Conservation into a new Land Management Department.** We found the top staff of both these departments to be fully aware of the need for modern land management. Times have changed, and both these departments should concentrate on managing the district's natural resources in a single department focusing on land management. The department should be headed by a person with solid credentials and on-the-ground experience in the restoration and restocking that is at the heart of the District's mission.
  - ! **Create an Education and Outreach Department.** This department would teach people how to appreciate the preserves. It would encompass the educational functions of the nature centers and effective outreach to the citizens of Cook County. For further discussion, see Chapter 3, "Public Outreach and Involvement."
  - ! **Retain, prune, and redirect the Law Enforcement Department.** Focus the department on conservation policing, enforcing picnic permits, patrolling trails, and similar activities. Consider having fewer sworn officers and more rangers. Increase the portion of the officers' time spent on foot and on bicycle in the field.
  - ! **Refocus the Recreation Department.** We believe that the District should get out of the swimming pool business—not shut down the pools, but turn them over to local park districts, which were established to run this sort of facility. The Recreation Department should pay more attention to the kind of recreation that the District legislation envisioned: recreation based on an appreciation of nature, and compatible with it. This kind of recreation includes canoeing, hiking and daytrips, bird watching, fishing, outdoor photography, orienteering, and so on. Other kinds of recreation that can bring people who might otherwise have no interest in the out-of-doors to enjoy District lands are biking, cross-country skiing, horseback riding and picnicking.
  - ! **Advertise jobs in an open and efficient manner, and hire qualified people.**
  - ! **Normalize the relationship between the president and the General Superintendent.** Too many decisions are made "downtown." The president

**STAFFING AND OPERATIONS**

needs a strong CEO with authority to make day-to-day decisions to implement needed new policy direction from the board.



**PUBLIC OUTREACH AND INVOLVEMENT**



We did note a few positive articles. Several dealt with the reopening of the toboggan slides, an issue made somewhat moot by last winter's lack of snow. There was one letter



50,000 households in the county. The Winter 2001 issue headlined “Land purchases, improvements to continue.”<sup>50</sup>

Other forest preserve districts operate in a similar manner, despite their much smaller size. Will County, for instance, puts out a regular newsletter<sup>51</sup> and in 1997 prepared a detailed review of citizen interests in Will County.<sup>52</sup>

The Forest Preserve District of Cook County no longer has a newsletter.

All outlying forest preserve districts also issue an annual report, usually multi-colored and easily understood by the reader.<sup>53</sup> Cook County issues nothing of the sort.

## **Discussion**

Marketing and publicity are everything in today’s age. Decades ago the District understood this, within the opportunities present at that time. Visit, for instance, the Illinois Railway Museum in Union. Among the many operating displays there is a collection of Chicago Transit Authority buses from the 1950s and 1960s. Period advertisements (cardboard inserts) preserved on the interior of these coaches include

## *Publications*

### Print media

All forest preserve districts issue maps and information to help the public to use their

Stroger/board label pasted over the earlier printed material showing a slightly *different* Stroger/board.<sup>59</sup>

Another exemplary piece, printed in June 1998, mimics Lake County's pocket-sized 4!-square materials and describes how the District controls deer, why prescribed burning is necessary, and why it's not sufficient merely "for nature to take its course."<sup>60</sup>

The "workhorse" of District publications is surely its series of forest preserve maps, elegantly designed decades ago and, like an old Chevrolet, still running well. These 18!×20! maps are multicolored, consistent in their design, and still serviceable today—even though you have several presidents to choose from, if you refer to the back. Like the car, they could use a minor tune-up, but they are accurate and readable. Particularly impressive is the overall *Recreational Facilities Map*.



Consistent printed materials are crucial to any group's efforts to present itself to the public. With the exception of the time-tested preserve and general facilities maps, the only consistency we could find was the ongoing efforts to update free political advertising—the names of the president and current board—at public expense.

## *Outreach*

Outreach might be defined as the process of involving citizens in the mission of an organization. We note two areas where this would apply to the District:

- ◆ Citizen initiatives (volunteers, friends groups, etc.)
- ◆ Advisory groups

### **Citizen initiatives**

#### ***Volunteers***

a program allowing volunteers to be certified as master stewards. Those who earn this certification will be able to supervise ecological restoration workdays on District lands. This program will permit much-needed efficiencies in staff scheduling, thus providing some economies to the District.

***Regional friends groups***

Nearly all outlying forest preserve districts have various citizen support groups in place. These range from policy advisory groups to groups that concentrate on a specific forest preserve.

