

2012 Land Acquisition Plan

October 2012



FOREST PRESERVE DISTRICT
of Cook County, Illinois

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Arnold L. Randall, GENERAL SUPERINTENDENT

September 2012

Dear Cook County Resident,

We are pleased to share the Forest Preserve District of Cook County's newest land acquisition plan. This plan was developed over the past year with input from a special Land Acquisition Advisory Committee made up of leaders from government and non-profit organizations as well as real estate and finance experts. Local planners and park managers were also interviewed to get their ideas about land acquisition opportunities.

Earlier this summer, the District issued its first General Obligation Bonds in 8 years, resulting in roughly \$25 million in new funding for land acquisition. These funds will be used to make strategic land acquisitions to fill the gaps in our greenway and trail system, protect the best of our remaining natural land and expand opportunities for outdoor education and recreation. This updated Plan will help guide this investment.

The current buyer's real estate market will help us stretch our acquisition dollars. Making use of partnerships and strategic acquisitions, we hope to come closer to reaching our statutory limit of 75,000 acres in the next ten years.

This is an exciting time in the Forest Preserve District and we look forward to working with many of you to make our existing system of preserves even better.

Sincerely,

Toni Preckwinkle
President

Arnold Randall
General Superintendent





Table of Contents

Chapter 1.....1

Background, Vision and Goals

The Original Vision & Goals.....	1
The District's Vision Today	2
Why Acquire More Land?	5

Chapter 2.....7

The 2012 Land Acquisition Plan Process

Scoping the Project and Identifying Guiding Principles and Policies	7
Engaging a Land Acquisition Advisory Committee.....	7
Conducting Regional Outreach	7
Updating the Acquisition Evaluation Process	7
Preparing Property Evaluations and Assessments.....	8
Estimating Acquisition Costs.....	8
Updating Land Acquisition Policy and Focus Areas.....	9
Developing Strategies for Stretching Available Funding.....	9

Chapter 3..... 11

New Policy Guidance

Minimum Size	11
Potential for Compatible Recreation Use.....	12
Other Desirable Properties.....	12
Location in Underserved Areas.....	13
Practical Real Estate Considerations	14



Chapter 4	15
-----------------	----

Land Acquisition Focus Areas

Updated Focus Areas	15
Zones	18
Strategic Conclusions	19

Chapter 5	31
-----------------	----

Land Acquisition Plan Implementation

Strategies for the Future	31
Building Support	33
Partnerships and Ongoing Coordination with Key Regional Stakeholders	33

Conclusions	35
-------------------	----

Acknowledgements	37
------------------------	----



Chapter 1

Background, Vision and Goals

The Forest Preserve District of Cook County (the District) was formed in 1914 with the mission:

“...to acquire...and hold lands containing one or more natural forests or parts thereof or lands connecting such forests or parts thereof, or lands capable of being forested, for the purpose of protecting and preserving the flora, fauna, and scenic beauties within such district, and to restore, restock, protect and preserve the natural forests and such lands together with their flora and fauna, as nearly as may be, in their natural state and condition, for the purpose of the education, pleasure, and recreation of the public...”

The planners and political leaders who championed the creation of the District were visionaries who foresaw that Chicago and the Cook County region’s growth had the potential to develop well beyond Chicago’s city limits, replacing open prairie, forests, wetlands and farm fields.

The Original Vision & Goals

The original vision of the District’s founders was to establish the forest preserves as an outer greenbelt of larger parks to provide natural relief and breathing space for this highly urbanized county. Early forestry experts and naturalists also recognized the richness of Cook County’s biodiversity and the importance of protecting this. Finally, no plan crafted by the likes of Daniel Burnham and his peers would be less than bold: establishing the District as a national leader in urban forestry and land management was an important part of the grand vision.

Building upon the vision in Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett’s 1909 Plan of Chicago of a continuous greenbelt of parks, forest preserves, boulevards and an expanded Lake Michigan lakefront that radiated throughout the region, these planners and political leaders envisioned an “outer belt line” of parks and forest preserves that ran along rivers, streams and marshlands throughout Cook County and encircled Chicago, forming a regional green network without parallel.

Authorized by its enabling statute to own a maximum of 75,000 acres, the District aggressively purchased properties in its early decades, and owned over 62,000 acres by 1970. By 1980, this total increased to over 65,000 acres. With relatively few properties purchased in recent decades, the District's current holdings are just over 68,000 acres. The District also has long-term leases for more than 500 acres of property.

Eighteen years ago in 1994, the District prepared a Land Acquisition Plan to address the challenges of rapid development and high land prices in Cook County coupled with limited funding. There was a sense of urgency at the time to save the best of the County's remaining natural lands before these lands were lost to development. Due to limited funding, another key goal was to catalyze support for increased public funding. The District Board officially approved the 1994 Land Acquisition Plan and the related 2000 Forest Preserve Opportunity Map in July 2000.

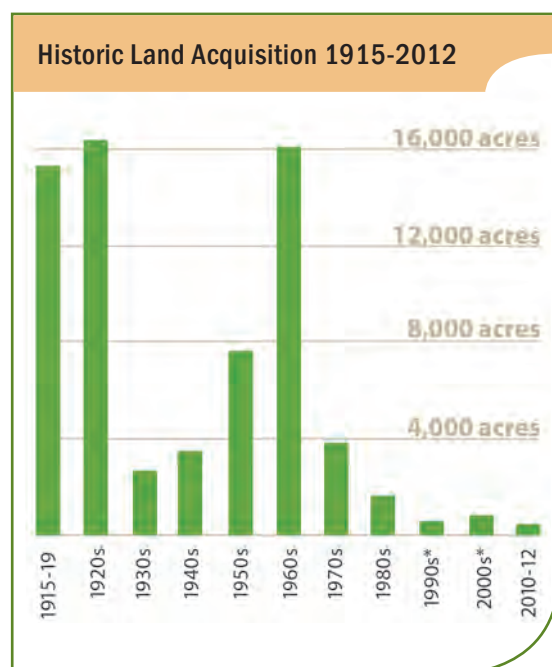
The 1994 Land Acquisition Plan articulated four mission- and vision-related goals:

- Protect high quality natural areas and habitats;
- Provide buffers for ecologically-sensitive areas;
- Create environmental and recreational greenway linkages; and
- Plan for education or recreational use by the public.

The 2000 Forest Preserve Opportunity Map, shown on Page 3, identified the general locations of more than 40,000 acres in designated "Opportunity Areas," proposed greenways and unprotected Illinois Natural Areas Inventory sites that have special ecological importance. This map provided general guidance on where the District would ideally like to acquire land. Due to a combination of successful land protection efforts and instances where Natural Areas Inventory sites were lost to development, just over half of the original 40,000 acres remain unprotected and vulnerable today.

The District's Vision Today

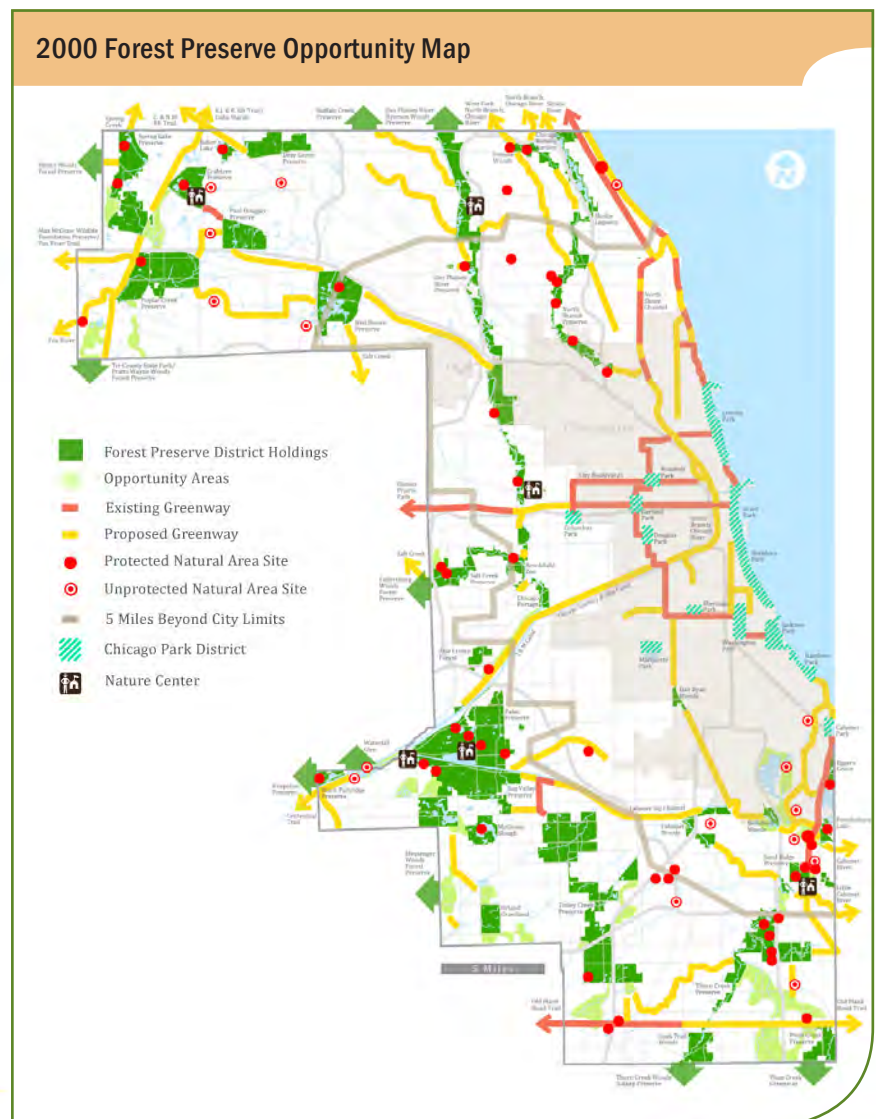
In 2012, the District faces a different set of challenges: a depressed real estate market and opportunity to acquire more land, along with some funding in hand to move quickly on acquisitions that meet the District's current goals and priorities. The 2012 Land Acquisition Plan reflects the current environment, needs and desirable acquisition candidate properties. It also provides an updated set of evaluation tools to help the District make strategic land acquisition choices to help achieve the District's mission-based goals.



*Excludes land leased from Metropolitan Water Reclamation District: 400 acres in 1993; 100 acres in 1999; 50 acres in 2006.

