

# Forest Preserves of Cook County Conservation & Policy Council Meeting

## April 16, 2025

Chicago Botanic Garden, 1000 Lake Cook Road, Glencoe, IL

**Presenters:** Dr. Kay Havens, Izabella Redlinski, Andrea Kramer, Molly Marz, Renee Patten

**Council Members in Attendance:** Alan Bell, Daisy Feidt, Ryen Nagle, Laurel Ross, Kim Ruffin, Jackie Samuel, Henrietta Saunders, Vice-chairperson, Mark Templeton, Chairperson, Alaka Wali

**Absent:** Commissioner Josina Morita, Megan Bang (resigned April 1, 2025)

## MINUTES

**Call to Order** Chairman Templeton called the meeting to order at 10:00 am. And welcomed Chicago Botanic Garden President Jean M. Franczyk and Commissioner Scott Britton (14<sup>th</sup> District).

**Welcome.** Welcome from Chicago Botanic Garden President Jean M. Franczyk welcomed guests and Commissioner Britton.

**Land Acknowledgement.** Commissioner Britton read the Forest Preserves' Land Acknowledgement.

**Nature spotlight.** Dr. Kay Havens provided an overview of native seed conservation efforts at the Chicago Botanic Garden.

**Approval of Minutes.** Motion to approve the minutes moved by Laurel seconded by Jacqueline. The minutes for the meeting of January 30, 2025, were unanimously approved.

**Public Comments.** There were no public comments.

### Chairman's report.

- **Council Membership Update:**

- Megan Bang has resigned from the Conservation & Policy Council. Her departure leaves a gap, particularly in representation of Native American communities and perspectives, and Megan has provided three recommendations for potential new members.
- Eileen will share with the Council a list of underrepresented areas of expertise and asks that Council members send additional candidate recommendations, including a CV or a professional profile, along with their name and contact information. Please send recommendations to Eileen and Michelle. The Nominating Committee will be convened to evaluate recommendations.

- In addition to traditional appointment considerations, the Council will also explore nominations of emerging and younger conservation leaders (e.g., Alan Bell).
  - Council member bios will be updated on the website. Please review your current bio and send any updates or changes to Michelle.
  - The Chair expressed appreciation for Council members' involvement in recent presentations and for generously sharing their expertise.
- **Preview of June Meeting:**  
 The next meeting will be on June 27, 2025 and has been extended from its usual time to 9am-2pm to allow a deeper dive into restoration, a priority for the Next Century Conservation Plan, the Council, and the Forest Preserves. Laurel, Kim, and Hank are working with Forest Preserves' Resource Management staff to prepare the presentation.
    - **Q: Regarding the June 27 agenda – What is the “engaging volunteers team”?**  
**A:** This is a new coalition formed to coordinate organizations that bring volunteers to the Forest Preserves. The effort builds on previous initiatives such as SENA and recent discussions with the Volunteer Resource Center (VRC). More information will be shared before the meeting. Henrietta Saunders and Eileen are points of contact.
    - Council members are encouraged to make time for the **Camp Bullfrog Tour** held the morning of the meeting.
  - **Board Meeting Participation:**  
 The Chair thanked council members who are scheduled to present at upcoming Forest Preserves' Board meetings.
    - **Tips for Board Presentations:**  
 Commissioner Britton emphasized that public comments have influenced policy decisions in the past.
      - Keep remarks concise and action oriented.
      - Avoid confrontational or overly critical tones, “Don’t threaten them out of office!”
      - Focus on raising awareness and building support.
    - **Laurel Ross’ Tip:**  
 Commissioners have become more open, engaged, and respectful over time. If you need assistance crafting or refining remarks, Forest Preserve staff can help.

#### **Discussion with Interim General Superintendent Eileen Figel.**

- **Underground Railroad sites tour:** The Conservation and Experiential Program (CEP) team is collaborating on a project to honor the history of the Underground Railroad at several Forest Preserves sites in Calumet. The CEP team is working with a network of partners to promote accurate and inclusive historical narratives.
- **Prescribed Burns in the News:**  
 Block Club Chicago recently featured the Forest Preserves' prescribed burn program,

which burns more than 7,700 acres annually, and is one of the largest and most successful programs in the country. Director of Resource Management John McCabe continues to train others in prescribed fire best practices.

- **Spring Activities & Stewardship Opportunities:**

A full calendar of spring events is underway, including hikes, clean-ups, bike rides, and wetland restoration.

- **Partnership with MWRD (Metropolitan Water Reclamation District):**

The Forest Preserves is partnering with MWRD on flood mitigation efforts. A future tour or presentation will be planned.

- **Federal Funding Landscape:**

Michelle provided an update on the potential impact of federal funding cuts.

- **General Notes on Funding & Equity:**

While most Forest Preserves funding comes from local taxes, the federal funding climate remains uncertain. It was noted that the preserves offered solace during the pandemic and likely will again in future times of need. Unfortunately, there is limited legal authority to intervene if groups, including immigrant communities, are targeted in public spaces. Nonetheless, staff are committed to creating a welcoming, inclusive environment.

