

# Next Century Conservation Plan

PHASE 2 IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY



**Annual Report on Progress to Date  
October 24, 2022**

# NCCP Phase 2 Implementation Strategy (2021 to 2025)

2022 Progress Report ▪ August 31, 2022

## Next Century Conservation Plan Vision

*The people of Cook County will celebrate and nurture our thriving woodlands, prairies and waters as world-class treasures that sustain our great metropolis.*

### BACKGROUND

In 2014, President Toni Preckwinkle and the Forest Preserves of Cook County Board of Commissioners adopted an ambitious plan to restore the Forest Preserves to health and sustain them as a world-class treasure for the people of Cook County. The Next Century Conservation Plan (NCCP) lays out a set of bold actions to affirm Cook County as a national leader in urban and regional conservation and calls for a massive commitment to restore habitat, acquire and protect more land, and make the preserves more inviting and accessible to all Cook County residents.

The Forest Preserves and its partners are implementing the 25-year plan in five phases as described in Figure 1.

Five position papers developed by the Council outline a set of principles and recommendations about key issues that face the Forest Preserves today and in the foreseeable future.

Implementing the position papers is a key priority for phase 2.

This report presents: (1) The overall progress made to date to advance NCCP goals, and (2) An update on the strategic priorities for phase 2, including those outlined in the position papers. Both the overall progress and the updates on phase 2 strategic priorities are organized by the four NCCP goals: Nature, People, Economy, and Leadership.

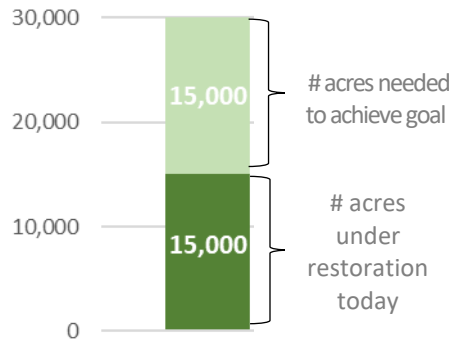
**Figure 1: NCCP Phased Implementation Strategy**

<b>Phase 1</b> 2016 to 2020	<b>Learn, share and implement best practices</b> <i>During phase 1, more than 70 partners worked with the Forest Preserves to implement 64 priority programs and projects which could be advanced with limited new resources. The Forest Preserves and partners researched best practices and piloted a broad range of initiatives to expand engagement, recruit volunteers, advance ecological restoration, document the economic impact of the preserves, cut costs, expand revenue, improve transparency, and more. As detailed in the <a href="#">Conservation &amp; Policy Council 2020 Annual Report</a>, the Council concluded that the first phase of implementation represented a healthy balance of steady progress, adaptability, and risk taking. However, the Council noted that additional resources are needed to stabilize the Forest Preserves' finances and fully implement the NCCP.</i>
<b>Phase 2</b> 2021 to 2025	<b>Build support and secure needed resources</b> <i>During the current phase, advocates and partners are promoting a referendum to secure resources needed achieve the Forest Preserves' long-range goals and address its structural budget deficit. Additional phase 2 priorities include implementing the Council's position papers, broadly demonstrating the value of the preserves, and advancing other priority NCCP goals.</i>
<b>Phase 3</b> 2026 to 2030	<b>Stewardship</b> <i>Phase 3 will focus on scaling up stewardship and volunteerism throughout the preserves.</i>
<b>Phase 4</b> 2031 to 2035	<b>Expansion</b> <i>Phase 4 will focus on acquiring and protecting land.</i>
<b>Phase 5</b> 2036 to 2040	<b>Plan for next 25 years</b> <i>During phase 5, the Forest Preserves will work with partners to develop strategic priorities for the next 25 years.</i>

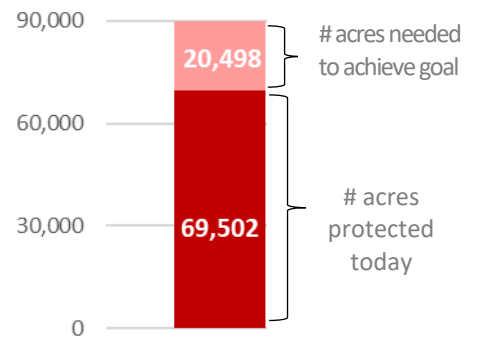
# 1. Overall Progress Towards Goals

**Goal 1. NATURE**  
Native landscapes will thrive for generations.

Restore 30,000 acres to ecological health.

