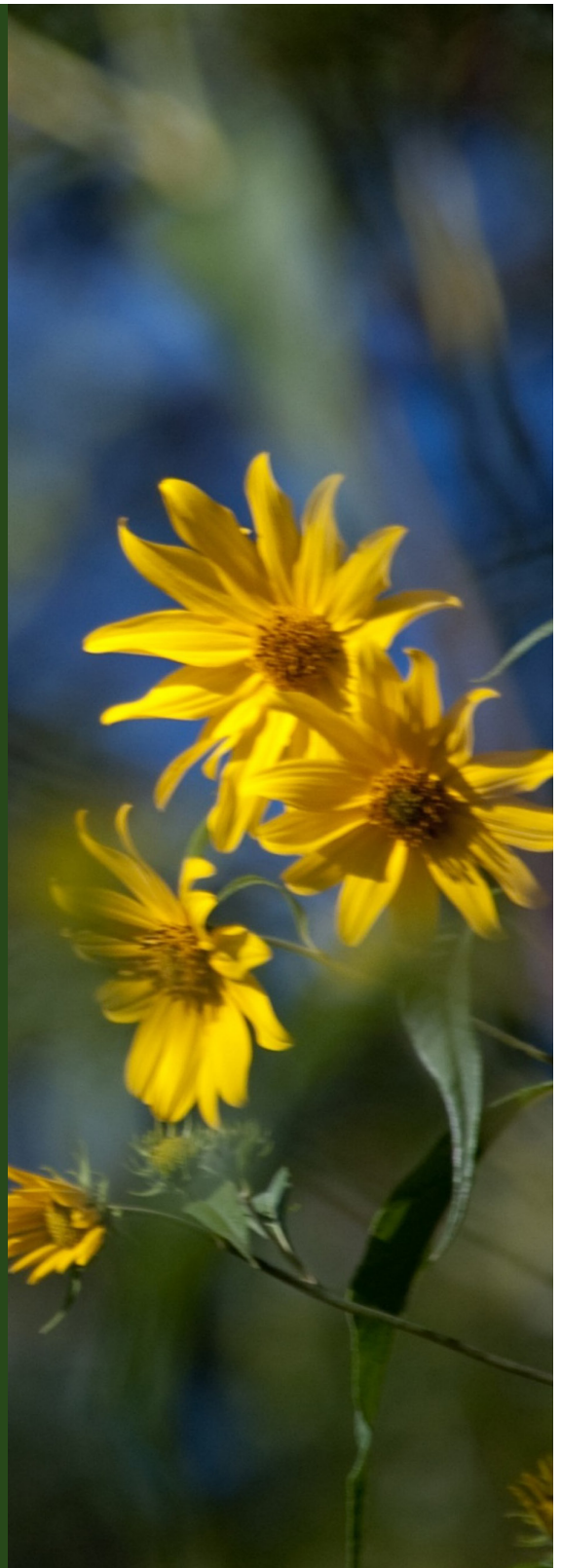


Annual Progress Report (January– December 2024) & 2026 Budget Recommendation

Conservation & Policy Council of the
Forest Preserves of Cook County



Submitted on October 21, 2025

To President Preckwinkle and Forest
Preserve District of Cook County Board of
Commissioners

By Mark Templeton, Chair, Conservation &
Policy Council



TONI PRECKWINKLE
President

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**General
Superintendent**

Adam Bianchi

October 21, 2025

Dear President Preckwinkle:

As required by Title I, Chapter 18, Section 5 of the Forest Preserve District Code of Cook County, Illinois, the Conservation & Policy Council has reviewed the Forest Preserves of Cook County's proposed 2026 budget and the annual report on progress toward the goals of the Next Century Conservation Plan (NCCP).

The proposed \$194,087,303 budget sustains momentum, including full funding of pension obligations and continued investment in public access, restoration, and acquisition. The attached report, which covers January–December 2024, highlights meaningful progress across these priority areas. These include:

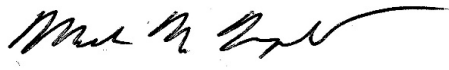
- With the addition of 68 acres along Deer Creek in unincorporated Cook County, the Forest Preserves reached a major milestone—surpassing 70,000 acres of protected land for the first time in its 110-year history.
- The Board of Commissioners' Real Estate Committee approved important updates to the Land Use Code, following recommendations from the Council's Land Use Task Force. The changes clarify criteria for proposed land uses, prioritize ecological impacts, and reinforce that public benefit must align with the Preserves' conservation mission.
- Notable accessibility improvements included a new language access policy and expanded translation services in key departments, resulting in the provision of additional multilingual materials and live American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation services.
- The Forest Preserves and Moraine Valley Community College co-sponsored a Greener Together conference, attended by more than seventy-five professional staff, educators and volunteers to discuss collaboration and institutional alignments between the Forest Preserve District and Suburban Cook County Community Colleges.
- Sustainability efforts advanced with refined climate reporting protocols aligned to best practices. Greenhouse gas emissions are down 18.5% since the 2016 baseline, with fleet emissions reduced by 33%.