- **Superintendent Search:**

Interviews for the permanent General Superintendent position are currently underway and an announcement is likely in May.

- **Acknowledgment of Leadership:**

Chairperson Mark Templeton expressed gratitude for Eileen Figel's steady and thoughtful leadership during this transitional period and also called out Debra Shore's leadership and partnership as former Region 5 EPA Administrator and MWRD Commissioner.

### **Seed Amplification Program (SAP)**

Iza Redlinski, Deputy Director of Resource Management; Molly Marz, SAP Manager; Andrea Kramer, Chicago Botanic Garden

The Seed Amplification Program (SAP) focuses on growing and distributing native seeds for restoration projects within the Forest Preserves. The program is managed by the Seed Amplification Program team, with a goal to enhance seed production, collection, and storage for large-scale habitat restoration efforts.

- **SAP Needs:**

- Building a **hoop house** for temperature control and plug planting.
- Seed cleaning and storage capacity, including seed racks, fridges, and beds.
- Involving volunteer groups and departments to scale the program effectively.
- Completing the Field Map App and AGOL Map to track and collect data.

## **Q&A Highlights:**

- Laurel requested a tour of Red Gate Woods during the June meeting. The request was noted and will be arranged.
- Kim inquired about the involvement of UW Stevens Point students and alternative spring break. John McCabe explained that alternative spring break crews that participate in prescribed burns and other restoration activities. Interested groups are welcome and encouraged to reach out to the Department of Resource Management.
- Alan asked about the need and cost for a Forest Preserve propagation hub. Iza explained that the estimated cost for a greenhouse is around \$500,000. The the Salt Creek Resource Management complex, located in central Cook, serves as the current hub. Future expansion is anticipated as more staff are added.

## **Climate Resiliency & Sustainability: Solar Initiative**

Renee Patten, Sustainability Coordinator

- Following a presentation on the Forest Preserves' Sustainability and Climate Resiliency goals a discussion was held regarding the various solar energy options with particular focus on the development of a solar project on FPCC land via PPA, making FPCC both the customer and landlord. A proposed 3.3MW solar installation on 17 acres could fulfill 100% of 2030 facility electricity needs. Off-site options would be considered if suitable FPCC land is unavailable.
- Opportunities and Challenges:
  - Balancing current and future land use priorities
  - Navigating competitive purchasing requirements
  - Evaluating impacts on wildlife and natural areas
- Discussion Highlights:
  - Alan: Emphasized that FPCC land should be preserved in its natural state and a solar installation should remain a last resort. Advocated for off-site or non-restoration-eligible land and reminded that a solar installation would in essence be a disposition of land. Project should align with the Acquisition and Disposition of Land Position Paper (2020).
  - Connor Ploeger (Seasonal Policy Fellow): Clarified that state-led solar programs often exclude government entities, but FPCC is exploring additional avenues.
  - FPCC staff shared that Chris Adas is considering various properties for this project and not looking exclusively at properties that are traditionally more desirable for purchase by the FPCC because of restoration needs and land

degradation. Solar energy is necessary to meet climate goals, given FPCC's energy demands.

- Carl Vogel: Shared that some public education efforts exist (e.g., Sagawau signage), but this is a growth opportunity.
- Kim: Suggested that facility-based solar can spark public interest and create relatable experiences for residents.
- Jennifer Baader: Noted potential in leveraging more FPCC buildings for solar projects.
- Ryen: Asked about public perception and best practices for ground-mounted vs. rooftop solar; FPCC noted it would be among the first in conservation to pursue this type of solar use on public land.
- Benjamin Cox of the Friends of the Forest Preserves: Raised concerns about visual impacts, comparing large-scale installations to "prison yards"; suggested closed parking lots as alternative sites.
  - FPCC acknowledged the trade-offs and noted parking lot solar is possible but would not meet all energy needs alone.
- John McCabe: Stated that ground-mounted solar requires significant infrastructure and security; acknowledged potential aesthetic concerns.
- Raquel Garcia-Alvarez: County is exploring co-benefits such as job training and local investment.
- Alaka: Emphasized the importance of considering trade-offs and public feedback in future planning.
- Mark: Urged FPCC to plan for the long-term given the extended life of energy infrastructure agreements. Encouraged use of local, low-quality, or degraded lands and thoughtful negotiation of long-term contracts.

### **Updates from Strategic Partners**

- Chicago Botanic Garden: An update was provided in the meeting packet.
- Brookfield Zoo: Expressed appreciation for being part of the coalition. Noted the loss of several federal grants and conveyed gratitude to Cook County for its ongoing support.
- Friends of the Forest Preserves: Reported that grants continue to be awarded; however, there is concern about future funding due to broader economic and political uncertainty.

**Adjournment.** Laurel called for a motion to adjourn, seconded by Ryen, all approved. Mark thanked all participants, and adjourned the meeting at 11:54 a.m.