An outstanding example of an old-time friends group is The Conservation Foundation. This organization began its life in the early 1970s as The Forest Foundation, an advocacy group for the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County. Over a decade ago this group “went public” in that it became a nonprofit corporation fully independent of the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County, but it continued its mission of helping that district under the name of The Conservation Foundation of DuPage County. In recent years it has shortened its name to The Conservation Foundation, and now it is actively helping forest preserve districts in DuPage, Kane, Kendall, and Will Counties. Its newsletters regularly discuss lands it has helped these districts preserve.<sup>67</sup> The group also hosts an annual dinner to highlight its forest-preserve efforts. Its featured speaker in 2001 was Christie Todd Whitman, director of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Regional friends groups contribute greatly to the support and success of forest preserve districts among citizens. Yet Cook County is apparently reluctant to embrace these efforts. Two recent examples of this lack stand out. We found an excellent pamphlet explaining the importance of conservation easements, first published in 1999 by The Conservation Fund and Corlands. According to Bill Davis, the Foundation’s director of land preservation, “There are thousands of these pamphlets out there. We

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months to get an appointment with President Stroger to review their concerns, Thompson felt this effort was successful in improving the maintenance efforts and getting rid of a “do-nothing” supervisor. Still, he sees much to be done:

- ◆ Alcohol consumption is still a big problem, currently allowed anywhere more than 50 feet from parking lots. The Chicago Park District and about half of the outlying forest preserve districts allow no alcohol at all.
- ◆ There are still no requirements for cleaning up after dogs and no leash law enforcement.
- ◆ There are no Spanish-language signs despite a high level of Latino visitors.
- ◆ There are no charcoal pits.
- ◆ There are no facilities for recycling—a common practice in all other forest preserve districts.<sup>74</sup>

The Friends of the Forest Preserves is a countywide organization founded in 1999. It supports a wide variety of volunteer initiatives on habitat, trails, wildlife, and other issues. The Friends of the Forest Preserves frequently testifies at board meetings and has, with Friends of the Parks, jointly published a comprehensive two-phase study of the District, of which this document is Phase Two.

Two local groups are associated with Friends of the Forest Preserves—the Friends of

They followed this with a number of policy-setting recommendations in the 1940s and, in 1953, a completely revised and updated policy document for the District's future aims.

Unfortunately, in later years, the Citizens Advisory Council has done little, becoming instead under General Superintendent Arthur Janura and President George Dunne (circa 1965–1990) little more than a rubber stamp for District decisions. In the early 1990s Dunne's successor, Richard Phelan, attempted to reinvigorate that group, appointing a number of new faces such as Al Pyott, then head of the Illinois chapter of The Nature Conservancy. Great hopes came to little: by 1998 this committee had become a rubber stamp for President Stroger's sale of land to Rosemont, thanks in part to Janura. The Citizens Advisory Council has not met since it approved the sale of land to Rosemont four years ago.

Contrast this bungled effort to involve leading citizens in District matters with how several other forest preserve districts manage their affairs. Lake County has assembled the Partnership Council, made up of various interest groups, which meets to help that

- ◆ **Start advertising, either alone or with other groups.** Remember those District ads seen in antique buses at the railroad museum? Today's buses sport ads by the Chicago Park District. Why not the Forest Preserve District of Cook County too? In many cases, ads are free and only production costs are incurred. The District should also showcase events in publications offering regional outdoor activities, such as *Nature/Chicago*.

While we're at it, why not include Metra train and CTA/Pace bus routes on all District maps? While our user survey found the vast majority of District visitors arrive by car, public transportation that the public should know more about serves many forest preserves. These could easily be added to existing maps, and

board has never taken risks, has never tried anything.” “This is 1955 in terms of innovation at the District.”<sup>75</sup>

- ◆ **Make far better use of advocacy groups.** The Chicago Park District once eyed Park Advisory Councils, founded to help citizens achieve better involvement with their local Chicago parks, with suspicion. Now the Park District actively welcomes their participation. The Forest Preserve District of Cook County should do the same with local support groups, using the Friends of Busse Woods and the Friends of the Forest Preserves’ local groups as models.
  
- ◆ **Once the District’s fiscal house is in order, establish an independent non-profit support group to help the District raise funds and do land deals.** Something like the Conservation Foundation would be of great help to the District in acting as an impartial third-party group to develop corporate sponsorships, significant gifts, and endowments. We believe, however, that a foundation to solicit private funds for the District would have little success until public trust in the District’s finances has been restored.

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<sup>75</sup> Larry Sufferdin and Mike Quigley, respectively, comments in presentation to Chicago Chapter, NOW, July 16, 2002.