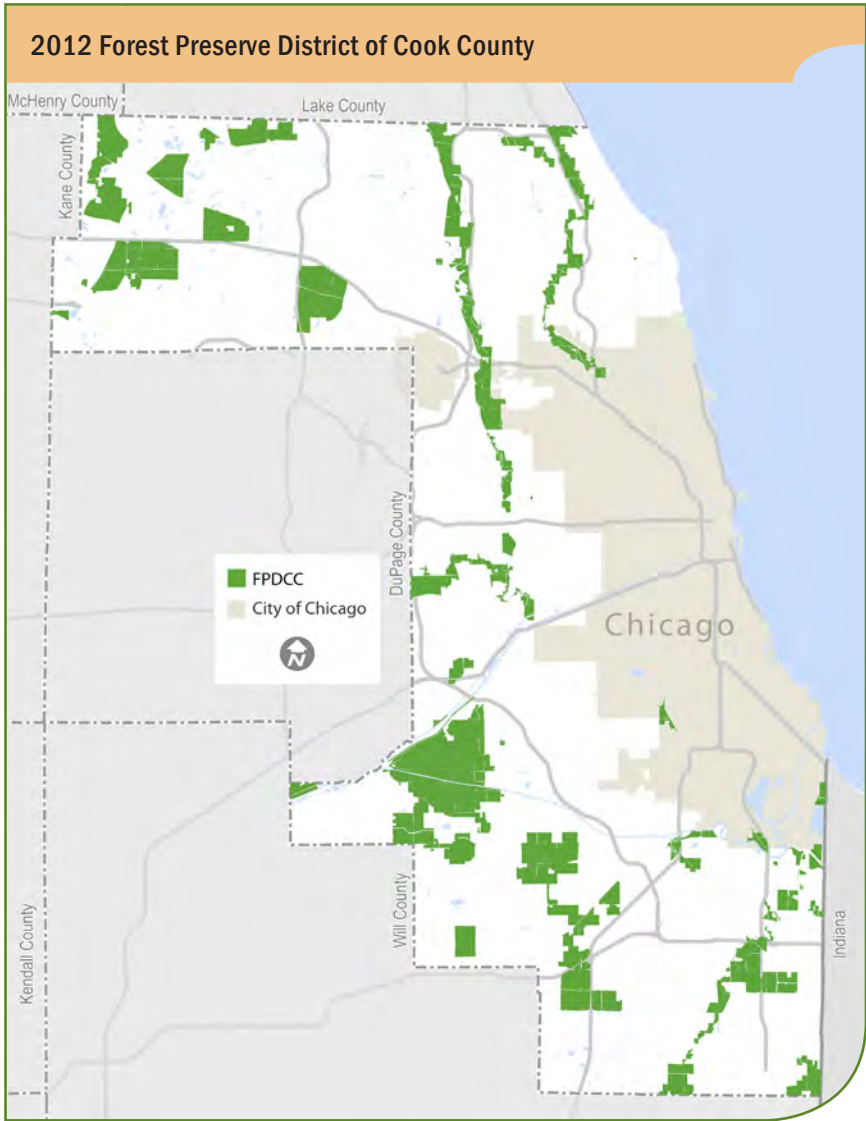
The vision of the District's leaders today is largely unchanged. Greenway connections and wildlife corridors are still the cornerstones of the region's updated Green Infrastructure Vision. Protection and restoration of the rich biodiversity in the region is a key focus of the District and other environmental and open space organizations. Leadership in land management is still paramount to the District's resource management specialists.

Refining the District's vision is about fine-tuning the original vision – defining and filling in gaps in the forest preserve system, improving connections and saving the best remaining natural lands. The new vision is also about introducing new people to the forest preserves,



and giving more consideration to the accessibility of new sites and the potential to use them for educational, recreational or revenue-generating activities. The new vision also recognizes the value of working in partnership with other organizations to build the District's base of support and share the cost of acquiring and/or managing new land holdings.

The goals defined in the 1994 Land Acquisition Plan are still important today, although many of the remaining high quality natural areas are already protected.



Additional 2012 goals include:

- Expanding educational or recreational opportunities, particularly those generating revenue for the District;
- Defining and filling in gaps in current holdings, towards fulfillment of the District's mission and vision; and
- Providing access opportunities to underserved areas within Cook County.

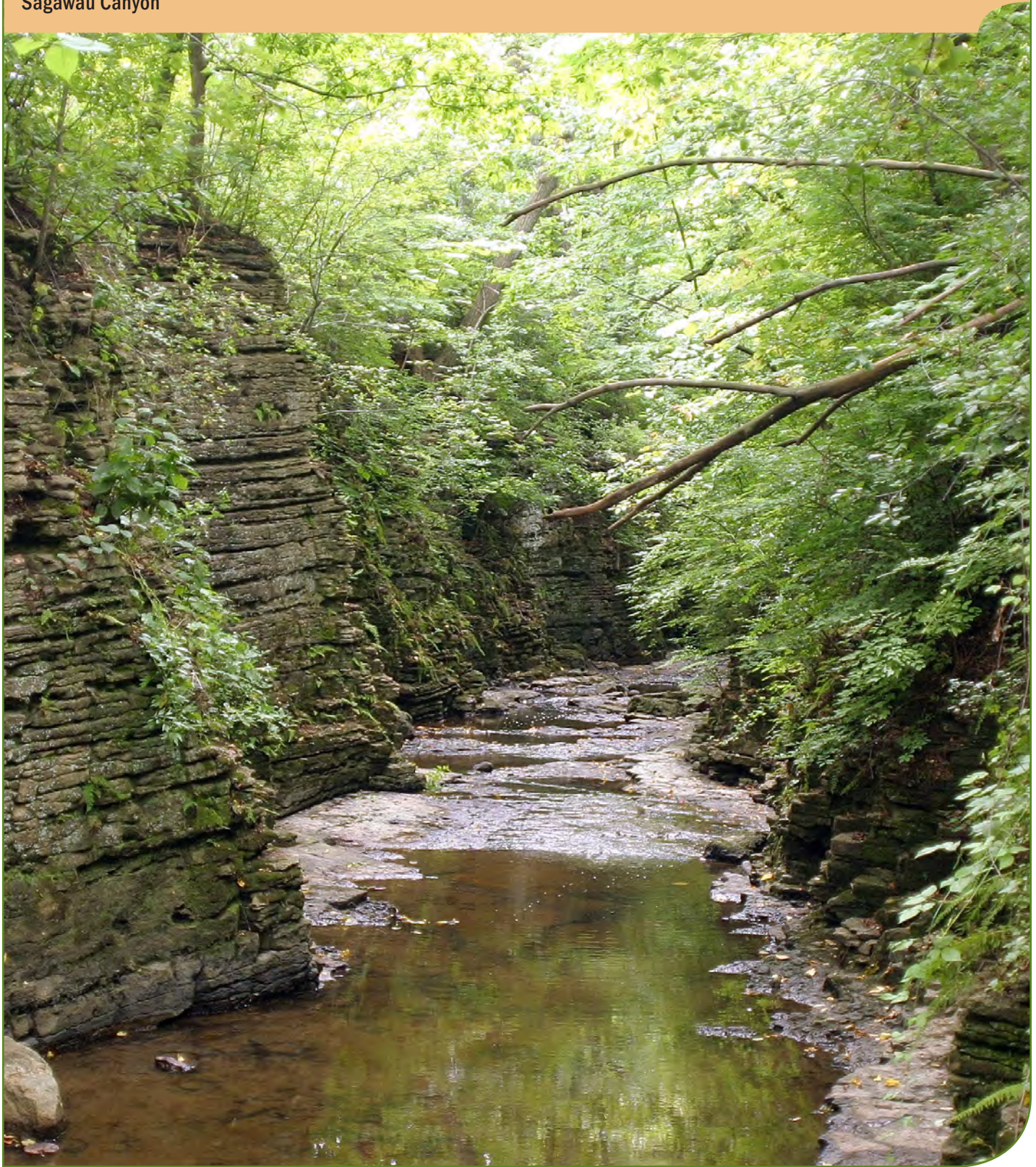
Why Acquire More Land?

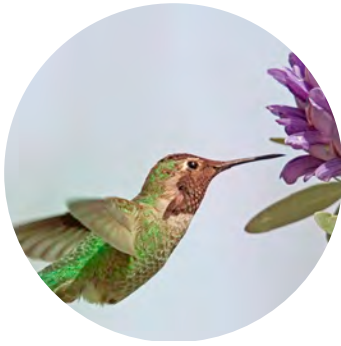
The Forest Preserve District today has over 68,000 acres of holdings, as shown on the "Current Holdings" map on the previous page. For internal management purposes, the County is subdivided into five Zones (Northwest, North, Central, Southwest, and South), and the District's holdings are organized into twelve divisions (Poplar Creek, Northwest, Des Plaines, Skokie, North Branch, Indian Boundary, Salt Creek, Palos, Sag Valley, Tinley Creek, Calumet and Thorn Creek).

With roughly 11% of the County's total land area, the District is Cook County's single largest property owner. Some would argue "Isn't that enough? Shouldn't the District focus on improving what it already owns?" The District can and should manage and improve its existing holdings, and it has outlined a five-year Capital Improvement Plan for doing this. However, there are still valid reasons for the District to continue to acquire land up to, and potentially beyond, its acquisition limit of 75,000 acres. These include:

- Advancing the District's mission to acquire, protect and restore forested and natural lands for the education, pleasure & recreation of the public;
- The District has not reached its statutory land acquisition limit;
- Cook County lags behind neighboring counties in open space acres per capita;
- The current real estate market is a buyer's market that presents some short-term opportunities; and
- The District has funding available for land acquisition.

Sagawau Canyon





Chapter 2

The 2012 Land Acquisition Plan Process

The Land Acquisition Plan update was initiated in Summer 2011, and completed and submitted to the Forest Preserve District Board of Commissioners in Fall 2012.

Scoping the Project and Identifying Guiding Principles and Policies

An important first step in developing the 2012 Land Acquisition Plan was to establish the foundation mission, vision and goals. This important framework was developed internally by the District to reflect updated priorities, and shaped with input from an external Land Acquisition Advisory Committee.

Engaging a Land Acquisition Advisory Committee

A 12-member Land Acquisition Advisory Committee with strong representation from the private real estate and finance sectors in addition to government and civic conservation groups provided guidance on the acquisition priorities, site evaluation criteria and an outreach plan. It also provided advice on vision, goals and strategies for stretching scarce funding in the future.

Conducting Regional Outreach

The original plan was to conduct a series of public outreach meetings to identify properties that should be considered for acquisition. Members of the Land Acquisition Advisory Committee warned against broad-based outreach that might inundate the District with offers of unsuitable property, and instead encouraged a more targeted outreach effort to local municipal planners and managers and non-profit organizations with potential knowledge of lands that should be considered by the District for acquisition. Over 100 contacts were directed to a web survey where they could provide information on sites they deemed appropriate for District acquisition. Around a dozen municipal, park district and non-profit organization representatives were interviewed to elicit more in-depth advice and suggestions for potential acquisition opportunities. Although a few new acquisition opportunities were identified through the survey and interview process, District staff was already aware of most sites.

