



Forest Preserves of Cook County Conservation & Policy Council Meeting

June 20, 2024

Volunteer Resource Center ▪ 6100 N Central Avenue, Chicago

MINUTES

Call to Order. Chairman Alan Bell called the meeting to order at 10:03 am. Alan congratulated the Department of Planning and Development on the completion of the new wellness center which is transit accessible.

Land Acknowledgement and Nature Spotlight. Landscape Maintenance Division Superintendent Lindsay Ivanyi read the Land Acknowledgement and gave a brief update on the 17-year cicadas and other broods. Lindsay explained that cicadas are loud enough to cause hearing damage, though the 17-year brood does not sing at night. The cicadas live three-four weeks. They lay eggs and stay underground for 17 years. There is a boon in cicada killer wasps and other animals that eat them. The district is leading a sound mapping project with citizen scientists across the region.

Approval of Minutes. Henrietta Saunders moved to approve the minutes. The motion was seconded by Mike DeSantiago and the minutes were approved.

Public Comments. There were no public comments.

Chairman's report. Alan stated that Council presentations have been extremely helpful in keeping the board informed and engaged. Alan thanked Megan and Ryen for representing Council at May and June board meetings and provided additional updates as follows:

- Alan invited Lisa Lee to give an update on land use reform. The Council will review the proposed changes to the district's ordinance in August and the proposal will be introduced to the Board in September. There will be a 30-day period for public comment with the Board to vote on the proposed changes at the October Board meeting. If approved, changes would be effective in January 2025. Commissioner Morita noted that there has been some tension at recent Board meetings related to land acquisition and economic development.
- The Council discussed wanting to get more young people involved in stewardship and concerns about safety and liability related to unaccompanied minors. Lisa Lee explained that the district is exploring different options but cautioned that even if an unaccompanied minor has parental consent, this does not eliminate the district's liability. Alan suggested convening a taskforce on this issue and asked Council members to notify him if interested in participating in further conversations.
- Henrietta Saunders reported on a 6.5.24 meeting with partners to explore opportunities to collaborate to engage volunteers. Partners shared information about where and how they work with volunteers.
- Ryen Nagle provided an update on an initiative to partner with colleges engaged in restoration management. Many campuses have natural areas and faculty members are doing a great job connecting preserved land, students and local communities.

District Updates. Cathy Geraghty gave the following updates:

- Outside Chicago was featured in Timeout Chicago.
- There was a recent confrontation between a district employee and a first amendment auditor. The district is developing a training to ensure employees understand the first amendment rights of visitors and to help employees handle various situations.

Approval of Recommendation from the Nominating Committee. A motion was made by Daisey Feldt and seconded by Ryan to approve the following recommendations from the Nominating Committee:

- 1) Make no change to current ordinance and adopt a strict interpretation to prohibit employees of conservation organizations AND conservation foundations from serving on the Council.
- 2) Approve an amended disclosure statement.
- 3) Ensure nominees would be subject to strict adherence to the amended disclosure statement.

The motion was approved.

Update on 5.29.24 Native American Summit and Next Steps. Megan Bang and Raquel Garcia-Alvarez reported that sixty people attended a Native American Summit on 5.29.24. The Native American community in Illinois does not have the same infrastructure as native populations in other states. Participants asked the district to establish a standing technical advisory committee; this would be the first in Illinois. The committee will focus on some low hanging fruit and some higher reaches, including:

- To support the committee's work, the district will hire a tribal relations fellow.
- In April 2024, the U.S. government recognized the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation as the first federally recognized tribal nation in Illinois. The district will work with Native American partners to add a sentence to its Land Acknowledgement to recognize the Prairie Band specifically.
- The district will explore sharing culled deer with Native American partners.
- The district will work with Native American partners to explore options to reinter ancestral remains returned to Illinois.

Nomination of Daisy Feidt for Council Secretary. Mike DeSantiago made a motion to nominate Daisy Feidt to be the Secretary of the Conservation and Policy Council. Mark Tempelton seconded the motion which passed unanimously.

Purpose and Role of Steering Committee. Benjamin Cox and Cathy Geraghty explained the role of the Steering Committee as follows:

- 1) Assist the Council in ensuring the goals of the NCCP are implemented by adding expertise and providing information, as well as developing position papers with Council Members, and serving on ad-hoc committees, such as the Land Use Task Force.
- 2) Develop framework to report on FPCC spending in line with Referendum funding and NCCP goals to the Council, Board, Coalition Members, and the people of Cook County, with a focus on how public investment is resulting in more open space, more nature being restored, more jobs, more people engaged, etc.
- 3) Share information with elected officials, partners, the public, and media on the forest preserves and key topics such as their importance to our communities and biological diversity, ecological restoration and the ongoing work to maintain natural areas, connecting people to nature, and so forth.

The following issues were discussed:

- Mark stated that the Steering Committee provides a voice for the conservation community and makes recommendations to the President. The Council wants to ensure it doesn't look like a political recommendation; it is important that committee members want to advance the mission of the preserves.
- Megan Bang asked what it means to be a conservation leadership organization and not allow on the ground practitioners in conservation organizations. The Council provides a place for additional voices including citizen volunteers and people working outside their area of expertise.

Updates from Strategic Partners. Partners provided the following updates:

- Jenn Baader reported that the Brookfield Zoo Chicago now has koala bears and recently opened a Sandhill Crane exhibit which highlights the Forest Preserves. The Zoo is currently constructing an outdoor expansion of the great apes house.
- Beth Dunn reported that the Chicago Botanic Garden is working with the district to help grow native seeds to support district restoration efforts. The Garden will host the 2027 Congress for Botanic Gardens.

Capital Investments at the Forest Preserves. Chris Slattery explained that, in addition to open space, the district has bridges, benches, bathrooms, parking lots, campgrounds, trails, buildings and lots or other infrastructure. Chris highlighted features of the 2025 capital improvement plan including:

- 98% of improvements to the Des Plaines Trail have been funded by other agencies/ 2% of the funding was provided by the district. Improvements include a new bridge across the river at Lawrence.
- Other improvements include new restrooms at Beaubien, improvements to the district's central compound, and improvements to boat launches.
- The golf courses do not generate enough revenue to fully fund their capital needs.
- The district is working with MWRD to cost-share recreational amenities and other improvements throughout the Deer Creek Reservoir.
- A significant portion of referendum funds are being used to repair parking lots and access paths and to shrink pavement where possible.
- \$7 to \$10 million is needed to clear a backlog of deferred maintenance.
- \$500K per year is needed for improved signage.
- Building improvements are estimated at \$18.8 million and include the Thatcher/Trailside Campus Plan, a new maintenance building at Salt Creek, and the new Caldwell Wellness Center which was funded by a PARCC grant.
- A ComEd grant provided \$300K for energy efficiency upgrades to buildings, but far more is needed to upgrade all buildings and transition to a green fleet to meet districtwide sustainability goals.
- Upgrading restrooms is extremely costly—approximately \$200K per bathroom.

The district cannot yet fund all its capital needs. Chris explained that the referendum funding is critical, but only addresses basic needs; there will always be a need for grants and bonds.

The following issues were discussed:

- The ADA budget and restrooms are public oriented, and they should continue to be high priorities for the District, over operational structures.
- The Council is interested in a presentation that focuses on ADA and life safety improvements; a presentation focused on ADA will be on the 2025 agenda.

New Business. The Council discussed a recent incident near Harms Woods and how they can help improve the safety of the preserves by working with district police and sharing information with the public.

Adjournment. Chairman Bell called for a motion to adjourn, thanked all participants, and adjourned the meeting at 12:50 pm.