The Council also wants to thank departing Acting General Superintendent Eileen Figel for her almost two years of service in that role and more than eleven years of service to the Forest Preserves. The Council is excited to work with Adam Bianchi, who became the Forest Preserves' sixth General Superintendent on July 25, 2025.

While progress continues, challenges remain. Rising program costs and uncertainty in federal funding, increased impacts from climate change, and continued misalignment of the use of some Forest Preserves' lands pose ongoing risks. Forest Preserves staff are dedicated to meeting these challenges. We are confident that staff, working together with partners and volunteers, will fulfill the first two pillars of the NCCP: "native landscapes will thrive for generations" and "everyone in Cook County will feel welcome at the forest preserves—and will seek them out for discovery, renewal and fun."

The Council commends the Forest Preserves for its continued leadership in advancing conservation, sustainability, and equity across Cook County. We recommend the annual budget, as presented to us, and we find that it is aligned with the Forest Preserves' current strategic and financial plans.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mark N. Templeton", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Mark N. Templeton
Chairman
Conservation and Policy Council of the Forest Preserves of Cook County

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

President Toni Preckwinkle and the Forest Preserves of Cook County Board of Commissioners adopted the Next Century Conservation Plan (NCCP) in 2014, the year that the Forest Preserves celebrated its centennial. The plan describes an ambitious vision and a bold set of actions to affirm the Forest Preserves as a national leader in urban and regional conservation and calls for a significant commitment to restore habitat, acquire and protect land, and make the preserves more inviting and accessible to all Cook County residents. The Forest Preserves of Cook County's leadership, staff, partners, and volunteers have embraced this plan and have worked hard to advance its vision.

As required by ordinance, the Conservation & Policy Council presents an annual report to the Forest Preserves of Cook County Board of Commissioners that documents the progress being made towards the Forest Preserves NCCP goals. The following report provides progress updates in line with available data for the period of January 1, 2024 through December 31, 2024. The data and progress update from 2024 helped inform the Council's 2026 budget recommendation, also included in this report.

ENSURING TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The approval of the historic 2022 referendum is providing more than \$40 million in additional funding

each year to the Forest Preserves and to its partners, the Brookfield Zoo Chicago and the Chicago Botanic Garden. These referendum funds are allowing the Forest Preserves to scale up efforts to care for nature and better connect people with the preserves. The Council is working with the Forest Preserves to ensure that these additional funds are spent in accordance with the funding priorities presented to voters in 2022 and that they align with the Forest Preserves' mission.



Volunteers pulling sweet clover at McMahon Woods and Fen Nature Preserve (photo by Forest Preserves)

OVERALL PROGRESS TOWARD GOALS

This report details progress on NCCP related goals from January 1, 2024, through December 31, 2024, related to habitat restoration, land acquisition, and engaging and providing access to the preserves for Cook County residents and visitors. In 2024, the Forest Preserves included more than 70,000 acres of land, with 16,925 acres under active restoration. Approximately 1.8 million people participated in Forest Preserves' programs and events; 3.7 million people were engaged through outreach and engagement efforts; 237 people were certified as stewardship volunteers, and annual greenhouse gas emissions were reduced by 18.5% from the 2016 baseline.

While the Forest Preserves is continuing to make progress on its major priorities and goals, it still faces challenges, including impacts from climate change on operations, restoration initiatives and programming. Other issues include dealing with land use that is not mission-aligned, deferred maintenance, general inflationary pressures, and the growing costs of popular programs like the Conservation Corps. An uncertain federal funding landscape may also limit some of the Forest Preserves' plans, and new federal executive orders, targeting items like diversity and equity initiatives, could make achieving priorities more difficult. The recent referendum funding has helped the Forest Preserves' meet its goals and priorities and establish a solid financial outlook. However, it is critical to avoid future structural and budget deficits by managing resources efficiently and avoiding adding new expenses that would return the Forest Preserves to a structural budget deficit. The Forest Preserves is working to address these challenges and to ensure that it is meeting its mission. Section 2 provides details on this progress, as well as on some challenges.

2025 BUDGET REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATION

As described in Section 3 of this report, the Council has completed a review of the Forest Preserves' proposed 2026 budget. Based upon the Forest Preserves' recent accomplishments, current needs and future goals, the Conservation and Policy Council recommends approval of the proposed 2026 budget for the Forest Preserves of Cook County.

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PROGRESS TOWARD GOALS

The 2014 Next Century Conservation Plan reconfirmed the Forest Preserves' goals to focus on ecological restoration, expansion of protected lands, and a commitment to making the preserves more accessible to all citizens of and visitors to Cook County. This section of the report includes key performance indicators that demonstrate how major goals are progressing. It also includes performance metrics that measure progress towards a range of priorities, as well as updates on recommendations outlined in the Council's position papers.

NATURE

Native landscapes will thrive for generations.