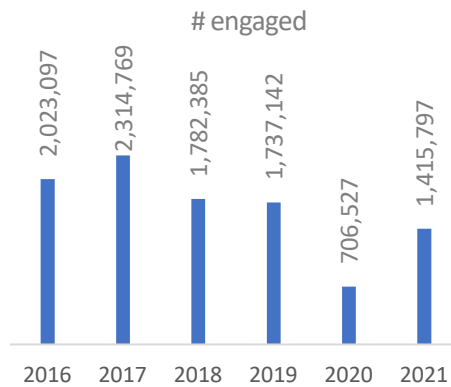


Expand the Forest Preserves to 90,000 acres.

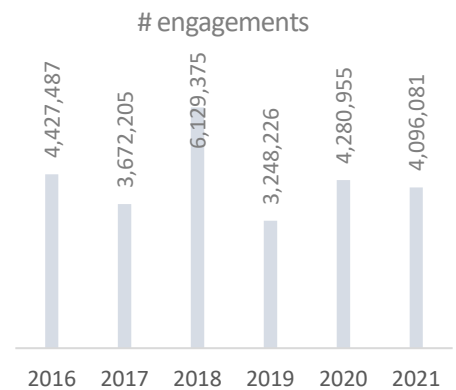


**Goal 2. PEOPLE**  
Everyone in Cook County will feel welcome at the forest preserves—and will seek them out for discovery, renewal, and fun.

Engage visitors in programs, events and activities *at the preserves.* <sup>i</sup>



Engage residents via social media and off-site activities.



**Goal 3. ECONOMY**  
Communities will value the benefits of protected lands.

✓ Goal 3 is completed.

- The Forest Preserves documented the value of ecosystem services, launched *Home for Health* ad campaign and various social media campaigns, and developed nature episodes for the Wild & Wonderful children’s series.
- The Zoo and Garden are promoting the preserves via their newsletters and helping to promote native habitat with displays at their sites.

**Goal 4. LEADERSHIP**  
Visionary conservation leaders will safeguard, expand and bring increased resources to the Forest Preserves.

Secure the resources needed to achieve the vision of the NCCP.

The Forest Preserves has not secured the resources needed to fully achieve the NCCP goals, fully fund its pension obligations, or fully address its backlog of deferred maintenance. To secure needed funding, conservation advocates are promoting a referendum which will appear on the November 2022 ballot.

## 2. Goals for Phase 2 (2021 to 2025)

### Goal 1. NATURE

Native landscapes will thrive for generations.

The mission of the Forest Preserves is to preserve and protect native flora, fauna, and ecosystems for current and future generations. Its nearly 70,000 acres contain some of the most unique habitats on earth, but these lands have deteriorated due to pollution and runoff, competition from invasive species and climate change.



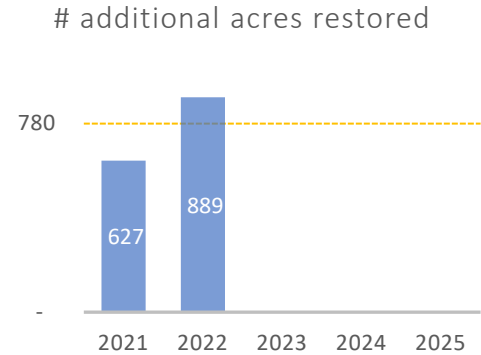
As described in Section 1, the NCCP calls for 30,000 acres to be restored to health and for the preserves to expand to 90,000 acres.

Two position papers, *Land Acquisition & Disposition* and *Scaling Up Volunteers*, establish additional guidelines and strategies related to the Nature goals. Progress towards these guidelines is also presented here.