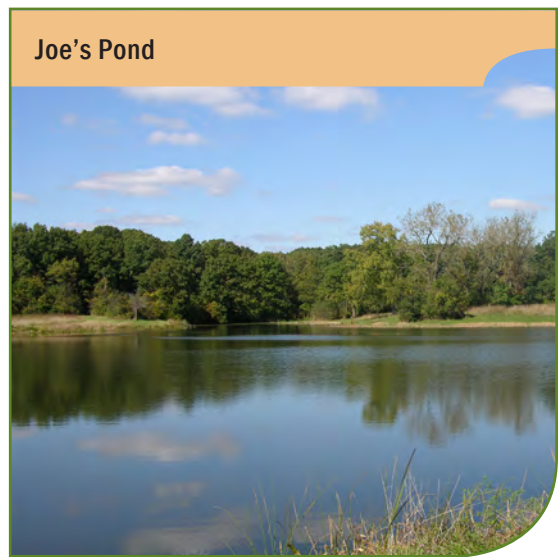
Updating the Acquisition Evaluation Process

The District staff has long maintained an ongoing list of potential acquisition candidate properties. Properties get brought to the attention of the District

in a variety of ways, including unsolicited outreach by interested sellers, and through ongoing conversations with various public and not-for-private entities.

The former process for evaluating the ecological importance and fit with the District's mission of particular acquisition opportunity sites was rigorous but cumbersome. It required District staff to manually fill out up to 19 paper worksheets as part of each property evaluation. The development of a more streamlined and efficient evaluation process utilizing electronic technologies, digital databases and mapping was a focus early in the Plan Update process. The refined process is premised on use of shared digital and GIS data platforms that allow for efficient District staff workflow, information sharing and data retrieval, analysis and reporting.

The initial property intake and screening includes entry of basic property information into a database, notes on the property's fit with the District's mission and vision, a preliminary planning assessment of a property's potential use, accessibility and contributions to relatively lesser-served areas, and a natural resource assessment. Properties with special considerations are given a higher priority, including those with time urgency, availability of leveraged funding, location in lesser-served areas, specialized recreation opportunity, or are infill sites or greenway connections. Properties with unwilling sellers or unreasonable prices are given a lower priority.

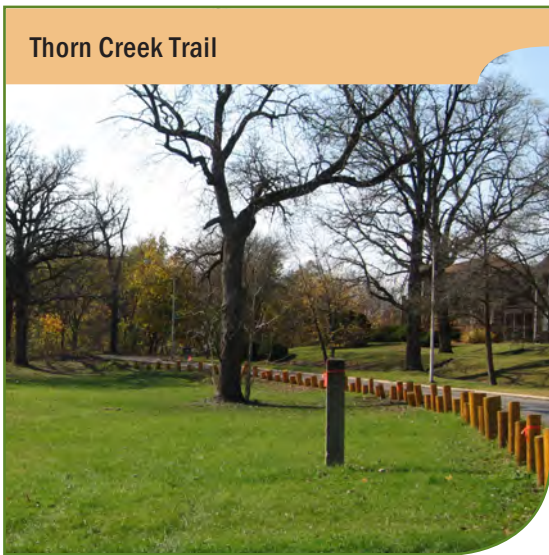


Preparing Property Evaluations and Assessments

District staff analyzed the current pipeline of over 50 acquisition candidates using an updated Acquisition Evaluation Process. The initial rankings were then considered by an internal committee of District staff. Recommendations of the committee were then discussed with the District's executive staff prior to proceeding with appraisals and negotiations with land owners. New sites are ranked and considered by the internal committee on a quarterly basis.

Estimating Acquisition Costs

To understand the potential cost for acquiring new land across the County, and in particular for the current pipeline of acquisition candidates, value estimates were prepared on a generalized basis and for specific candidate properties. To develop an understanding of relative land values across the county, information was gathered on sales of parcels in excess of 10 acres in size throughout Cook County over the past four years. The bulk of the sales were recorded in 2008 and 2009, but because there were comparably few recent sales, information on current offerings was also collected. A mapping



Thorn Creek Trail

of generalized prices per acre by Public Land Survey Township is presented in Chapter 3. Over the last ten years, the District's average acquisition cost has been approximately \$50,000 per acre. From the District's perspective, land prices below \$50,000 per acre are considered fairly reasonable.

Acquisition candidates were reviewed considering the general location of the site from a market perspective, and recognizing that larger parcels are generally sold at a discount compared to smaller parcels, but were not examined in detail or formally appraised.

Updating Land Acquisition Policy and Focus Areas

The keystone of the [2012 Land Acquisition Plan](#) is a revised [2012 Focus Area Map](#) and supporting policy guidance and needs analysis to advise the District on the location of the most appropriate and desirable acquisition candidates. Needs analysis and updated policy guidance is presented in Chapter 3 of this Plan, and helps to articulate the type of land that the District is seeking to acquire.

The [2012 Focus Area Map](#), along with more detailed Zone Maps and specific local recommendations, are presented in Chapter 4, and provide guidance on where the District should be looking for opportunities. These maps incorporate natural resource data from the Green Infrastructure Vision 2.0 framework, and include woodlands, wetlands and other natural resource lands within relatively close proximity to existing forest preserves, trails and greenways.

The Focus Area Map also depicts open space owned by entities other than the District, current agricultural lands, and other features of environmental importance.

Developing Strategies for Stretching Available Funding

The District has identified more opportunities for acquisition than it can afford with existing funding, including approximately \$25 million in new general obligation bond funds. In collaboration with the Land Acquisition Advisory Committee, a diverse range of creative financing and acquisition strategies were considered for stretching available funding. These strategies are documented in Chapter 5 of this Plan.

McGinnis Slough





Chapter 3

New Policy Guidance

Acquiring a very large pool of potential acquisition sites in any market can be an exhausting exercise without policies in place to provide guidance on what kind of land the District is seeking to acquire. In the past, the District's policy was to acquire large natural sites near its existing holdings. Today, though, there is a willingness to consider smaller sites, especially in underserved areas, to assess their use for compatible recreation as well as restoration potential, as a means of introducing new users to the forest preserves.

Minimum Size

In the past, there was no specific minimum size for new land acquisitions that were not immediately adjacent to the District's existing holdings, but informal directives set by past District leadership favored large sites of at least 100 acres. The rationale was the practical difficulty and potential inefficiency in managing isolated sites and a perception that they are less able to support biodiversity than larger sites.

Today, we know that smaller sites can contain viable forest remnants, support biodiversity and be successful venues for educational and recreational activities. Examples of smaller, successful forest preserve units that are smaller than 100 acres in size include: Perkins Woods in Evanston (roughly seven acres); Dolton Prairie (24 acres); Hickory Hills Woods (36 acres); and Columbia Woods, a popular canoe launch on the Des Plaines River (61 acres). However, smaller isolated sites do present some management and maintenance challenges and should only be considered where there is a strong case that the site would contribute to the District's mission and goals.

Stand-alone sites smaller than 10 acres would need to make an exceptional contribution to the District's mission and goals to be considered as priority acquisition candidates. Smaller sites in underserved areas of Cook County would be considered, and assessed for possible compatible recreation use and restoration potential, as a means of introducing new users to the forest preserves.

Potential for Compatible Recreation Use

Recreational use of forest preserve land has been a topic of debate since the 1920s. In those early years, picnickers and campers were not confined to specific areas, resulting in heavy use and degradation of some sensitive areas. In 1929, a District advisory committee put forward a recommendation for recreational development policy in the forest preserves based on a survey of current land use at the time: that 75 percent of the District's land was to be kept in its natural state.

This early recommendation is still used today as an informal guideline, but has been more loosely stated as an "80-20" policy: that when measured in the aggregate 80% of the District's land should be kept in as natural a condition as possible, and no more than 20% developed for recreational uses.

District staff is preparing a Recreation Master Plan to confirm this policy and provide information on areas of Cook County where additional recreational sites and facilities should be considered. Based upon the findings and recommendations of the Recreation Master Plan, new acquisition candidates that are suitable for compatible recreation may fare better in the screening and evaluation process in some parts of the County than in others.

Other Desirable Properties

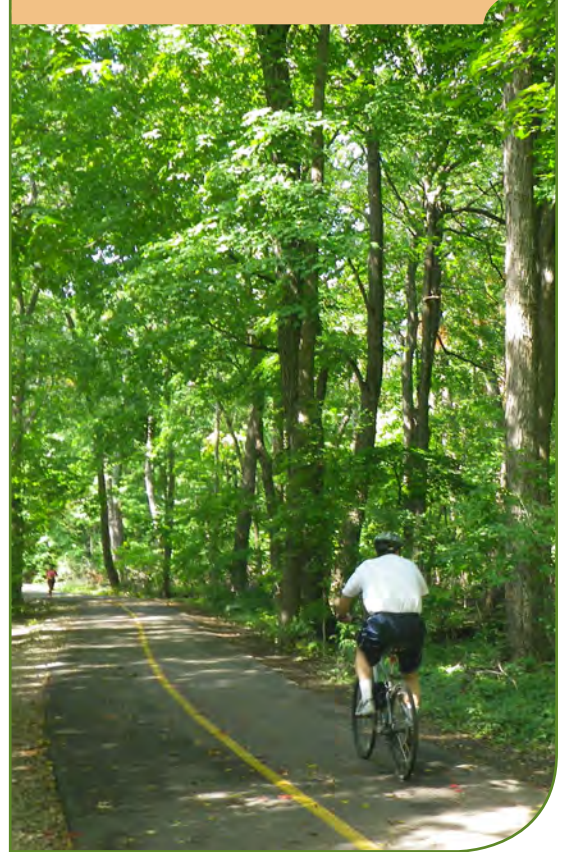
In addition to possible recreation uses, smaller sites may also ideally connect land along existing greenway and trail corridors, provide buffers, and protect remaining high-quality biodiversity sites.

Greenway and Bike Trail Connections. The network of greenways and bicycle trails across the County currently has gaps in many areas that ought to be filled. Examples include the Des Plaines River corridor greenway, the North Branch Bicycle Trail and greenway corridor, and the Calumet-Sag Trail.

Buffers. Strategic acquisitions can provide buffers or protection for existing District or other open space holdings.

Biodiversity Sites. Although important natural areas across the County, such as Illinois Natural Areas Inventory sites are now all protected, there are still sites with significant natural resources remaining in the region. The best of these are identified as Focus Areas on the map in Chapter 4.