In November 2024, the Forest Preserves' reached a major milestone, approving the acquisition of a parcel that brings the Forest Preserves land holdings to more than 70,000 acres for the first time in its 110-year history. The Forest Preserves of Cook County is the oldest and largest preserve system of its kind in the country: more than 11 percent of Cook County is Forest Preserves land. While a significant number, only 4% of Illinois land is currently protected, which makes ensuring the forest preserves remain intact essential to the millions of plants and animals as well as people that depend on them.

Supported by volunteers and partners, the Forest Preserves is working diligently to restore habitats and acquire new public lands that provide access to outdoor recreation opportunities as well as benefit public health. The Forest Preserves also helps mitigate the impacts of a changing climate helping to clean the air and water and reduce flooding. The Forest Preserves does all of this to ensure that native landscapes thrive for the next generation.

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

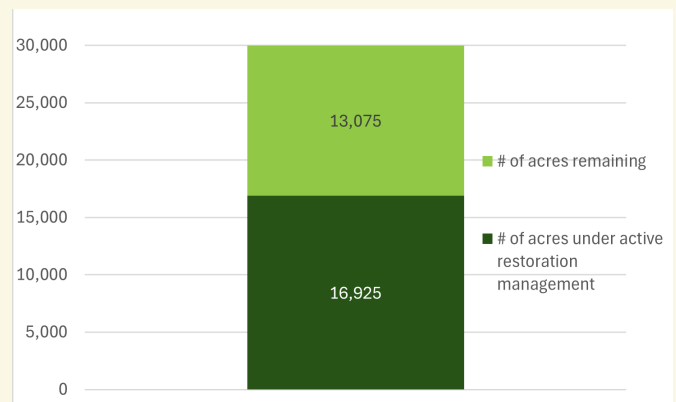
With 16,925 acres under active restoration management at the end of 2024, the Forest Preserves is on target to reach the NCCP **goal of restoring 30,000 acres to ecological health by 2040**, thanks in large part to referendum funding, grants and partnerships. In 2023, work began on the Forest Preserves' biggest restoration project to date—restoring 1,000 acres through the Swallow Cliff and Palos Trail System Infrastructure Upgrades project funded through a \$10,000,000 line-item grant through the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity. In 2024, 849 acres were cleared of woody brush for this project, with the remaining acres targeted for completion in the winter of 2025/26.



Staff spreading seed in natural area (photo by Forest Preserves)

To support its restoration efforts, the Forest Preserves has collaborated with the Chicago Botanic Garden on the Seed Amplification Program that includes in-house native plant propagation. This program has developed on-site infrastructure such as nurseries and wild seed beds to ensure there is appropriate native plants stock available for restoration projects. In 2024, more than 200 pounds of seed representing nearly 100 species of native plants were collected and upwards of 20,000 plugs have been installed as part of this initiative.

Number of Acres Under Active Restoration Management and Number of Acres Remaining to Achieve Goal



Data through December 31, 2024

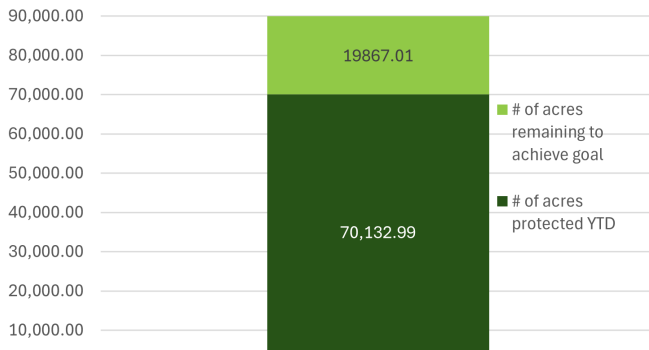
Expanding the Forest Preserves to 90,000 acres

is the most expensive and challenging goal of the NCCP. The cost to acquire 21,000 additional acres is estimated to be more than \$1.7 billion, which at current funding rates, will take more than 100 years to achieve. The Forest Preserves continues to pursue grants and other opportunities to acquire and protect as much remaining open space as possible, but it will also need to work with the Council, partners and advocates to explore other ways to protect natural lands. The Forest Preserves did reach a momentous milestone in 2024, officially approving the acquisition of a 68-acre plot of land along Deer Creek in unincorporated Cook County, that brought it to more than 70,000 acres of land for the first time in its 110-year history.

Consistent funding from the referendum does allow the Forest Preserves to continue to make progress on acquiring key sites. In 2024 the Forest Preserves acquired the following:

- 11.25 acres near Orland Grassland (Southwest)
- 13.54 acres near Spring lake (Northwest)
- 46.44 acres near Sweet Woods (South)
- 5.56 acres near Spring Lake (Northwest)
- 6.50 near Spring Lake (Northwest)
- 56.26 acres near Sweet Woods (South)
- 42.09 acres near Sweet Woods (South)

Number of Acres Protected and Number of Acres Remaining to Achieve Goal



Data through August 31, 2025



Orland Grassland (photo by Jeanne Muellner)

ACQUISITION AND DISPOSITION OF LAND

The Council strongly supports that the use of Forest Preserve land should align with its mission. The disposition of land by sale or other means should not be allowed, and the use of land that does not align with the Forest Preserves’ mission should be forbidden.