#### Phase 2 Goals & Progress

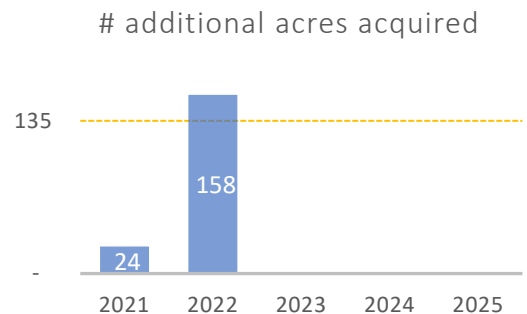
**Restore and actively manage 3,900 additional acres (780 acres per year).**

By 2025, 18,900 acres to be restored and actively managed.



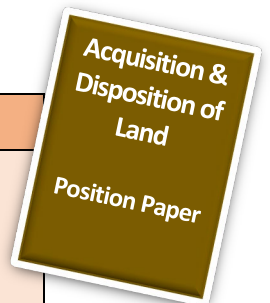
**Acquire 680 additional acres (135 acres per year).**

By 2025, 70,158 acres will be protected. *At the current rate of expansion, it will take an additional 146 years to reach the NCCP goal of 90,000 acres.*



**Develop and follow guidelines to limit land disposition to rare and extreme instances.**

2021 to 2022	2023 to 2024
A land use task force consisting of Council members, advocates, and Forest Preserves staff will complete the guidelines in 2022.	A legal team will draft revisions to the code and state enabling act to codify the new land use policies.



## Phase 2 Goals & Progress

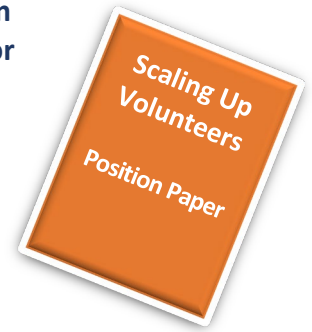
While steady progress is being made, increased investment in restoration and stewardship is needed to reach the ambitious goals of the NCCP.

Progress towards land acquisition in recent years has been modest and only limited progress is expected during phase 2. Land acquisition is by far the costliest NCCP goal; the estimated cost to acquire 21,000 additional acres is \$1.7 billion. With the Forest Preserves land acquisition fund nearly depleted, staff will aggressively pursue grants and other opportunities to acquire and protect as much of the remaining natural land as possible, but without a stable resource to scale up acquisition and/or new and creative strategies to protect more land, the NCCP goal to protect 90,000 acres of natural land in Cook County will not be achieved.

Progress towards reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions has also been limited and the Forest Preserves are not on track to achieve long term goals established in the Sustainability and Climate Resiliency Plan.

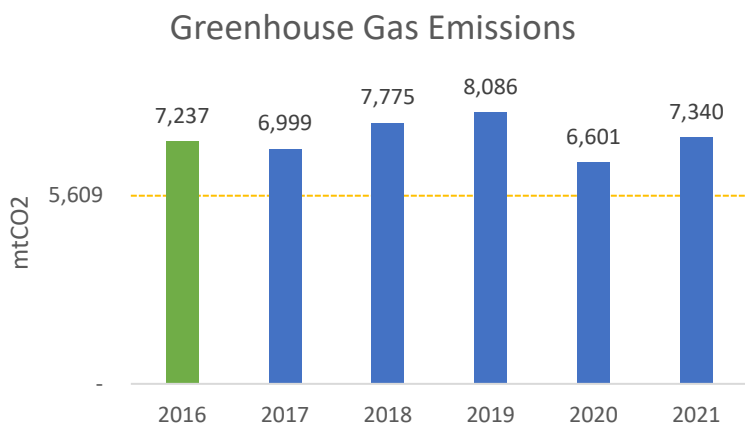
### Recruit 250 volunteers (50 per year) from communities throughout Cook County for leadership roles in ecological stewardship.

The SUV paper calls out the critical need for volunteers who play leadership roles in the preserves; progress towards recruiting volunteer stewardship leaders is presented here. Thousands of additional volunteers are needed to improve trail safety, monitor threatened species, and more. In 2021, volunteers logged 77,345 hours—equivalent to over 8 years of donated time and \$2 million.