North Branch Trail



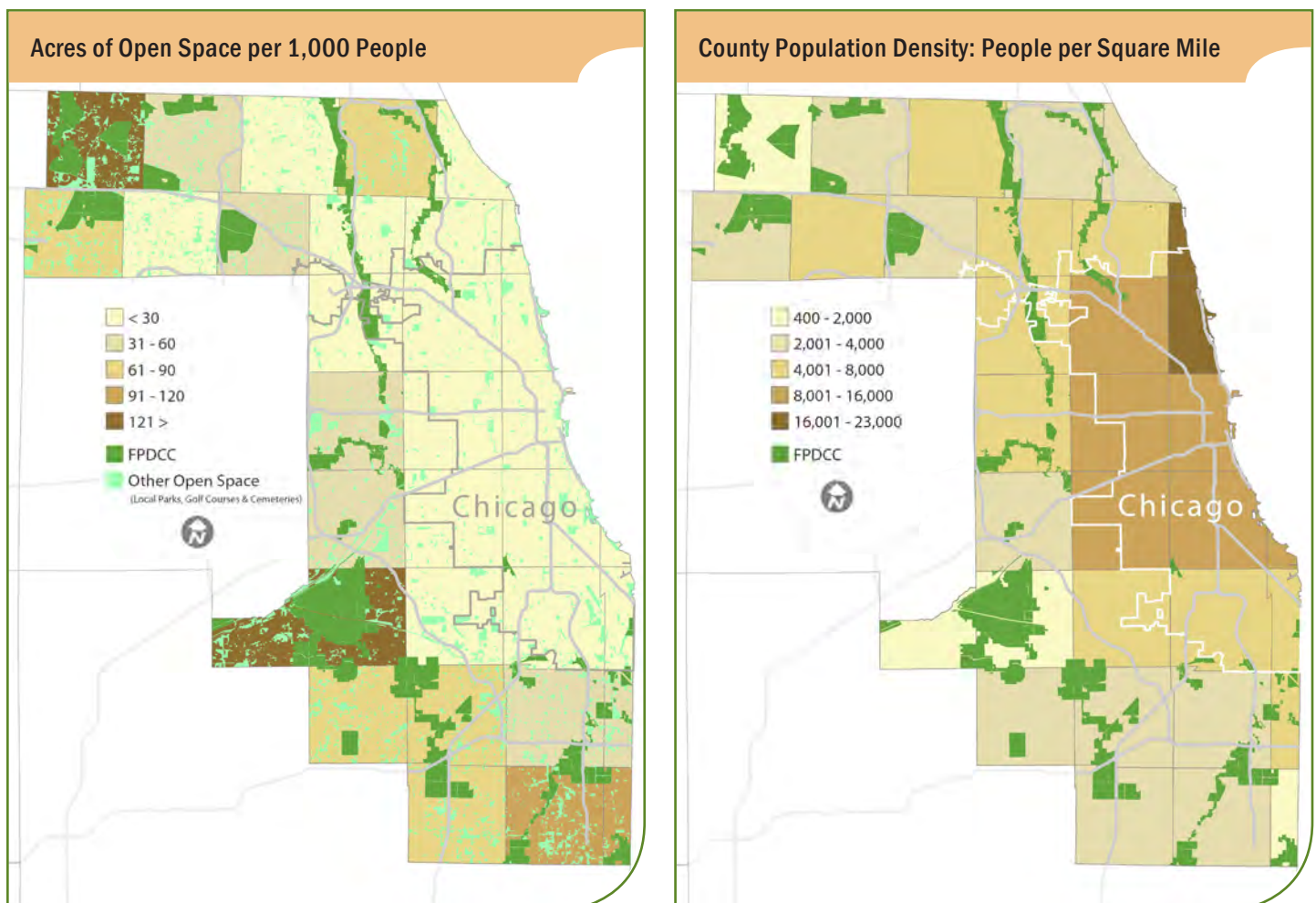
Location in Underserved Areas

The District also examined the location of existing open space as well as population density and migration trends to identify relatively underserved areas within Cook County as a basis for defining geographic priority areas for land acquisition.

Certain zones within Cook County already enjoy more District open space holdings than others, on an absolute and per capita basis. However, the District is not the sole owner of open space within the County, as residents also have access to other types of open space, such as local park district lands, golf courses, and cemeteries.

As shown on the map below, open space is relatively most abundant per capita in the far northwest portions of the County and southwest, as measured by population and acreage per township. Potential new acquisitions in areas of relative need should be given extra consideration. Additional marketing and educational programs may also be needed in certain areas of need to bring residents in these areas out to more remote forest preserves.

Areas of high residential density in major cities are generally areas where it is difficult to acquire and maintain large amounts of open space per capita. The highest population densities in Cook County are closest to downtown Chicago, and the lowest densities are in outlying areas of the County.



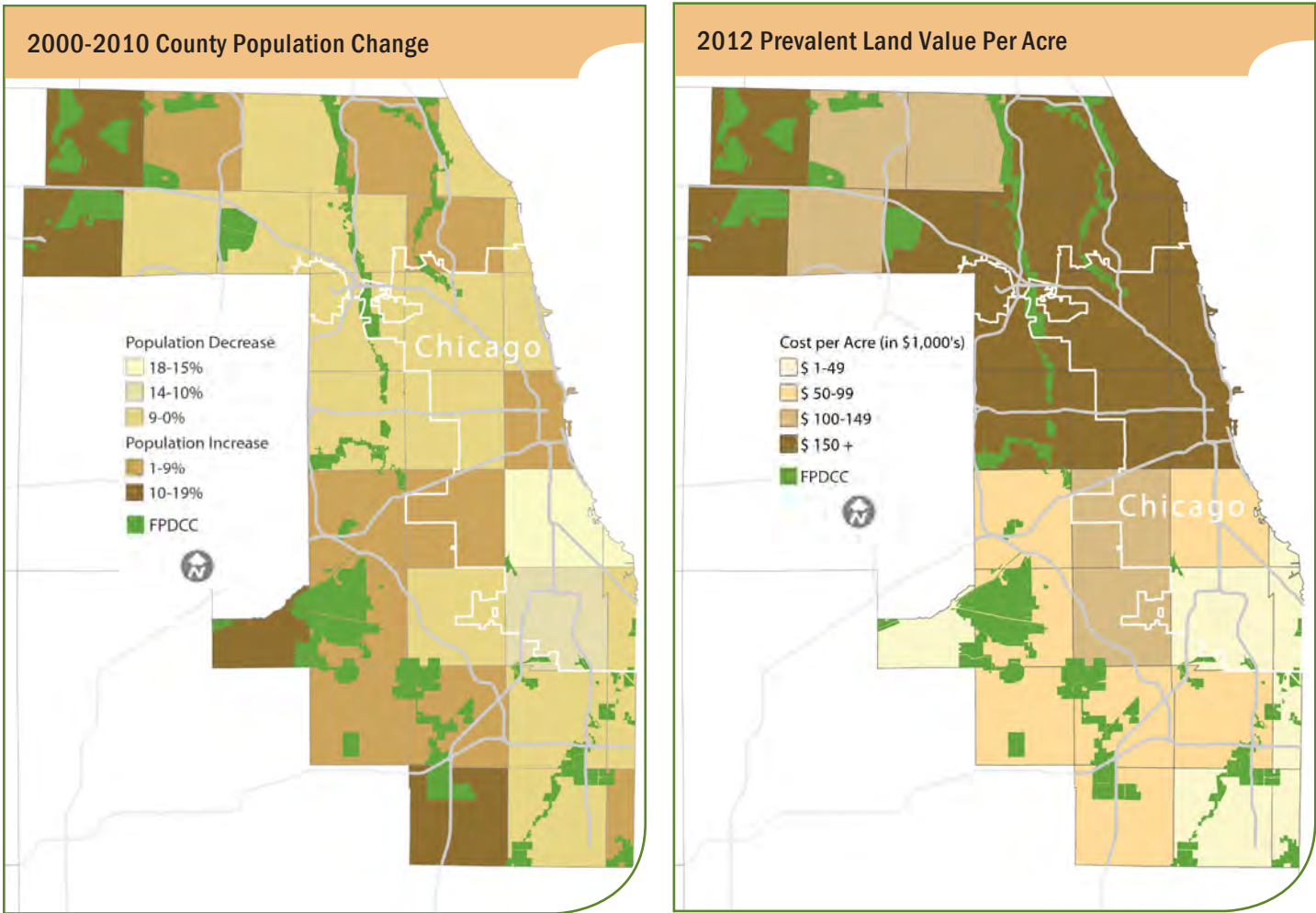
The areas of Cook County experiencing the greatest population decline between 2000 and 2010 included the southern portion of Chicago and some inner-ring suburbs. Some of the population decline in the City of Chicago may be attributed to changes in public housing policies and urban reinvestment patterns. Areas of greatest population increase over the past decade are at the far northwestern, western and southern edges of Cook County. Much of this growth may be attributed to suburban development and the shift of formerly agricultural lands to residential use.

Practical Real Estate Considerations

The District’s mission-related vision and goals have not changed dramatically, but its thinking about practical real estate considerations has changed with the real estate market. There is currently a desire to give priority to:

- Acquisitions that are a good value, that help stretch public land acquisition dollars;
- Acquisitions where there is a willing seller and local political support for acquisition – that will not be delayed for years in costly, contested condemnation proceedings; and
- Partnerships where other organizations can contribute to the cost and care of new sites.

Generalized costs of potential acquisitions for different portions of Cook County are shown below. The least costly open space is generally found within the South region of the County.





Chapter 4

Land Acquisition Focus Areas

Updated Focus Areas

A key outcome of the Land Acquisition Plan update process is a revised Focus Area Map that identifies general locations of land with natural resource value. The Focus Area Map incorporates resource data obtained from Green Infrastructure Vision 2.0. This framework envisions a network of “hubs” that provide ecological, flood control and recreational opportunities, linked by green “corridors” that provide connectivity necessary for animal, plant and human movement. GIS data from the Green Infrastructure Vision 2.0 was used to identify woodlands, wetlands and other natural resource lands within relatively close proximity to existing forest preserves, trails and greenways.

The Focus Area Map depicts open space owned by the District and other entities, agricultural lands, and other features of environmental importance.

Acres. The 1994 Land Acquisition Plan included roughly 40,000 acres within “Opportunity Areas.” Although all unprotected Natural Areas Inventory sites as documented by the Illinois Natural History Survey have been since protected, many more acres were lost to development. The current Focus Area Map includes approximately 21,000 acres. The District is authorized to acquire roughly 7,000 more acres before hitting its current 75,000 acre cap. Based on current cost estimates and available financing, the District is not expecting to reach the cap in the next 5 years.