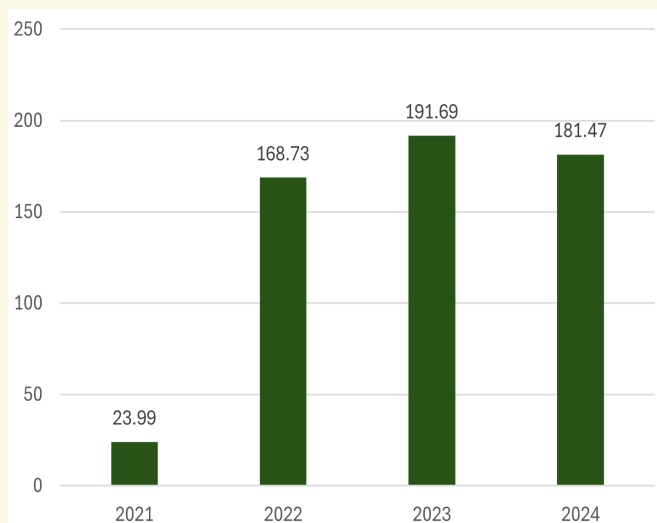
Develop and follow guidelines to limit land disposition to rare and extreme instances

The Council’s 2020 position paper, “Acquisition and Disposition of Land,” recommends convening a land use task force to develop guidelines to strictly limit land disposition (via conveyance or functional disposition), and to further study other unresolved land use issues. The Land Use Task Force, formed in 2021, has representatives from the Council, Friends of the Forest Preserves, Openlands and Forest Preserves’ staff. In November 2024 the Forest Preserves’ Board of Commissioners approved the Land Use Task Forces’ recommended changes to the Forest Preserves’ Land Use Code, which includes but are not limited to:

- Removing the option to dedicate lands for highway purposes.
- Limiting non-mission uses of land to essential infrastructure/improvements for public health, safety, and welfare, as well as uses specifically authorized by law.

- Clarifying that revenue generation is an insufficient public benefit and/or primary justification for ongoing land uses that are not mission related.
- Clarifying the criteria to be considered when reviewing proposed uses of District property.
- Providing review criteria that includes, without limitation, impacts to high quality natural areas, viability of alternatives, and mitigation measures.

Number of New Acres Protected Annually



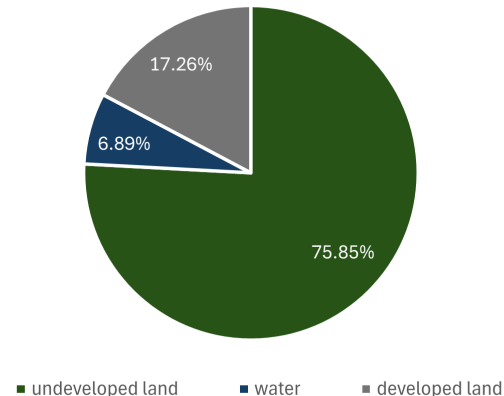
Data through December 31, 2024

Ensure at least 80% of holdings remain in a natural state over time

In 1929, an advisory committee recommended that the Forest Preserves maintain an 80/20 balance in its land use, with at least 80% of the land to be kept in a natural condition (including 5 percent for water recreation areas in rivers, lakes and marsh lands), and no more than 20% to be available for “active play such as boating, bathing, camping, athletics and golf” (including 2% for a zoo and arboretum).

The 2021 Nature-Compatible Recreation position paper affirms the 80/20 principle; the Land Use Task Force documents both holdings in a natural state and development/built infrastructure to ensure that a minimum of 80% of the land can protect biodiversity and provide ecosystem services.

2024 Distribution of Land Holdings



Data through December 31, 2024

SCALING UP VOLUNTEERS

The Forest Preserves depends on an extensive community of volunteers and stewards to help improve the ecological health of the more than 70,000 acres of public land that it manages. To attain its ambitious goals around restoration, the Forest Preserves and its partners must engage, train and retain volunteers, and especially volunteer leaders.



