



Forest Preserves of Cook County Conservation & Policy Council Meeting

February 1, 2024

Little Red School House Nature Center, 9800 Willow Springs Rd, Willow Springs, IL 60480

Minutes

Welcome and Call to Order. Chairperson Alan Bell called the meeting to order at 10:02 am.

Advisory Council Members

Alan Bell, Chairperson
Daisy Feidt
Henrietta Saunders
Jackie Samuel
Mark Templeton, Vice-chairperson
Michael DeSantiago
Ryen Nagle
Laurel Ross
Commissioner Josina Morita

Presenters

Eileen Figel, Forest Preserves
Benjamin Cox, Friends of the Forest Preserves
Carl Vogel, Forest Preserves
Chris Slattery, Forest Preserves
Debra Silic, Forest Preserves
Emily Reusswig, Openlands
Jacqui Ulrich, Forest Preserves
Jennifer Baader, Chicago Zoological Society
Lisa Lee, Forest Preserves
Nina Baki, Forest Preserves

Megan Bang did not attend.

Elevating the Council's Relationship with the Board & Amplifying Key Messages (Mark Templeton, Commissioner Morita, Carl Vogel)

Commissioner Morita thanked everyone who is working to increase engagement. She reminded everyone that it is important for the Board to hear about the district's good work. She thanked Carl Vogel for sharing with Commissioners the monthly social media toolkit. She also offered the following suggestions:

- Send a Council representative to every board meeting.
- Make sure that Council members are meeting with each commissioner.
- Develop a one-pager of things Commissioners can do throughout the year.
- Provide a list of stewards and staff to each Commissioner.
- Provide fact sheets and briefings for Commissioners and their staff.

Mark Templeton explained that the Council's role is to share their expertise with the Board and provide a bridge to the greater public. He added that staff will help prepare talking points for Council presentations to the Board, and he suggested that Council members also share with the Board personal stories about their work on the Council. Mark stated that the message house developed by the communications team is also a helpful tool.

Alan stated that there are sometimes conflicts with priorities of some Commissioners and asked how best to navigate these conflicts. Commissioner Morita responded that some Commissioners may suggest uses which are not aligned with the District's mission, and Council members should suggest these may be great ideas to bring to a park district. Commissioner Morita indicated this can be a good opportunity to remind people of the mission of the Forest Preserves. Mark added that it is important to establish relationships now, before these

conflicts arise. He stated that the Council can also help Commissioners communicate back to their communities. This can also be an opportunity to remind Commissioners about the referendum vote and to encourage them to support what their constituents voted for. Henrietta Saunders agreed that it is important to educate the Commissioners. Laurel Ross suggests that Council members partner with advocates or other stakeholders and meet with a Commissioner at least once a year; this should be a priority. Mike DeSantiago noted the Council can also play an important role in controversial situations such as the coyote and the commitment to wildlife. Alan added that the Council is an advisory group, not a decision-making group, and the Council needs a process for deciding whether to support these types of controversial issues.

Engaging Communities

a. Update on engaging partners, communities, and volunteers (Henrietta Saunders, Benjamin Cox, Emily Reusswig)

- Henrietta wants to see more discussion and less presentation. She explained that engagement is a huge continuum that intersects with restoration, and encouraging a sense of ownership promotes engagement. The Scaling Up Volunteers position paper is focused on ecological stewardship. Goals in the paper are difficult to reach. Forest Preserve staff and the Council have an obligation to invite all kinds of people. It's a complicated and fascinating challenge.
- Benjamin Cox explained that the Friends of the Forest Preserves is all about people. In some places it's easy to engage. In other places it's asking people what they want, and then talking about advocacy. Friends received two big grants to focus on volunteer engagement, indicating that the funding community is interested in community engagement. We also need to find a reason to re-engage the 167-member coalition that worked to pass the referendum.
- Emily Reusswig said it's easy to reach out to partners who are familiar with the Forest Preserves; it is much harder when they're not. The work to promote the Underground Railroad and African American Heritage Trail engaged Black communities, and Openlands is now acquiring small parcels of land along the river near Beaubien woods. Other engagement strategies include a tree planting program and habitat restoration work at Deer Grove East.

b. Conservation and Experiential Programs (CEP) focus on engagement (Jacqui Ulrich)

- Jacqui Ulrich explained that CEP's job is to connect people to nature. Working on this throughout the county are eleven CEP teams and lots of partners. The goal is to get to yes, all over Cook County, while staying committed and connected to the District's mission. Food vendors, events, small grants, nature express, and the gear library are examples. Jacqui asked the Council to help her connect with their networks. CEP can do a Community Leadership Workshop for Council members or others interested in connecting their communities to the forest preserves. Jacqui added that the Volunteer Resources team also does a tremendous amount of engagement.

c. What's missing? Are there other approaches and connections we should consider?

- Alan suggested figuring out a way to engage people who are not here.
- Commissioner Morita suggested producing a menu of what's available, so anyone can figure out where to funnel questions. She also suggested helping Commissioners understand the value of the stewards and helping them learn how to activate what is already in place.
- Daisy Feidt said that sometimes people don't reach out because they don't know if an activity would be accessible, so be clear about what is and isn't accessible.
- Henrietta added that stewards are pioneers in restoration science and it's a challenge to recruit, train and manage ecological volunteers.
- Alan suggested continuing the conversation at the next meeting in April.

Land Use Policy Reform Update & Land Use Tracker Demonstration (Alan Bell, Lisa Lee, Chris Slattery)

Alan and Lisa Lee explained that the Land Use Task Force has worked for 3 years to update code and legislation to:

- Strictly limit non-mission uses to (a) essential infrastructure/improvements for public health, safety, and welfare, (b) reuse of historic structures, and (c) uses specifically authorized by law.
- Prohibit all other non-mission uses (even if they generate substantial revenue).
- Phase out over time existing “legacy uses” (such as tennis courts and baseball fields) which are not nature-compatible recreation and do not advance the district’s mission.
- Amend enabling legislation to prevent new uses that are not nature-compatible, mission-aligned, or economically sustainable (such as natatoriums, ice rinks, tennis courts, toboggan slides, vets/nursing homes.)
- Ensure that there is no net loss of land and require the total acreage of land holdings and total acreage of lands in a natural state be tracked and reported annually. (This Key Performance Metric has been added to the Forest Preserves’ new on-line performance dashboard)

Chris Slattery gave an on-line demonstration of where the public can find information on land-use requests. Chris shared that requests have declined since the Council was formed.

Alan stated he is proud of the work of the Land Use Task Force; it is an excellent example of taking advice from the Council and making it operational.

Eileen stated that briefings with small groups of Commissioners will be scheduled to let them know about the land use reform policy.

Next Century Conservation Plan Webpage Updates (Carl Vogel)

Carl Vogel explained that out of date on the Next Century Conservation Plan (NCCP) has been pulled off the website and archived. The website now focuses on high level, key performance indicators (KPI’S). As NCCP goals have become embedded in District operations, these are now referred to as the Forest Preserves’ mission driven goals; they are no longer referred to as NCCP goals.

Commission Morita asked to see the demographic data; she is wondering how the District is getting volunteers in and building an institutional base.

Updates from Strategic Partners

- Beth Dunn, Chicago Botanic Garden, distributed a summary of hottest things going on at the garden.

Adjourn

A motion to adjourn made by Alan Bell and seconded by Ryen Nagle was approved and the meeting adjourned at 12 p.m.