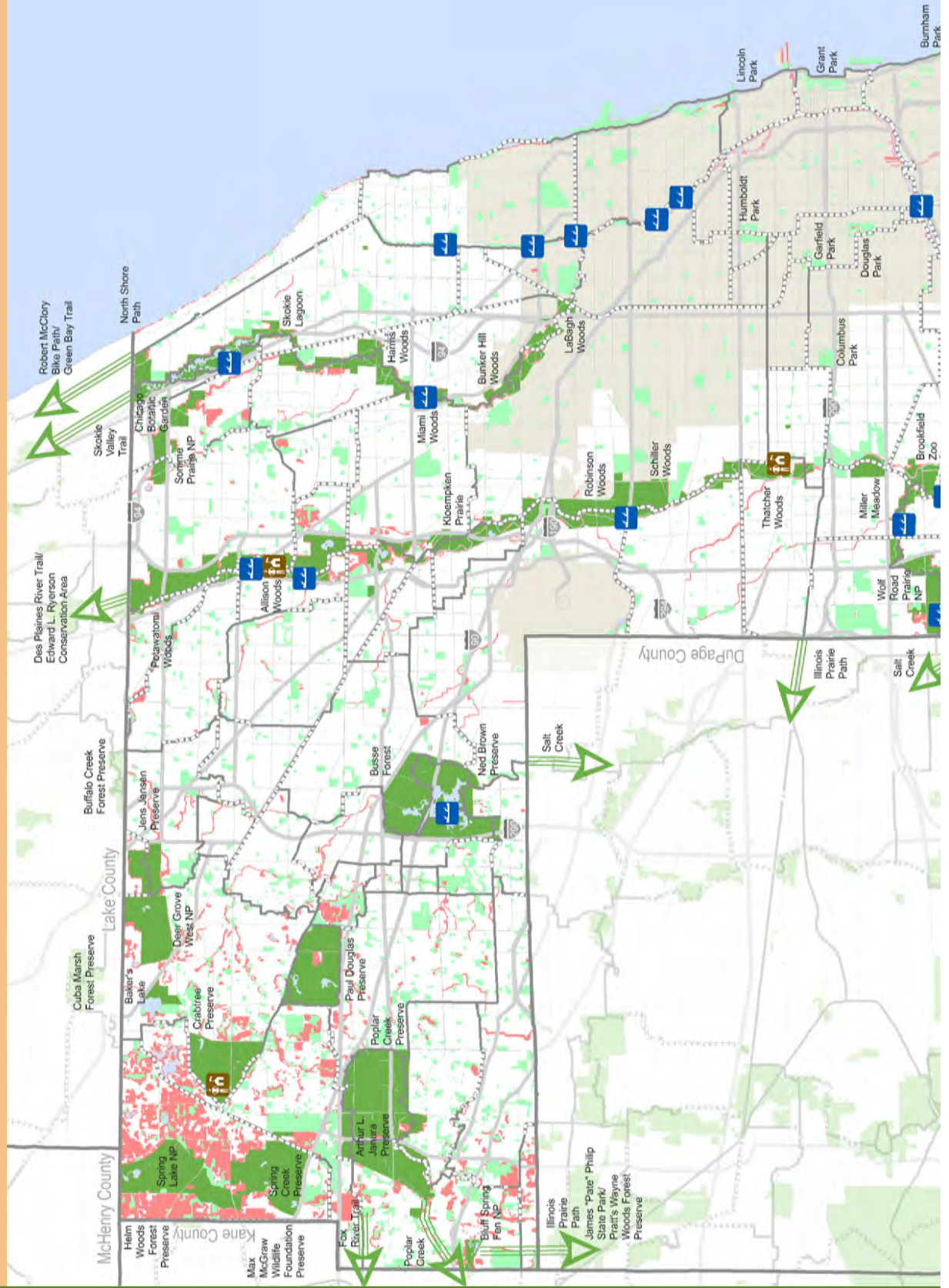
Estimated Cost. Assuming an average cost of \$50,000 per acre, more than \$1 billion would be needed to acquire all of the Focus Areas. This is currently well beyond the available funding for land acquisition.

Timeframe. Within the next 5-10 years, the District is likely to acquire only a fraction of the 21,000 acres identified. The 2012 Focus Area Map can help guide the District’s land acquisition process, but will need to be updated regularly to reflect current real estate conditions.

Underserved Areas. The Focus Area Map highlights the uneven distribution of current District land and remaining natural land to augment and connect it along trail and greenway corridors. Special consideration should be given to relatively rare acquisition opportunities in underserved areas or to compatible recreation opportunities.

The District will continue to consider acquisition of property not in a Focus Area, if the site otherwise meets the District mission-based vision and goals.

Forest Preserve District of Cook County: 2012 Land Acquisition Focus Areas



Zones

For purposes of analysis and management, the District divides Cook County into five zones: Northwest, North, Central, Southwest and South. Closer views of the [2012 Focus Areas Map](#) are presented on the following pages, organized by these Zones. In addition to evaluating natural resource data, the District analyzed key demographic, open space and land value data for Cook County overall and for each Zone in detail.

While the City of Chicago continues to have the highest residential density levels within Cook County, portions of the Northwest and Southwest Zones experienced the greatest levels of population growth in the past decade on a percentage basis, largely due to suburban development and infill, which transferred open space into developed lands.

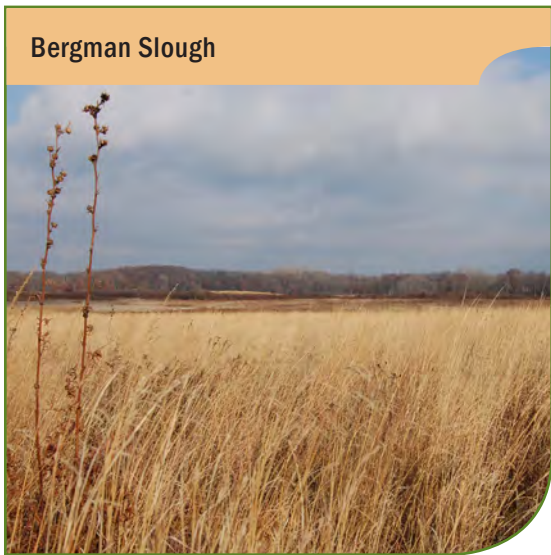
The existing District holdings are most heavily concentrated in the Northwest and Southwest Zones, as they have been since the inception of the District. The North and South Zones contain a moderate level of existing District holdings, generally along the Des Plaines River corridor and in the Thorn Creek area south of Interstate 80.

The Central Zone has the lowest amount of existing District holdings, although this in large part reflects the fact that most of this Zone consists of the City of Chicago, whose extensive Park District holdings and publicly-accessible lakefront provide significant open space opportunities.

The analysis of current land values by Zones indicate that the District's acquisition funds will go furthest in the South Zone where land costs are most reasonable and larger open space parcels can be acquired. There may be some moderate cost land parcels in the Southwest Zone, while land costs are highest and fewer sizable parcels are available in the Northwest, North and Central Zones.

Harms Woods Trail





Strategic Conclusions

Based upon these regional conditions and findings from its analysis, the District has developed strategies for acquisition that are tailored to each Zone:

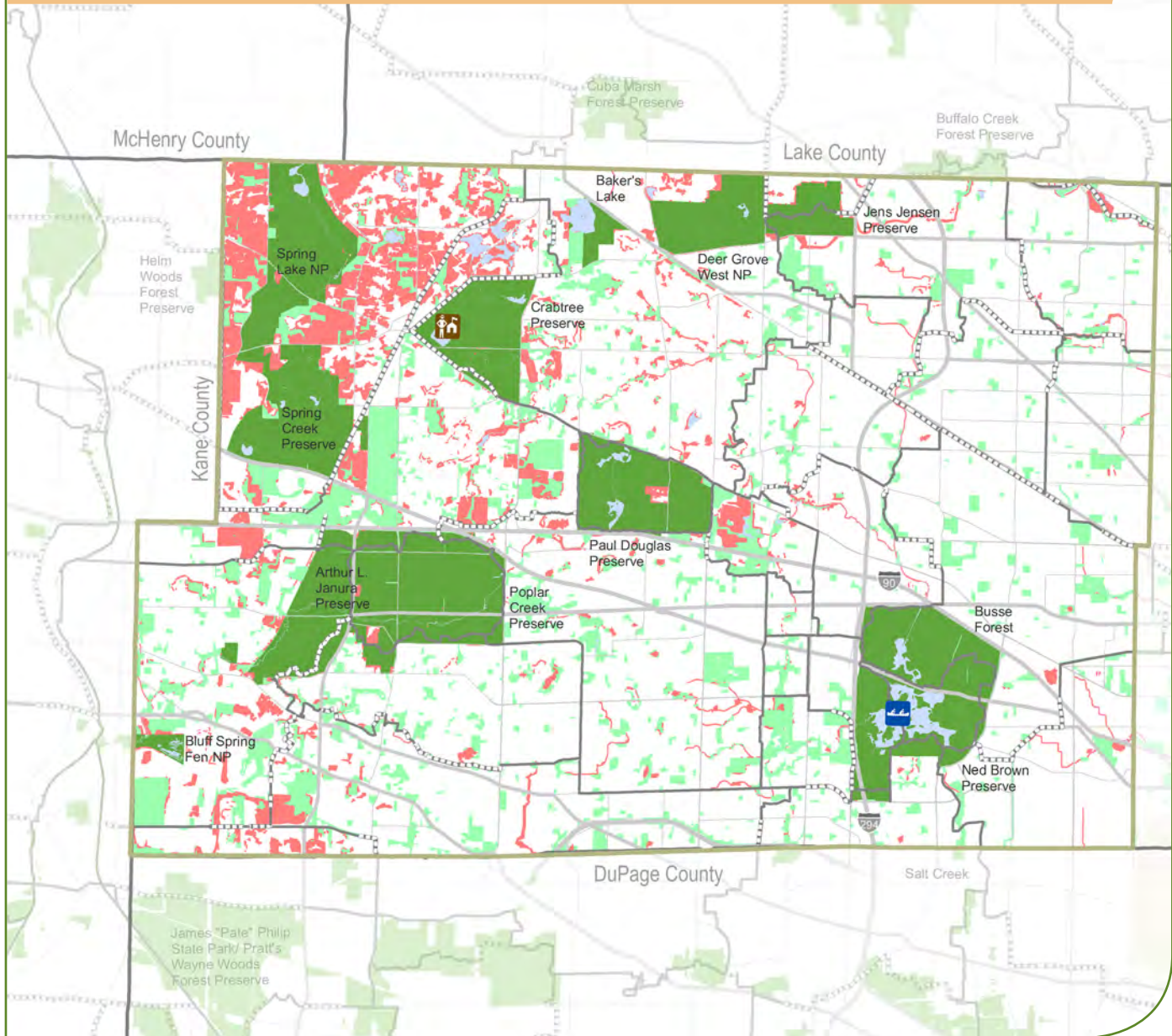
In the **Northwest Zone**, focus on acquisitions that connect or expand upon existing holdings, as well as sites that contain remnant native populations. Use conservation easements to protect sites that are currently part of large estates or corporate campuses.