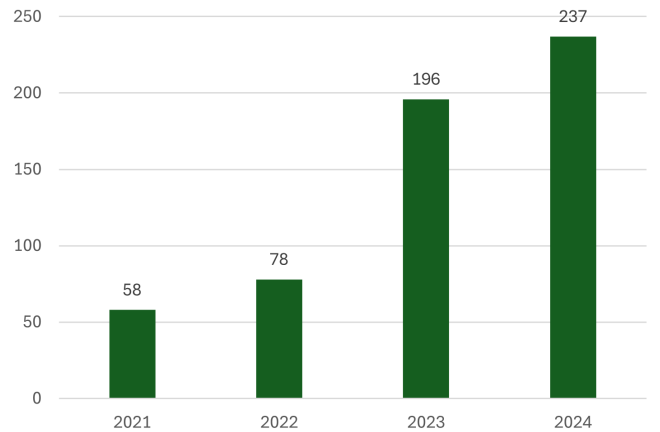
Volunteers at Eggers Grove (photo by Brianna Stack)

Recruit 50 volunteers per year from communities throughout Cook County for leadership roles in ecological stewardship

The 2021 Scaling Up Volunteers position paper states that in order for the Forest Preserves to maintain healthy nature, it is critical to support, commit to and collaborate with volunteers. Supporting leadership development amongst ecological restoration volunteers is key to improving and maintaining the natural habitats of the forest preserves, and recruiting more volunteers for stewardship roles is essential. In 2024, volunteer stewards logged more than 67,231 hours in restoration work, equivalent to \$2,338,966 (at a 2024 value of \$34.79 per hour), and we have reason to believe that volunteers performed significantly more additional hours than what was captured in Forest Preserves’ volunteer database.

The number of leadership certifications that volunteers earn continues to increase each year, with some volunteers earning multiple certifications. In 2024, a new position of chainsaw mentor was introduced and a revamped training for chainsaw safety assistant was offered, so the 18% increase of 237 certifications is higher than in a typical year. The Forest Preserves’ goal is to build teams of volunteers who take on a leadership position that is a good fit for their interests, which may be applying herbicide or managing the brush pile burn.

Number of New Leadership Certifications Earned by Volunteers Each Year



Data through December 31, 2024

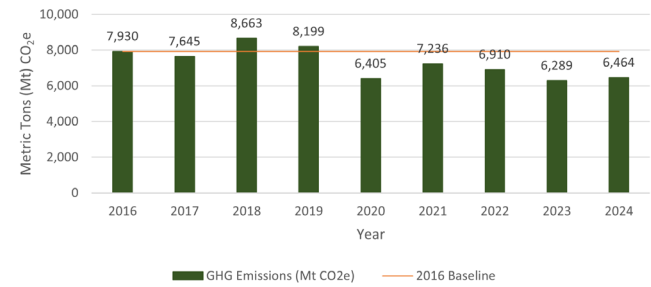


New electric garbage trucks (photo by Forest Preserves)

SUSTAINABILITY AND CLIMATE RESILIENCY

The Forest Preserves’ Sustainability & Climate Resiliency Plan provides a strategy to reduce Forest Preserves’ greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and adapt to a changing climate.

Annual Greenhouse Gas Emissions



Data through December 31, 2024

Achieve net zero emissions in facilities by 2050

In order to achieve net zero emissions in facilities by 2050, the Forest Preserves is striving to reduce its facility GHG emissions by 45% and to be 100% reliant on renewable energy for its building portfolio by 2030. In 2024, the reporting and accounting protocols for climate reporting were refined and clarified to follow professional best practices for transparency and accountability. In 2024 GHG emissions decreased 18.5% from 2016 baseline levels, and the Forest Preserves remains on track to meet GHG reduction goals with 45% reduction by 2030 and net zero by 2050. Emissions from the Forest Preserves’ vehicle fleet have dropped by 33% since 2016—one of the most significant sector improvements.

PEOPLE

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

The Forest Preserves strives to ensure everyone feels welcome to explore and enjoy nature in the preserves. There are an estimated 62 million visits to the forest preserves each year, where patrons enjoy nature centers, attend a picnic, engage in organized programs and events offered by the Forest Preserves and more. Forest Preserves staff also travel to schools and community events to educate thousands of students and residents about nature, and the Forest Preserves' website and social media platforms generate millions of engagements annually. The aim is for all Cook County residents to feel welcome to explore and enjoy the forest preserves.



Teacher development program partnership with Chicago Symphony Orchestra (photo by Forest Preserves)

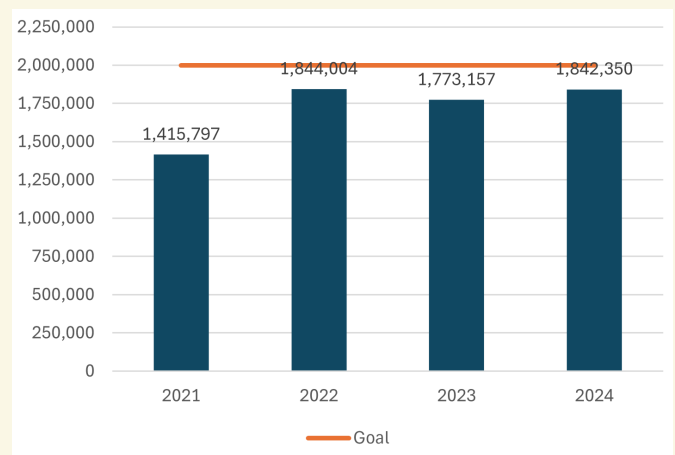
KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

The Forest Preserves has a yearly goal to increase engagement with nature, with an annual involvement of 2 million individuals through a variety of diverse onsite programs, events and activities at the Forest Preserves.