### Reduce greenhouse gas emissions 22.5% (4.5% per year).

The Sustainability Plan calls for the Forest Preserves to achieve a carbon reduction of 45% by 2030 (based upon 2016 as the baseline) and carbon neutrality by 2050. This translates to a 22.5% reduction in phase 2 which would achieve GHG emissions of 5,609 metric tons by 2025. **The district will not achieve this goal without major upgrades to facilities and generation of solar power.** The reductions in 2020 and 2021 are largely due to the closures of aquatic centers and less use of fuel and electricity during the pandemic.



## Goal 2. PEOPLE

Everyone in Cook County will feel welcome at the forest preserves—and will seek them out for discovery, renewal, and fun.

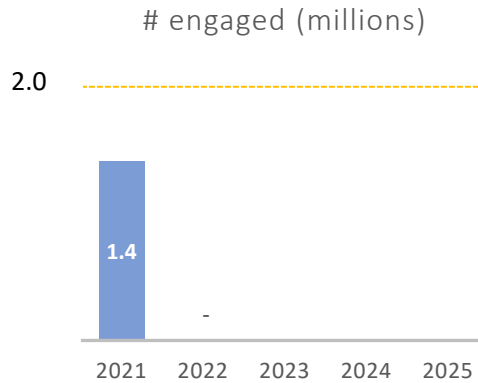
When the Forest Preserves were created in the early 1900s, Chicago was the fastest growing city in America. The founders' intent was to create a surrounding greenbelt, forever protected from development, where city dwellers could escape their urban environment and connect to nature.

Today the Forest Preserves offers opportunities to bike, run, hike, walk, boat, camp, and more. Residents make an estimated 62 million visits to the preserves each year. (During the peak of the pandemic in 2020, an estimated 100 million visits occurred.) While most of these visitors are taking a walk or ride along 300+ miles of trails, hundreds of thousands are also visiting nature centers, enjoying a picnic, or engaging in organized programs and events convened across the preserves each year.

Forest Preserves staff also travel to schools and community events to educate thousands of students and residents about and nature and the forest preserves, and the Forest Preserves' website and social media platforms generate millions of engagements annually.

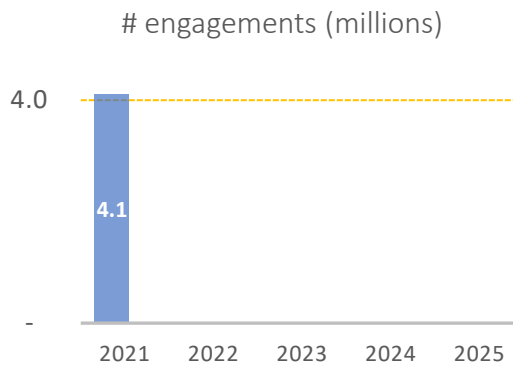
### Phase 2 Goals & Progress

**Generate 10 million engagements (2 million per year) in programs, events, and special activities at the preserves.**



Includes participants at district events including Nature Center programs; visits to pools, camps, golf courses and other special amenities; and participants in permitted picnics and events. Note: In 2021, many on-site programs and activities were canceled due to COVID.

**Generate 20 million engagements (4 million per year) via social media, newsletters, tabling events, visits to schools, and other**



Includes #website hits, Facebook impressions & engagements, Twitter impressions & engagements, Instagram followers, newsletter subscribers, and participants in off-site school programs & community meetings.

**Complete pilot studies for golf courses, pools, and model airplane fields to re-align these sites as nature-compatible uses**

2021 to 2022	2023 to 2024
Complete study and adopt long range plans for River Oaks, Burnham, and Edgebrook golf courses.	Complete study and adopt long range plans for model airplane fields and aquatic centers.



## Phase 2 Goals & Progress

Three position papers--Nature-Compatible Recreation, Moving Toward Racial Equity, and Amplifying Diversity & Inclusion—establish additional guidelines and strategies related to the People goals. Progress towards these guidelines is also presented here.

To showcase what the Forest Preserves offer, the **Connecting People to Nature Challenge** was launched in 2021. The initiative directs strategic investment to three sites (Sauk Trail Woods, Miller Meadow, and Caldwell Woods) to engage and connect more people to nature. Progress on this special initiative is also reported here.



Photo: Listening and visioning session for Miller Meadow.