*Chapter Four*  
**Analysis of 2002 Budget**

## ANALYSIS OF 2002 BUDGET

The total 2002 budget of \$148.7 million includes, in gross revenue from all sources, among others:

- ◆ Property taxes
- ◆ Non-tax revenue from golf courses
- ◆ Admission and funds privately raised by the Brookfield Zoological Society and the Chicago Horticultural Society
- ◆ Interest on investments

The Brookfield Zoo and Chicago Botanic Garden are two line items on the FPD budget. The two institutions together receive \$23.8 million in property tax dollars in 2002. In addition, the two institutions project that they will raise an additional \$48.8 million





savannas, prairies, and recreational areas throughout the forest preserves—promoting suitable and safe public use in a balanced natural ecosystem.”<sup>76</sup>

Although focused on the core mission to preserve, protect, and restore natural habitats

infrastructure of the built environment, motor fleet, and other capital facilities throughout the forest preserve.”<sup>79</sup>

The Law Enforcement Department received the second largest appropriation in 2002 or \$7.3 million, or 16% of the District's budget. *More dollars are spent for law enforcement than to manage and restore the forest preserves themselves.*

## *Comparison with prior years' budgets*

Especially in recent years there has been a shift in resources away from the purposes established by Illinois State Statute—the acquisition and care of natural lands for recreation and education. During this time there has been an increase of resources redirected to unrelated recreational activities, general maintenance, and law enforcement.

### **Changes in the total budget (all funds) since 1980**

Since 1980 the total District budget jumped 270% from \$40.1 million to \$148.7 million, as shown in Table 3 and Figure 4 (p. 78). However, while the total budget jumped 270%, the tax levy increased 139% since 1980. As a comparison, the Chicago Park District's overall budget increased 123%, with the property tax increase totaling 118% since 1980. Property taxes rose 16% more for the Forest Preserve District during the same time period.

The most significant increase in property tax dollars from 1980 to 2002 went to the Chicago Botanic Garden with a 431% increase in tax support, from \$1.6 million to \$8.7 million. The Brookfield Zoo received a 155% increase in operating funds from taxpayers since 1980, from \$5.4 million to \$13.9 million. (The Chicago Botanic Garden, located at the northern boundary of Cook County on Lake Cook Road, is at the border of Cook and Lake Counties. A significant number of visitors are from Lake and other counties, yet only Cook County taxpayers subsidize the Chicago Botanic Garden. Similarly, the Brookfield Zoo is located at the west border of Cook County, and many visitors are from counties that do not pay taxes to support the Brookfield Zoo. In both cases, access from the city is difficult especially if one does not own a car).

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<sup>79</sup> Forest Preserve District of Cook County, 2002 budget, p. 28.

**ANALYSIS OF 2002 BUDGET**

**Table 3. Budgets by fund (from all sources, both tax and non-tax), 1980–2002<sup>80</sup>**

Fund	1980	1985	1990	1995
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compensation, unemployment, and Medicare should be assigned, as are salaries on which they are based, to the various departments to show the departments' true operating costs. There are also the questions of why the pension fund has had such a dramatic increase since 1995 and what happens to funds budgeted for positions that remain vacant (see p. 52).

The Civic Federation has recommended for years that the District improve its notification to the public about its proposed budget and has pointed out that the District's budget did not show the cost of its programs. To date, nothing has changed. In short, the District has summarily ignored repeated requests for clarity, timeliness, and transparency in its budget from civic groups and from its own auditors.

### **Forest Preserve District's response in the 2002 budget to its deficit**

Earlier this year, when the 2002 budget was finally released to the public, we reviewed it carefully to see how the District was going to cut its personnel and programs in the face of its \$10 million deficit. We did find a number of cuts, but we also discovered a new position in the Conservation Department for a storeroom supervisor to be paid \$47,000 a year. Where is this storeroom? we wondered. Who is the supervisor, and what does this have to do with conservation?

We posed this question (among others) at the public hearings devoted to the budget. Sharon Gist Gilliam, chairman of the Chicago Housing Authority Board of Commissioners and former budget director for the city of Chicago who had been enlisted as a consultant to help prepare the budget in the wake of the Chief Financial Officer's abrupt departure, told us that she had discovered a number of positions in the District that were, in her words, "floating in space." We still do not know why Conservation was chosen as the most appropriate location for the storeroom supervisor.