This key performance indicator includes participants at Forest Preserves' events and Nature Center programs; visits to pools, camps, golf courses and other special amenities; and participants in permitted picnics and events. In 2024 1,842,350 people were engaged in onsite programs events

and activities. This figure represents an increase in onsite programs from the previous year, which may be attributed in part to an increased advertising budget due to the referendum, improved summer weather for pools and golf, streamlined and more informative online event listings, and additional personnel dedicated to programming and marketing. To continue this upward trajectory, the Forest Preserves will continue these efforts, with the notable exception of the summer weather, and begin the pilot of a coordinated marketing campaign for events that focuses on "don't miss" events.

Number of People Engaged in Onsite Programs, Events, and Activities at the Forest Preserves

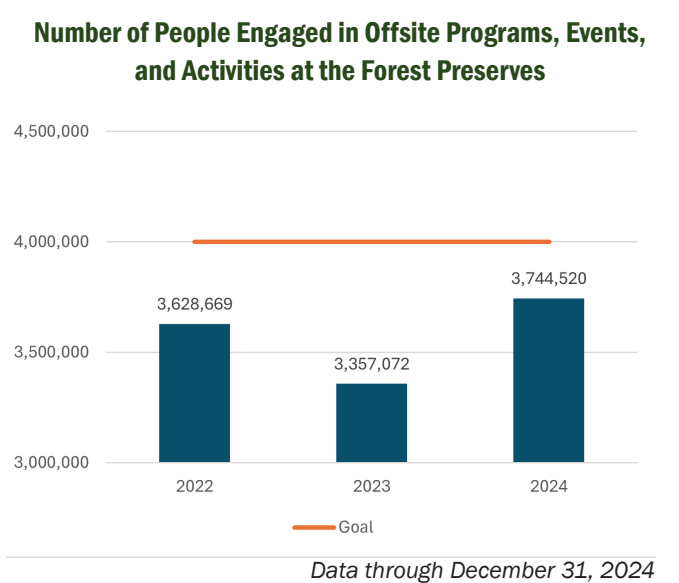


Data through December 31, 2024

Each year, the Forest Preserves' offsite programs, activities, and online communications seek to make four million connections with people. These offsite activities focus on better connecting Cook County residents with Forest Preserves' resources and offerings to ensure that everyone feels invited and welcome to enjoy nature and outdoor recreation activities. This key performance indicator includes social media impressions, website sessions, newsletter opens, as well as the number of people engaged at community events, school programs, and community leadership workshops.

In 2024, the Forest Preserves engaged with 3,744,520 people in offsite programs, events, activities and online information. One notable event, facilitated through the Conservation & Policy Council, was the November 2024 Greener Together conference co-sponsored by the Forest Preserves and Moraine Valley Community College and held at the College’s campus in Palos Hills, IL. The event was attended by more than 75 professional staff, educators and volunteers to discuss collaboration and institutional alignments between the Forest Preserves and Suburban Cook County Community Colleges.

Further action and follow-ups are underway in 2025 with regard to outreach and engagement efforts and contiguous habitat restoration. Efforts will include continuation of efforts that impacted the year-to-year increase from 2023, including expanded social media efforts, connections with community groups and advertising, marketing and editorial strategies to engage more Cook County residents.



MOVING TOWARD RACIAL EQUITY AND AMPLIFYING DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

The 2020 Moving Towards Racial Equity and 2022 Amplifying Diversity & Inclusion position papers developed by the Council acknowledge that the Forest Preserves operates in a broader system shaped by structural racism, which has led to significant and persistent inequalities. The papers call for the Forest Preserves to engage residents from communities

that have historically been excluded, including developing relationships with the Native American community, and continuing to improve access to the preserves for individuals with disabilities.



Pride Night at Crabtree Nature Center (photo by Forest Preserves)

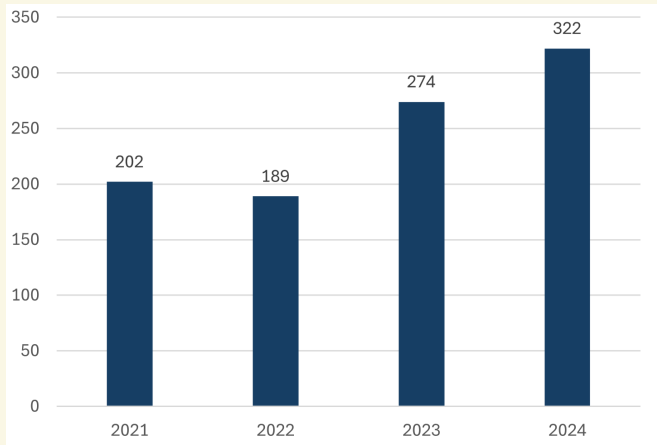
Continue efforts to expand outreach and engage residents and extend these strategies to engage more people who have been historically excluded

The Forest Preserves, through its Conservation & Experiential Programming Department, continues to partner with community organizations, schools, parks and other entities. The Forest Preserves works with hundreds of new and repeat partners every year in a variety of ways including programming, special events, guided talks, walks and programs for school groups and other organizations, and gear library trainings and programs where community leaders are trained in how to lead group camping, paddling and hiking activities.