In the **North and Central Zones**, consider acquisition candidates that link, add to, fill in, or buffer existing holdings, trails and greenway connections. Collaborate with other agencies such as the City of Chicago and Chicago Park District to increase conservation and recreation opportunities for these Zones.

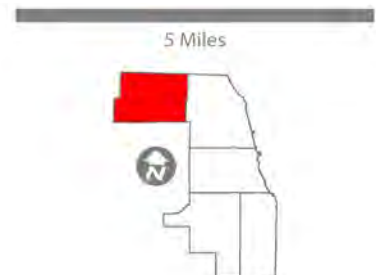
In the **Southwest Zone**, target acquisition candidates that connect or expand upon existing holdings, as well as those with unique ecologically significant features. Explore acquisition of failed development projects as large site opportunities at reduced costs.

In the **South Zone**, take advantage of lower land costs and larger opportunity sites to add new holdings and enhance connections and buffers to existing holdings. Collaborate with other agencies and stakeholders such as the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and the Millennium Reserve Partnership to influence the success of large-scale conservation projects in the Zone.

2012 Land Acquisition Focus Areas: Northwest



- FPDCC
- Focus Areas
- Open Space
- Existing Trail Corridors
- Planned Trail Corridors
- Canoe Launch
- Nature Center



Description

Northwest Zone

The Northwest Zone is roughly bounded by Illinois Route 83 to the east, DuPage County to the south, Kane County to the west, and Lake and McHenry counties to the north. The Northwest Zone contains Barrington, Hanover, Palatine, Schaumburg, and most of Wheeling and Elk Grove Townships.

The existing forest preserves in this region are generally large blocks of property, a few thousand acres in size. This Zone is also home to the Forest Preserve's first acquisition site, Deer Grove Preserve, which was acquired in 1916. Major preserves include: Spring Creek Preserve, Poplar Creek Preserve, Deer Grove Preserve, Paul Douglas Preserve, and Busse Forest.

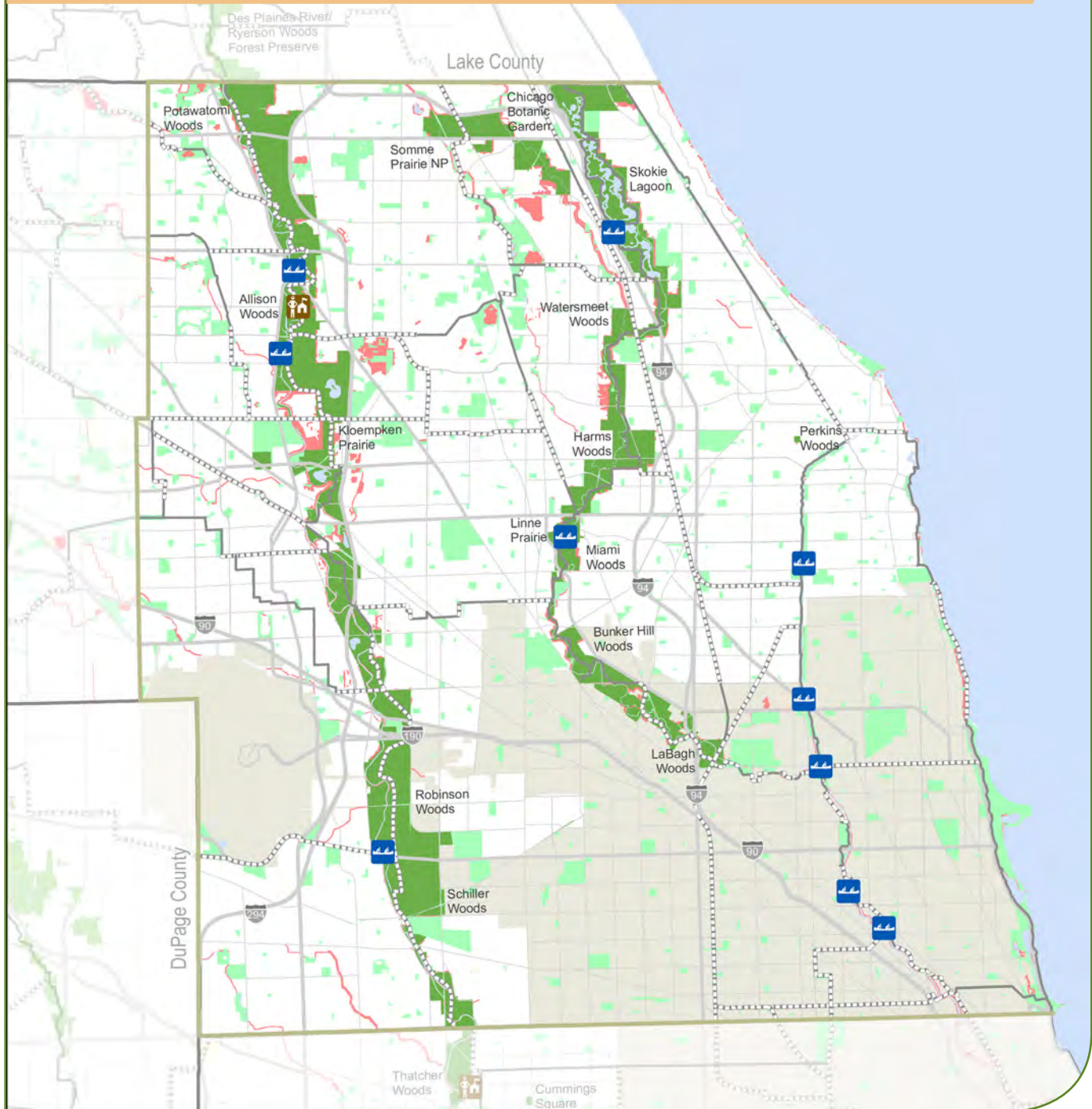
Parts of the Zone are highly urbanized, densely developed, and offer limited acquisition opportunities. Other parts of the Zone are very sparsely developed, typically in large private estates and large corporate campuses. These less densely developed areas may contain remnant plant communities and wildlife populations, and may offer the District opportunities to acquire desirable parcels.

Strategy

The land acquisition focus should be on acquisition candidates that connect or expand upon existing holdings, as well as sites that contain remnant native populations. The large estates and corporate campuses may offer unique opportunities to protect some sites using conservation easements and less than fee simple acquisition strategies.

*(*Map on opposite page)*

2012 Land Acquisition Focus Areas: North



- FPDCC
- Focus Areas
- Open Space
- Existing Trail Corridors
- Planned Trail Corridors
- Canoe Launch
- Nature Center

5 Miles





Description

North Zone

The North Zone is roughly bounded by Lake Michigan to the east, Lake County to the north, Illinois Route 83 to the west, and Illinois Route 64 (North Avenue) to the south. The North Zone contains Northfield, New Trier, Maine, Niles, Evanston, Rogers Park, Leyden, Jefferson, Norwood Park, Jefferson, Lake View, and small portions of Wheeling and Elk Grove Townships. It contains about a third of the City of Chicago.

Major preserves include: Skokie Lagoons, Schiller Woods, LaBagh Woods, and Miami Woods. The existing preserves in this region are linear, following the Des Plaines River and the North Branch of the Chicago River. These preserves have extensive long distance trails, both on land for hikers, bikers and equestrians, and in the water for canoes and kayaks. The preserves here also protect these watersheds by providing stormwater conveyance and storage.

The Zone is highly urbanized and densely developed, with limited large-site acquisition opportunities, resulting in generalized land acquisition costs in the highest category (typically \$150,000 per acre).