### Demonstrate the value of the forest preserves (The Connecting People to Nature Challenge)

- ✓ Activating sites with community-led programs and events. (The 2022 *Party for the Preserves* will be held at the 3 challenge sites.)
- ✓ Cleared invasive brush that made people feel unsafe or unwelcome.
- ✓ Installing welcoming, wayfinding and interpretative signage based upon community input.

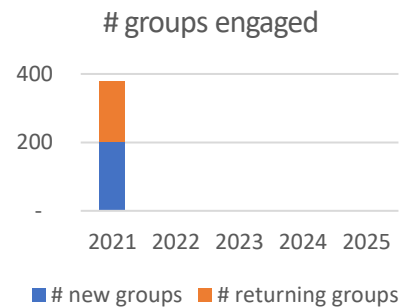
Position papers developed by the Conservation and Policy Council explicitly acknowledge that the Forest Preserves exists within a pervasive culture of structural racism that has produced deep inequities. The papers call for the Forest Preserves to engage residents from communities that have historically



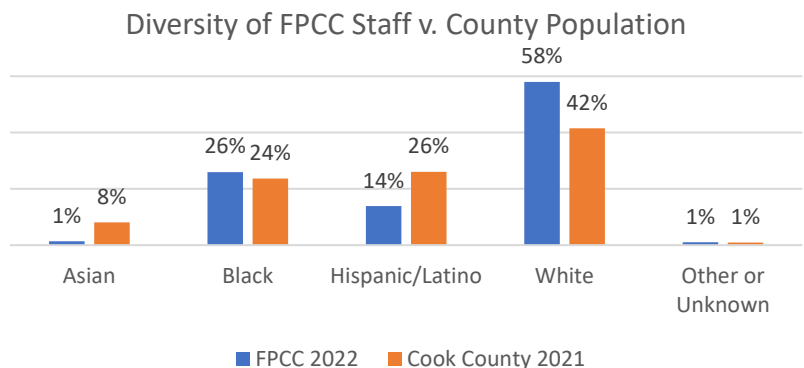
been excluded, and to build a staff that is diverse and promotes racial equity. Progress towards these goals is presented here. Note: A full [progress report](#) on all Forest Preserves REDI initiatives is published annually.

### Continue to engage more people who have been historically excluded.

- ✓ The CEP team continues to explore strategies to engage communities, including a camping gear library, day hike leadership trainings, and tabling at community events.



### By 2025, increase racial and gender diversity of FPCC workforce across all departments and levels.



## Goal 3. ECONOMY

### Communities will value the benefits of protected lands.

With 70,000 acres of protected nature, the Forest Preserves are critical to both the economic health and the quality of life throughout Cook County. In the first phase of NCCP implementation, the Forest Preserves worked with the Brookfield Zoo and Chicago Botanic Garden to build the case for nature, worked with local economic development officials to promote nature-compatible business development, and worked with World Business Chicago to market the preserves as an iconic element of the region.

Key findings from an economic impact report, an ecosystems valuation study, and other studies completed in phase 1 have been incorporated into Forest Preserves presentations and educational materials.

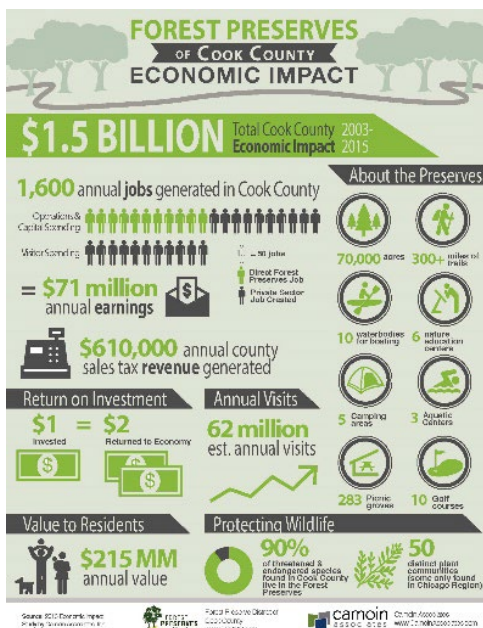
The priorities for goal 3 were largely completed in phase 1. (See below.) Progress reporting for the work which remains on-going is incorporated into the key performance indicators related to engagement and outreach as presented in goal 2; there are no additional performance indicators for goal 3.