The Forest Preserves counts on many collaborations and partnerships to meet its goal of connecting more people to nature. The Forest Preserves supports partners in many ways including event and programming partnerships, funds, transportation to Forest Preserves’ events and programs, and providing education permits for spaces in Forest Preserves so groups can independently host their own programs and activities. The Forest Preserves is also focused on diversifying its programming

offerings and partnering with community organizations to create opportunities around culturally significant events like Black History Month, Women’s History Month, Pride, Hispanic Heritage Month and more.

Number of New Community Groups Introduced to the Forest Preserves by Participating in Events and Activities



Data through December 31, 2024

Recognize the special obligation to Native Americans who have a historic and ongoing relationship with the lands within the Forest Preserves

In 2024 the Forest Preserves hired a Tribal Liaison Fellow to co-create the Native American Guidance documents with the Native American Community and Tribal Historic Preservation Officers. The Fellow assisted in building deeper relationships with various partner organizations and engaging different Native voices to be connected to the Forest Preserves

Learn from the Universal Design, disability rights and disability justice communities to improve access to the preserves for individuals with disabilities and others

The Forest Preserves seeks to make all people feel welcome to explore and enjoy the preserves. In 2024, the Forest Preserves continued to increase its accessible options and amenities, helped by the new Accessibility Coordinator, hired in 2023, and the work done by supporting departments. In 2024, several new accessible picnic groves, restrooms and trail access points were added, including at

Bemis Woods South, Busse Lake Boating Center, Catherine Chevalier Woods, Deer Grove, Eggers Grove, Midlothian Meadows, Red Gate Woods, Sauk Trail Woods Central, Schuth's Grove, Tinley Creek Woods, Wampum Lake and Wolf Road Woods. Accessible restroom upgrades were also completed at all Busse Woods locations.

The Forest Preserves also hosted two accessibility-focused professional fellows through the US State Department’s Young South East Asian Political Leaders Initiative for two months, and networking and skill development through the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning’s Regional ADA Coordinator’s Group. An accessibility review of all 337 Forest Preserves’ sites has been approximately 90% completed and will help guide discussions on what to prioritize next for accessibility work. The Forest Preserves’ external ADA Advisory Committee met several times in 2024, providing focused input and advice on accessibility improvements in the forest preserves.



Accessible pavilion and path at Tinley Creek Woods (photo by Forest Preserves)

The Forest Preserves’ language access policy has resulted in better communication with the public, especially real time translations using a contracted interpretation service, LanguageLine Solutions, with the Permits, Rentals, and Concessions and Law Enforcement Departments. It has allowed important documents to be translated into Korean, Arabic,

Polish, Mandarin Chinese, Ojibwe, and provided ASL and Spanish translators for on-site programs.

In an effort to ensure that all Cook County residents and visitors are able to access and enjoy nature, the Forest Preserves collaborates with many organizations to grow and offer adaptive programs including Misericordia, Shirley Ryan AbilityLab, the Illinois Chapter of the United Spinal Association, Chicago Hearing Society, Out Our Front Door, and many local Special Recreation Associations. The Forest Preserves is also working with Adaptive Adventures to provide opportunities for people with disabilities to connect with the outdoors through their adaptive hiking, cycling, climbing, and kayaking programming as well as providing an adaptive gear library at select locations.



Arab American Heritage Walk and Celebration at Little Red Schoolhouse Nature Center (photo by Forest Preserves)

NATURE-COMPATIBLE RECREATION

Throughout its history, recreational programs and facilities that do not align with the Forest Preserves mission have been developed throughout the preserves. To address this issue, the Council's 2021 Nature-Compatible Recreation position paper recommends transforming or re-purposing “legacy uses” which are not nature-compatible.

Complete pilot studies for golf courses, pools, and model airplane fields to re-align these sites as nature-compatible uses and to ensure environmental and economic sustainability.

In 2023, the Forest Preserves endeavored to launch pilot studies to re-align golf courses, aquatic centers and model airplane fields with its mission. The golf course re-alignment study is furthest along with community engagement meetings having been completed and a new golf concession agreement approved by the Forest Preserves' Board of Commissioners in December 2024. Under the new agreement a partnership between the concessionaire and the Forest Preserves is outlined and will take the form of a committee which is tasked with developing a future plan for the entirety of the golf portfolio. In addition, the new agreement continues to focus on including more energy efficient equipment, sustainability goals, and incorporating more nature compatible course design and native plantings.