The management letters submitted by the independent auditors in previous years outlined repeated shortcomings in accounting practices. Recommendations for changes were presented in the yearly audits. The recommendations included numerous repeated warnings in the management letters, with no apparent changes in the budget presentation. Furthermore, the delay in the completion of the 2001 audit, in view of the District's financial crisis, is almost incomprehensible.<sup>81</sup>

A report by Clark Burrus<sup>82</sup> and one from the Board's Revenue Enhancement Committee<sup>83</sup> contained detailed recommendations for cost savings and efficiencies as

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<sup>81</sup> Over eight months after the end of 2001, the District released the auditors' comments about the District's 2001 financial statement. Five of the auditors' eight comments were "repeat findings" raised in earlier audits of the District's annual statements that had not been satisfied. Many of the comments concerned inadequacy of financial controls and accounting for the District's assets and operations.

<sup>82</sup> Clark Burrus, *Financial Status and Management Analysis*,



A similar situation faces the City of Chicago and its world-class museums. Chicago residents are taxed by the Chicago Park District to support these museums, which are used by people from other counties who pay no taxes for their support. The Botanic Garden, for instance, sits on the Lake-Cook County line and is used extensively by Lake County residents, who pay nothing in taxes to support it.

In light of the District's needs for restoring its recreational facilities and thousands of acres of natural lands, this issue deserves future attention.

## *Recommendations*

- ◆ **Reallocate funds, appropriating more to Forestry and Conservation.** The Forest Preserve District should rededicate itself to its core mission—protecting, preserving, and managing its natural lands. Cost reductions can be accomplished by improved efficiencies, increased use of seasonal employees, the elimination of certain recreation programs, and



deficit. The District was borrowing from the land-acquisition fund to finance operations. The Board of Commissioners was caught by surprise in 2001 when an operating deficit of \$20 million was discovered. And, in both 2001 and 2002, multi-million dollar grants from Cook County to the Forest Preserve District of Cook County were required to maintain everyday operations.

- ◆ **Look for a multi-county tax base to support the Brookfield Zoo and the Chicago Botanic Garden.** These are fine institutions that provide public education and conservation programs. The two institutions generate 2 million visitors to the Zoo and 900,000 to the Botanic Garden. (This compares to an estimated 40,000,000 visitors to the forest preserves themselves.) However, while the two institutions are located in the borders of Cook County, they serve a multi-county population. The Zoo and Botanic Garden should not receive property-tax subsidies solely from Cook County. The County, the Zoo and the Botanic Garden should actively pursue funding from a broader, multi-county tax base for these valued institutions.



# Afterword

Friends of the Forest Preserves and Friends of the Parks spent almost two years studying the Forest Preserve District of Cook County: its history, policies, personnel, management, and governing board. We reviewed nearly 100 years of documents and interviewed dozens of people, including virtually the entire Board of Commissioners. Our user survey reached several hundred additional people.

We have worked hard to look for the positive aspects of the District and reported them whenever found. But we found so few. The District's staff and board have some qualified, eager people willing to do the best job possible. But again, we found few.

This project was not a pleasant task. The Forest Preserve District of Cook County was a national role model when it began nearly ninety years ago. The people who founded it had themselves spent nearly twenty years getting the politics in place to create it. Its lofty ambitions—to preserve and nurture the native Illinois landscape as a place for people to renew and recreate—set a new standard and vision not just for the Midwest but also for the entire nation.

Today—and we would like to dress up this phrase, but we can't—the Forest Preserve District of Cook County is a mess. The study found that the Forest Preserve District of Cook County has become a centralized bureaucracy with all decision-making, from jobs to public policy, in the hands of the president. It appears that the president's primary interest in the District is as a source of jobs for friends. With all policy and jobs decisions centralized in the board president, the District is essentially paralyzed. Land has not been acquired in a timely fashion. Restoration of the preserves has been placed on a six-year moratorium that is only partially lifted. The budget format has hidden a deficit from the board and the public for several years.

In addition, we found the worst alignment of stars possible at the District: a disinterested and controlling board president and a general superintendent who, while having a long record of service at the District as an outstanding landscape architect, is unable or unwilling to stand up to the corrosive forces of gross political mismanagement. Behind this lurks a board also largely unwilling or unable to accept the responsibilities the public elected them to take: to understand and guide the District.

This is a system where the president—the leader of a sixteen-member board of directors and a staff of over 800 people—never responded to our requests for a leadership interview about his care of the District. We sent a letter detailing our final request for

## AFTERWORD

this interview after we had talked with virtually the entire board, and we pointed this out to the president—again to no avail.

This is a system where the person in charge of publicity takes three months to answer a request for an interview about how the District presents itself to the public. This is a system where departments operate at 80% of budgeted capacity, with positions budgeted each year that are never filled, or positions filled by people who have nothing to do with