#### ✓ Build the economic case for nature.

- The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) documented the \$469M annual regional benefit generated by the Forest Preserves via flood control, water recharge and purification, and carbon storage.
- Camoin Associates completed an economic impact study documenting \$1.5B economic impact to the region (2003 to 2015).
- Forest Preserve staff and partners have presented this information to more 90 village boards and civic organizations. (This work is on-going and captured in a key performance indicator for goal 2.)

#### ✓ Market the Forest Preserves as an iconic element of Metropolitan Chicago.

- Billboards, radio, TV, the new Wild & Wonderful children's video series, and an Emmy-award-winning documentary are used to promote the Forest Preserves.
- Forest Way and social media campaigns are on-going. (Progress related to this work is captured in a key performance indicator for goal 2.)
- 44 municipalities and villages actively promote nearby forest preserves as a quality-of-life asset.
- World Business Chicago incorporated information into promotional materials used to attract corporations and other major employers, and smaller convention and visitors' bureaus regularly promote the Forest Preserves.
- The Zoo and Garden promote the Forest Preserves through newsletters, member magazines, social media and new signage.





## Goal 4. LEADERSHIP

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

*The Next Century Conservation Plan will not fully succeed unless two critical needs are met: (1) Focused conservation leadership is strong enough to endure over time, and (2) Resources needed to significantly scale up the work are secured.*

*Professional and accountable management have helped rebuild public confidence in the Forest Preserves. But these gains can quickly be lost if there are changes to the current administration, board, or Forest Preserves leadership team. The Conservation and Policy Council was created to establish focused conservation leadership that endures across such changes with enough strength to safeguard the preserves.*

### Phase 2 Goals & Progress

#### **Provide enduring conservation leadership and increased accountability.**

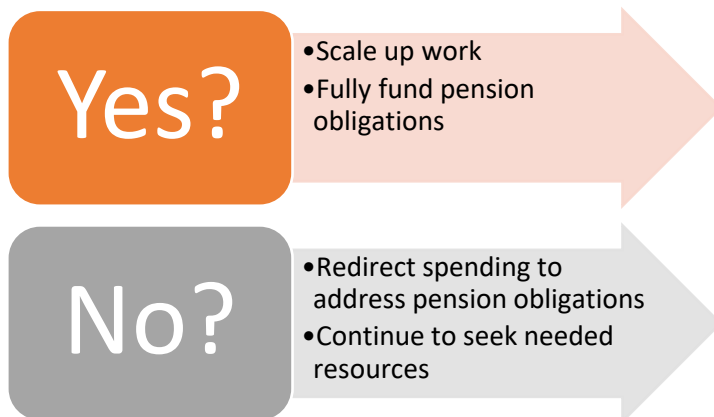
Since it was convened in 2015, the Conservation and Policy Council has worked with staff, partners, volunteers and advocates to raise awareness of the Forest Preserves' mission and build support for the forest preserves. With its position papers, the Council has continued a legacy of civic leadership by addressing key issues facing the Forest Preserves and developing a set of principles and recommendations for each issue.

The ability of the Council to endure a significant change of direction from the administration, board, or Forest Preserves leadership is difficult to measure and has not yet been tested.

The Conservation and Policy Council commits to developing a metric to measure this in the 2023 progress report.

#### **Secure resources needed to achieve NCCP goals and solve the Forest Preserves' structural budget deficit.**

The Board of Commissioners voted unanimously to bring a referendum to voters in November 2022 to increase funding available to the Forest Preserves, and a team of advocates led by the Friends of the Forest Preserves, The Nature Conservancy, and the Trust for Public Land is advocating for the referendum. If the referendum is successful, it will provide resources to stabilize the Forest Preserves' structural budget deficit and significantly scale up its work.



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<sup>i</sup> Prior to 2019, the reported number of attendees at school programs on- and off-site was combined. Staff will review the prior year reports to determine if this data can be separated out. For now, both numbers are included in the key performance indicator for on-site engagements.