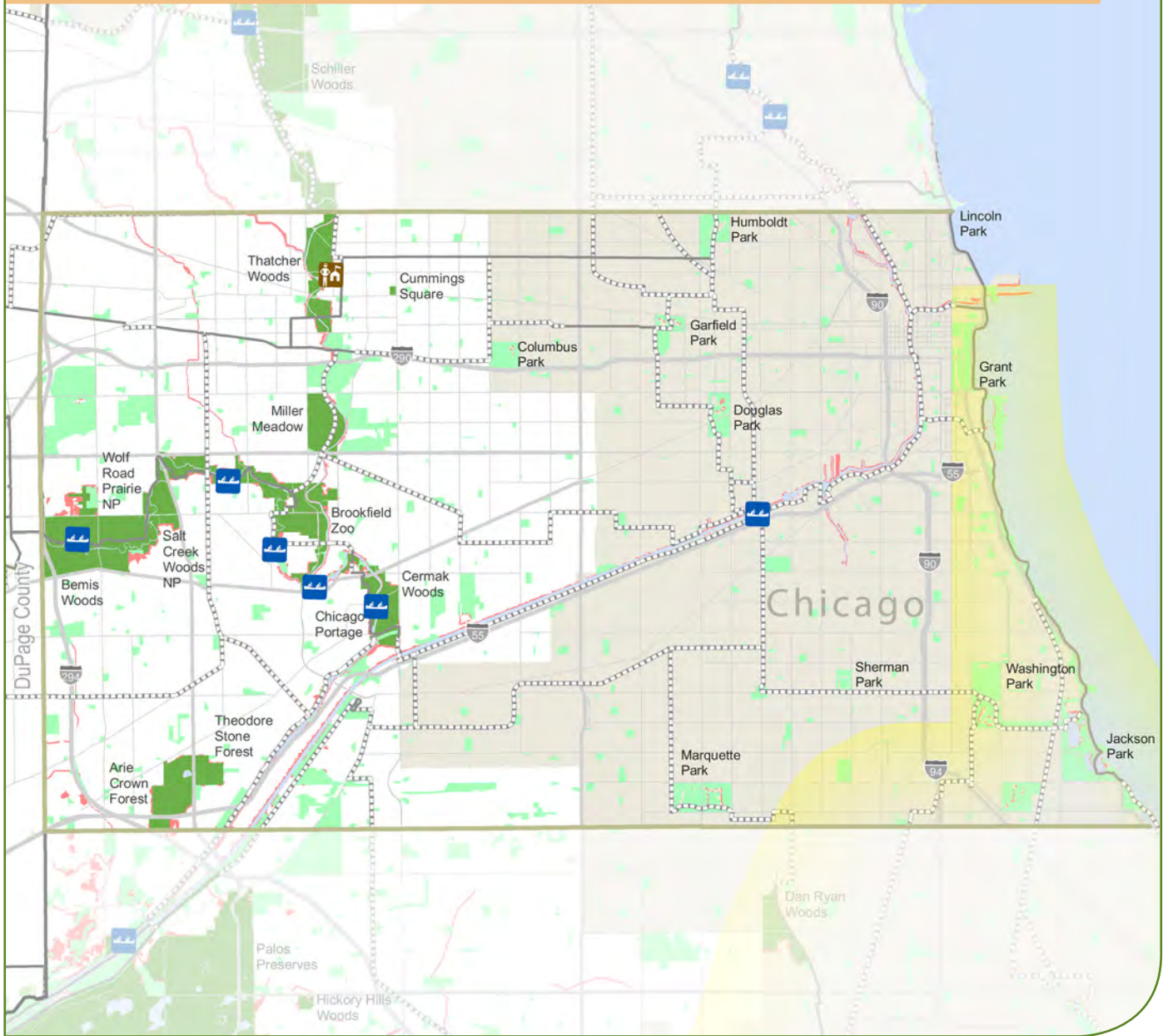


Strategy

Since acquisition opportunities will be limited, special consideration should be given to any available sites that link, add to, fill in, or buffer existing holdings. The District should also continue to partner with the City of Chicago, Chicago Park District and other open space stakeholders to acquire and/or manage open space properties. An example is the Weber Spur Trail rail/trail corridor that connects to the District's North Branch Bicycle Trail at LaBagh Woods.

*(*Map on opposite page)*

2012 Land Acquisition Focus Areas: Central



- FPDCC
- Focus Areas
- Open Space
- Millennium Reserve Calumet Core
- Existing Trail Corridors
- Planned Trail Corridors
- Canoe Launch
- Nature Center

5 Miles



Description**Central Zone**

The Central Zone is roughly bounded by Lake Michigan to the east, Illinois Route 64 (North Avenue) to the north, Interstate 294 to the west, and a line extending west from the southernmost portion of the Lake Michigan shoreline within Illinois to the south. The Central Zone contains Proviso, River Forest, Oak Park, West, Loop, South, Riverside, Berwyn, Cicero, Lyons, Stickney, Lake and a portion of Hyde Park Township. It contains about a third of the City of Chicago.

Major preserves include: Thatcher Woods, Miller Meadow, Bemis Woods, and Arie Crown Forest. The existing preserves in this region are primarily focused on Salt Creek and the Des Plaines River. Unlike the North Region, however, the Des Plaines River corridor in this region is much more interrupted with other land uses, which limits trail potential.

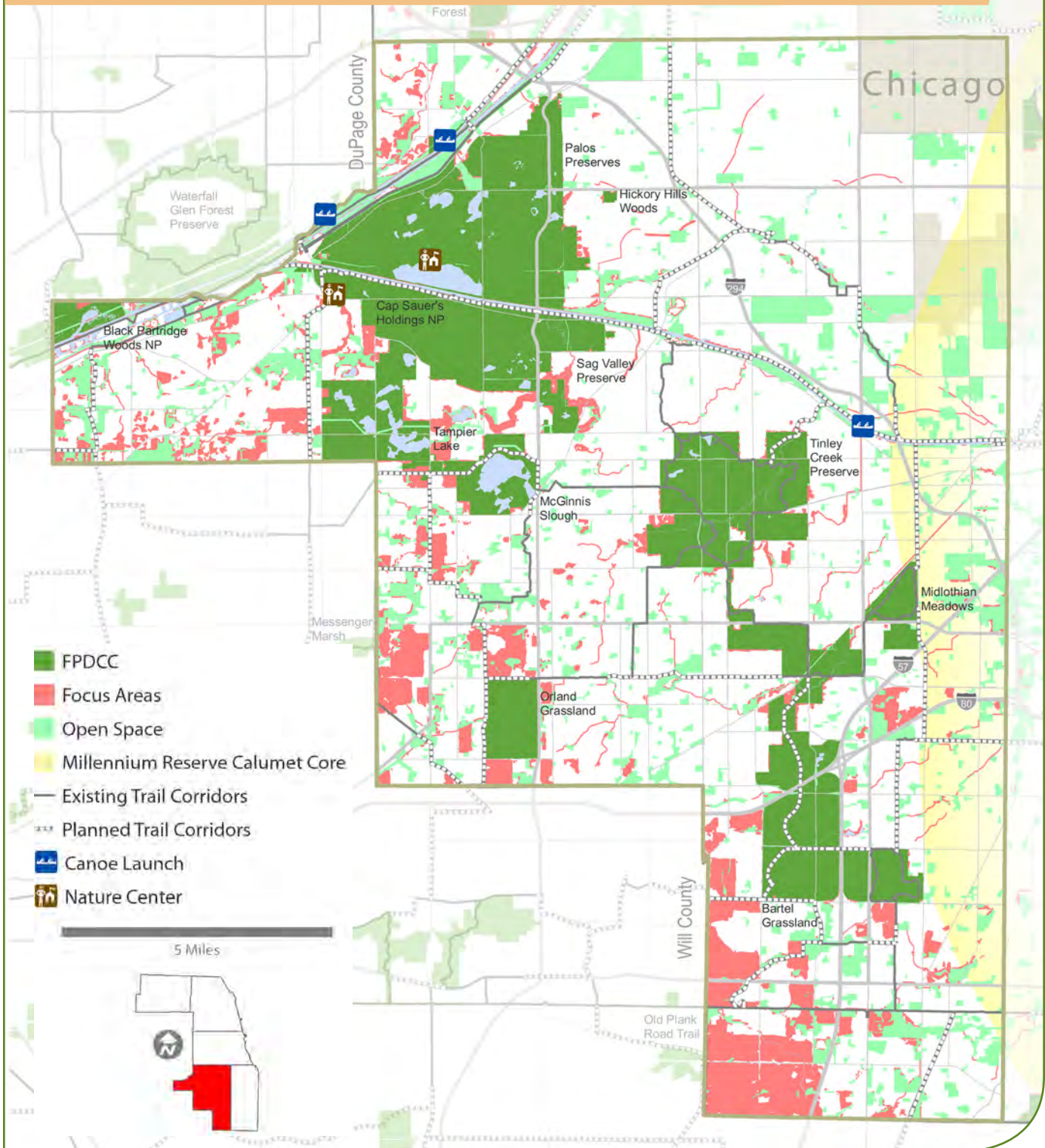
This region, particularly the eastern portion within the City of Chicago, is highly urbanized and developed. Few acquisition opportunities are available, and those that are tend to be high in cost. Highest costs are generally present in the northwest areas of the Zone adjacent to the North Zone, but tend to be lower in the south portions of the Zone.

Strategy

Since acquisition opportunities may be limited, special consideration should be given to any available sites that link, add to, fill in, or buffer existing holdings. The District should also continue to partner with the City of Chicago, Chicago Park District and other open space stakeholders to acquire and/or manage open space properties, particularly to fill in gaps in the trail corridors along the Des Plaines River and Salt Creek.

*(*Map on opposite page)*

2012 Land Acquisition Focus Areas: Southwest





Description

Southwest Zone

The Southwest Zone is roughly bounded by California Avenue (2800 West) to the east, Will County to the south, Will and DuPage Counties to the west, and the line extending west from the southernmost portion of the Lake Michigan shoreline within Illinois to the north. It contains Lemont, Palos, Orland, Worth, Bremen and Rich Townships.

Much like the Northwest Region, the Southwest Region contains large blocks of forest preserves including the Palos Preserves, the largest contiguous block of forest preserves at approximately 14,000 acres. Other major preserves include: Tampier Lake, Tinley Creek Preserve, Orland Grassland, and Midlothian Meadows. The large presence of existing preserves is an asset for the growing population in this area of the County.

Portions of this Zone are still undeveloped and are in agricultural use, with many opportunities for forest preserve district acquisitions. The undeveloped sites are quite diverse, similar to the existing holdings in this Zone, with some open grassland and wetland, others heavily wooded; some flat and expansive, others rolling and dissected.

The current economy has many projects on hold that were slated to convert agricultural lands to housing. Many of these sites are now opportunities for the District. Land acquisition costs tend to provide good value, with higher costs in Chicago and the areas immediately adjacent. Lowest prices may be found west of the Palos Preserves, with the other areas of the Zone presenting good value with moderate prices.

