

Forest Preserves of Cook County Conservation & Policy Council Meeting

January 30, 2025

Forest Preserves of Cook County, Dan Ryan Woods Pavilion, 87th and S. Western Ave.,
Chicago, IL 60620

Council Members Present: Alan Bell, Henrietta Saunders, Jackie Samuel, Commissioner Josina Morita, Laurel Ross, Ryen Nagle, Mark Templeton

Council Members Absent: Daisy Feidt and Megan Bang

Presenters: Iza Redlinski, Jacqui Ulrich

MINUTES

Call to Order and Land Acknowledgement. Chairman Alan Bell called the meeting to order at 10:00 am. Commissioner Morita read the Forest Preserves' Land Acknowledgement.

Welcome. Commissioner Moore welcomed all to Dan Ryan Woods, one of the few forest preserves located within City of Chicago limits and highlighted the many improvements that have been made to the site.

Nature spotlight. Iza Redlinski gave a brief overview of the seed amplification project; more will be shared at the Council's next meeting at the Chicago Botanic Garden.

Approval of Minutes. Motion to approve the minutes moved by Mark, seconded by Laurel. The minutes for the meeting of August 29, 2024, were unanimously approved.

Public Comments. There were no public comments.

Chairman's report.

- Alan welcomed new members Kim Ruffin and Alaka Wali to the Council.
- Council Representation at 2025 Board Meetings. Alan and Eileen reminded Council members of opportunity to sign up and speak at a Forest Preserves' Board Meeting as it's an excellent opportunity to strengthen relationships with commissioners. Forest Preserves staff can help prepare your 3-minute talk. All slots have been filled – to view schedule visit [Forest Preserves of Cook County: Conservation & Policy Council Attendance Board Meeting Sign Up](#).
- 2025 priority topics – for questions or to add a new topic to the 2025 list, please reach out to Eileen or Mark.
- Hank asked all Board members to sign up as Volunteers and to log into the system and track their contributions.

Action step: Please sign up at <https://volunteer-fpdcc.givepulse.com/register#>

Vote for Chair and Vice Chair; Remarks.

Alan expressed his deep appreciation for the Council members, Eileen, and FPCC staff. He looks forward to continuing his participation in the Council and is excited to see Mark in the role of Chair and Hank as Vice-Chair; Daisy will continue to serve as secretary. There were no additional nominations.

Motion to nominate Mark and Hank to serve as Chair and Vice-Chair, respectively, made by Laurel. Jackie seconded the motion. All in favor.

Mark thanked Alan for his extraordinary leadership and is honored to build on Alan and Wendy's great work. He looks forward to working with everyone on protecting nature and connecting people with the preserves and is eager and open to feedback on his role as Chair. He believes FPCC staff brings considerable expertise to the table and the Council's role is to offer its perspective, ask questions, and engage in dialogue. Mark affirmed the importance of inclusion and continuing efforts to ensure that all people feel welcome in the preserves.

Discussion with Interim General Superintendent Eileen Figel.

- FPCC achieved 70,000-acre milestone in November 2024.
- Southeast Cook County successes include a partnership with a company that will purchase a parcel, restore it for wetland mitigation, and then transfer ownership to the Forest Preserves.
Laurel lauded this work and urged the preserves to continue expanding its holdings in these ways.
- FPCC Ambassador Animal program has earned the "American Humane Certified" designation by the American Humane Society.
Commissioner Moore recommended that a representative from the American Humane Society attend a future Board meeting to say more about the certification.
- New staffing announcements: On December 31, 2024, Cathy Geraghty retired after 24 years of service with the Preserves; Michelle Uting has been promoted to Director of Strategic Initiatives. FPCC is working hard to fill other vacancies including Director of Legislative Affairs and Director of Human Resources.
- New concern – FPCC is trying to understand how the current administration and its Executive Orders will impact the preserves. Eileen reiterated the Forest Preserves commitment to ensuring that all people feel welcome in the preserves.
- New nature preserve designation – Iza reported that the 454-acre Busse Forest Nature Preserve (BFNP) will expand to 1,221 acres as 493 acres will be added as nature preserve and 274 acres as nature preserve buffer. BFNP and the proposed additions are part of a 3,542-acre stretch of preserve along Salt Creek in the northern part of Cook County. BFNP was dedicated in 1965, along with 10 other forest preserve sites, and represents the beginning of the Illinois Nature Preserve System in Illinois (thanks to the passage of the Illinois Natural Areas Preservation Act in 1963.) Today, the Illinois Nature Preserve System consists of over 416 nature preserves covering over 63,000 acres. If approved at the Illinois Nature Preserve

Commission hearing in May 2025, Busse Forest Nature Preserve would be the systems' 7th largest nature preserve.