In 2022, graduate students at University of Illinois at Chicago led a model airplane field report for the Forest Preserves, which aimed to assess the utilization of flying fields through comparative research, survey design and stakeholder input. Further work on the project was put on hold until a similar Aquatic Center study is also completed. However, there were no submissions in a 2024 request for proposals for the Aquatic Center study, so a taskforce will be created by the end of 2025 to review the current status of aquatic centers and model airplane fields and determine next steps.

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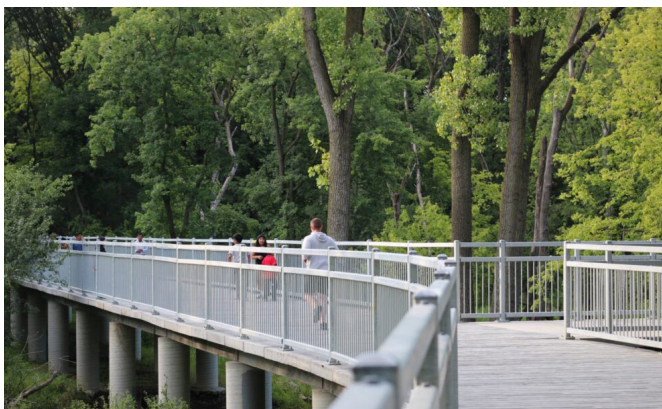
2025 BUDGET REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATION

On August 21, 2025, Council Chair Mark Templeton, Council Vice-Chair Henrietta Saunders, CFA, and Council member Ryen Nagle, met with the Forest Preserves' General Superintendent Adam Bianchi, Chief Financial Officer Damon Howell, Budget Director Shengyi Guan and Comptroller Jim Cunnea to review an initial draft of the Forest Preserves' proposed 2026 budget. The Council representatives and Forest Preserves' staff presented an overview of the proposed budget to the full Council at the September 25, 2025 meeting.

The proposed budget would allow the Forest Preserves to continue scaling up its work to achieve key NCCP goals and to address several pressing needs as follows:

- The total budget request for 2026 is \$194 million, which represents an increase of \$4.8 million from FY2025.
- To cover the cost-of-living adjustments and increasing costs of goods and services, the 2026 proposed budget captures inflationary growth of approximately 2.9%, providing an additional \$4.1 million.
- The proposed FY2026 budget will provide a total of \$19.4 million to Brookfield Zoo Chicago and \$11.9 million to the Chicago Botanic Garden.

- The Forest Preserves recommends a transfer from the Corporate Reserve Fund of \$22.8 million which includes funding for the Real Estate Fund and the Self-Insurance Fund. (The Forest Preserves cannot levy directly for these funds and transfers funding each year from the Corporate Reserve Fund.)
- The Corporate budget is proposed to increase 4% to \$92.6 million. The number of staff positions stays steady, but personnel expenditures are budgeted to rise 3.5% due to cost of living increases and associated personnel costs. Non-personnel costs are budgeted to increase 5.2%, primarily due to inflationary growth in costs, with some new investments as well.



Des Plaines River Trail boardwalk (photo by Forest Preserves)

The budget also includes funding for:

- Trail improvements including reconstruction of the Des Plaines River Trail system from Lawrence Ave to Irving Park Road and closing gaps and adding new connections on the Major Taylor Trail at Whistler Woods to Cal-Sag Trail in addition to a connection from the gathering space at Beaubien Woods Boat Launch to Altgeld Gardens and Carver Park.
- A new leader/partner training program that connects more people through their networks to nature and the Forest Preserves, and a restructured community liaison program to better connect with community networks and develop more partners and leaders.
- Investments in a green fleet, through a mix of electric, hybrid and propane-powered vehicles and equipment and expansion of an electric vehicle charging station system both public-facing and back of house throughout the Forest Preserves.
- Finalization of a Law Enforcement Department records management system, evidence management system and new electronic scheduling system
- Implementation of a new system of rotational tree inspections to manage the risks posed by trees that may fail due to age, disease, pests, environmental stress and other natural processes.
- Expansion of a pilot program that has reduced the amount of waste left in the Forest Preserves from people's homes by reducing and strategically placing garbage receptacles to emphasize the visitor experience and save the Forest Preserves money.
- Continue to pursue opportunities to leverage existing real estate acquisition funds and identify alternative financing strategies to fulfill the land acquisition goals of the Next Century Conservation Plan.
- Complete renovation of 14 restroom buildings at Busse Woods and Dan Ryan Woods and start renovation of 11 additional restroom buildings.

RECOMMENDATION

Based upon its review of the Forest Preserves' recent accomplishments, current needs and future goals, **the Conservation and Policy Council recommends approval of the proposed 2026 budget for the Forest Preserves of Cook County.**

Conservation & Policy Council Members

Mark Templeton, Chair

Henrietta “Hank” Saunders, Vice-Chair

Daisy Feidt, Secretary

Commissioner Josina Morita, Ex-officio member

Alan Bell

Dr. Ryen Nagle

Laurel Ross

Dr. Kim Ruffin

Dr. Jacqueline Samuel

Alaka Wali