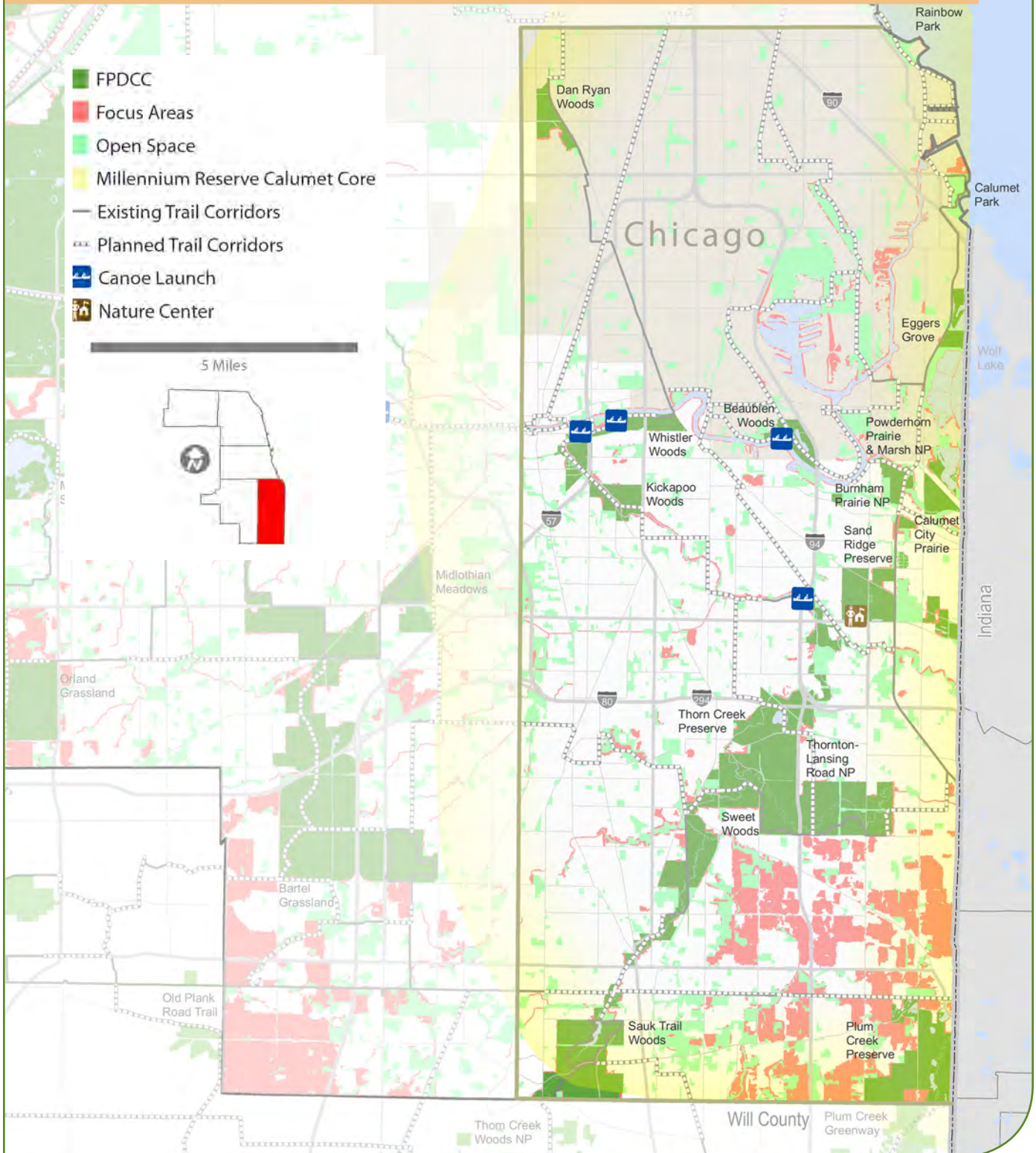


Strategy

The land acquisition focus should be on acquisition candidates that connect or expand upon existing holdings, and those that contain ecologically significant features. The District should also look for opportunities to acquire failed development projects at reduced costs reflecting the current economy.

*(*Map on opposite page)*

2012 Land Acquisition Focus Areas: South



Description

South Zone

The South Zone is roughly bounded by the Illinois State Line to the east, Will County to the south, California Avenue (2800 West) to the west, and the line extending west from the southernmost portion of the Lake Michigan shoreline within Illinois to the north. It contains Thornton, Bloom and a portion of Hyde Park Township. It contains about a third of the City of Chicago.

Major preserves include: Dan Ryan Woods, Kickapoo Woods, Powderhorn Prairie & Marsh, Thorn Creek Preserve, and Plum Creek Preserves. The existing preserves in the northern portion of this Zone are typically smaller than other regions, but also contain some of the District's most significant ecological sites. This area, owing to its urbanized and industrial history, also includes opportunities to reclaim brownfields and to buffer some sensitive existing forest preserves.

Land acquisition costs in this Zone are generally lowest in the County, which represents an opportunity for the District to stretch land acquisition and maximize the number of acres acquired. This Zone has experienced a moderate decline in population, but is also underserved in terms of current preserves and open space.

In terms of total acreage, the South Zone represents the largest acquisition opportunity in the County.

The bulk of the Focus Area acreage in the South Zone is in the southern portion and is focused along Thorn Creek, as well as a large parcel in the far southeast corner of the County along Plum Creek. The southeast portion of this Zone is still relatively undeveloped, and has significant acreage in agricultural use.

Strategy

The lowest land costs and the largest acquisition candidates present the greatest opportunities for new holdings and enhancing connections and buffers to current District holdings. The land acquisition strategy for this region should also include working with the multi-agency Millennium Reserve Partnership, and completing projects such as the connection between the District's Powderhorn Lake Preserve and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources' Wolf Lake State Park.

*(*Map on opposite page)*

Eggers Woods





Chapter 5

Land Acquisition Plan Implementation

In the early decades following its inception, the District generally performed land acquisition through fee simple property purchases. The District Board of Commissioners typically budgeted an annual figure for land acquisition. In years when the land acquisition annual budget was not exhausted, the money remained in the land acquisition fund; current funds available are approximately \$10 million. The District also has approximately \$25 million in proceeds from a general obligation bond offering, which will need to be spent by June 2015. Future funding for land acquisition after 2015 is uncertain.

Strategies for the Future

In the years ahead, the District will need to continue to rely upon an evolving set of creative land acquisition and financing techniques to stretch and leverage its land acquisition funding.

Acquisition of Less-than-Fee Interests in Properties

The District has historically used long-term property leases on non-District owned properties (including properties owned by the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago) as a temporary means of open space preservation, and should continue to do so when fee simple purchase is not an option.

Conservation or open space easements are, in effect, purchases of development rights from private landowners for open space and resource conservation purposes. The District has and should continue to use easements as a mechanism for open space preservation.

The District currently holds management agreements with certain landowners by which the District helps maintain or improve these open space resources. Such agreements to acquire less-than-fee interests in land leverage and stretch the District's land acquisition budget.

Active Marketing and Fundraising

The District has long benefitted from private individual gifts and bequests of open space and other mission-supportive properties, and should continue to aggressively seek out such donations. The District recently established the Forest Preserve Foundation as a separate not-for-profit organization to seek partnerships with individual donors, foundations and corporations. The Grand Victoria Foundation recently established the Vital Lands Illinois grant program aimed at supporting acquisition and preservation of vitally important and irreplaceable natural landscapes across the state and creating a statewide system of permanently protected natural lands, ensuring their long-term stewardship and building public support for conservation. The programs goals were shaped by more than 30 land conservation groups from across Illinois, including the District.

The District should avail itself of life estates and other similar estate planning arrangements by which it can acquire the use of appropriate open space parcels.

The District has long been successful in securing open space, environmental and other federal and state grants that have leveraged and stretched the District's land acquisition budget. Although these funds are less available and even more competitive these days, the District should continue to seek federal and state grant funding, particularly in specific newer grant categories such as sustainability, public health, and recreation.

A number of private and corporate foundations focus on open space, environmental, sustainability or public health issues, which makes them potential District funding partners. The District should continue to seek our partnership opportunities with identified foundations. The Forest Preserve Foundation will continue to be a good resource in this.

User Fees

Some District programs and functions currently charge user fees. The District should assess if there are additional functions and programs that could be partially or fully self-supported by user fees in order to reserve more District funding for capital improvements and land acquisition.

Bond Proceeds

The District is currently actively seeking ways to generate new capital improvement and land acquisition funding by capitalizing on favorable market conditions, and has recently refinanced its existing

Shoe Factory Road Woods



debt and issued new alternative revenue bonds to increase the budget for strategic land acquisition purchases.

Building Support

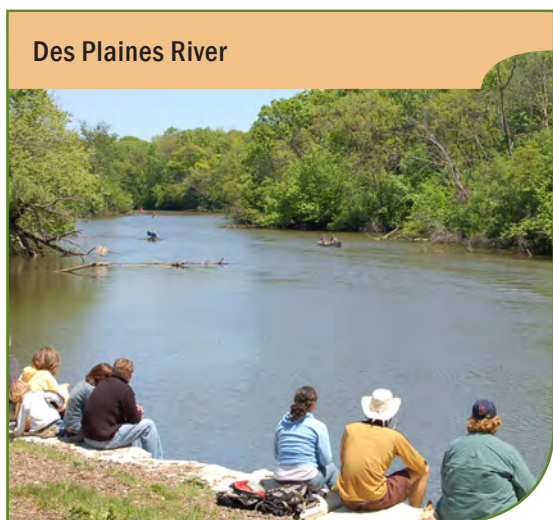
The District should continue to be a highly visible champion of open space and natural resource preservation within the metropolitan Chicago region, as befitting the single largest property owner in the county at the region's heart. Cook County's and the District's current leadership is practicing inspirational leadership in many areas, and they should continue to take every opportunity to creatively identify, evaluate, finance, partner and manage its land acquisition program to build support for what has historically been – and must continue to be – one of the pre-eminent open space and natural landscape systems in the United States.

Partnerships and Ongoing Coordination with Key Regional Stakeholders

The [2012 Land Acquisition Plan](#) project coordinated with a number of key regional stakeholders and leveraged several key regional initiatives. These stakeholders were important members of the Land Acquisition Advisory Committee, and provided substantial insights and data to the [2012 Land Acquisition Plan](#). Key partnerships and ongoing coordination with these and other important stakeholders will be an important component toward the successful implementation of the [2012 Land Acquisition Plan](#).

Chicago Wilderness is a regional alliance that brings together over 260 public, private and not-for-profit organizations to restore local nature and improve the quality of life for all living things by protecting the lands and waters on which the region depends. The District plays a leadership role in Chicago Wilderness. Initiatives such as the Green Infrastructure Vision 2.0 digital mapping, undertaken together with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, will continue to be important.

Non-profit environmental organizations have already contributed significantly to land conservation in Cook County through research, planning and advocacy. Some organizations, such as Openlands and Trust for Public Land also serve as intermediaries to assemble, buy or hold land. The District should leverage the collaboration and support of representatives of these organizations who participated on the Land Acquisition Advisory Committee to assist in the negotiation of acquisition candidate sites.



The District contracts with a number of governmental agencies to manage and operate open space properties. With the increasing attention to stormwater management and flooding throughout the region, the District will need to continue to collaborate with the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago and other agencies to develop regional solutions to stormwater management and flooding challenges. Development of the Millennium Reserve in south Cook County is another example of cooperation between multiple state, regional and local agencies (including the City of Chicago and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources) to jointly attract federal and private funding.



Egret



Conclusions

The 2012 Land Acquisition Plan provides important updated geographic information and policies that will help the District identify, evaluate, acquire and manage strategic acquisition properties that will fill in gaps and strengthen the already remarkable District system of holdings.

There are still good reasons for the District to continue acquiring the best of the County's remaining natural land. This updated Plan will enhance the District's ability to capitalize on time-sensitive and rare opportunities to acquire and operate appropriate lands to further fulfill its mission.



Acknowledgements

The Forest Preserve District of Cook County would like to gratefully acknowledge the contributions of many individuals and organizations whose assistance made possible the development of the 2012 Land Acquisition Plan. The Land Acquisition Advisory Committee provided valuable strategic advice over the one-year update process. Over a dozen local and regional planners, park district and environmental group representatives provided input and suggestions through survey responses and interviews. Our apologies to anyone we missed.

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Credits

Photos on pages 6, 11, 31 and 34, courtesy of Paul Dacko. Front cover (center and lower left), Christina Rutter, FPDCC. All others, FPDCC.

Map source data from FPDCC, Cook County, CMAP, GIV 2.0 and U.S. Census.



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