Invitation to Celebrate African American History.

Jacqui Ulrich presented on the Conservation & Experiential Programming Department's (CEP) programming efforts to celebrate African American Culture & History. Visit <https://fpdcc.com/event/black-history-month-story-trails/> for this year's programs.

Highlights include:

- African American programs take place throughout the year
- Since 2018, the FPCC has been collaborating with partners on Underground Railroad programs. Many of these start at Beaubien Woods Boat launch. In 2024, FPCC invested funds to identify more Underground Railroad sites. An upcoming tour is scheduled for March 14 - all are invited.
- African American Heritage Water Trail, developed by Openlands, includes 3 Forest Preserve sites (Beaubien, Kickapoo and Whistler). For more information visit: [Openlands African American Heritage Water Trail](#)
- Friends of the Forest Preserves is working with us on a youth learning interpretation program
- Prairie Boat Gathering Space at Beaubien Woods will feature more programming in the future
- Juneteenth celebration, in its 12th year at the FPCC, will be held on 6/21/2025

Alan – appreciates the scope and scale of these authentic programs and asked how the Council can help promote. Jacqui shared that CEP will be posting an RFQ seeking organizations and individuals to provide cultural and history programming for public programs and special events; will share RFQ with Council so that members can share with their networks.

Commissioner Morita – good to see focus on youth programming and would like to find ways to connect youth under 18 to volunteer opportunities in ways that are legal and compliant.

Engaging Community Colleges and Higher Ed

Ryan and Hank presented on the Greener Together initiative that brought together community college and conservation stakeholders on November 1, 2024. Community college staff reported that they are working in isolation and 82% strongly agreed that they want to continue this conversation and the group. The group aims to reconvene.

Jacqui – Still feeling euphoric from this day and thanked Hank and Ryan for their excellent work in leading this conversation.

Engaging Native Americans Update

Jacqui shared that Lucas DePerry has been hired by the FPCC to serve as Tribal Liaison Fellow. He is working within the Office of the General Superintendent and is helping the Forest Preserves

tell native stories and history; currently he's working on supporting the Native-led Climate Summit.

A policy paper is being drafted by Lucas and Native partners and Forest Preserves staff regarding historic treaties, resource management, and institutionalizing the Preserves' commitment to Native rights and access to land; the paper may also propose ordinance changes. The Policy paper will be presented to the Board for formal adoption. A draft will be ready in April and will be shared with the Council for input.

Other highlights include:

- The American Indian Health Services works with the Forest Preserves on programs hosted at Caldwell Woods and other northside locations.
- CEP working with American Indian Center and hopes to return the powwow to Schiller Woods.
- FPCC is working with Trickster Gallery on land management plans for Rolling Knolls and partnered with the Chicago Botanic Garden to create a sweetgrass garden at Trailside Nature Center.
- Native-led Climate Summit, held at Thatcher, was attended by 120 people.

Updates from Strategic Partners

Commissioner Morita: Cook County has released its first county-wide environmental justice policy and it's open for public comment. So far, more than 1000 people have weighed in. Please consider reviewing and commenting:

<https://www.cookcountyil.gov/environmentaljustice#:~:text=Environmental%20justice%20is%20a%20key,address%20historic%20disinvestment%20and%20inequitable>

Chicago Botanic Garden - Beth was not able to attend; update in packet.

Chicago Zoological Society – Jen was not able to attend.

Friends of the Forest Preserves - Benjamin shared that they're excited to launch an Engagement Corps Program, funded in part by NOAA.

Adjournment. Chairman Bell called for a motion to adjourn, thanked all participants, and adjourned the meeting at 12:00 pm.