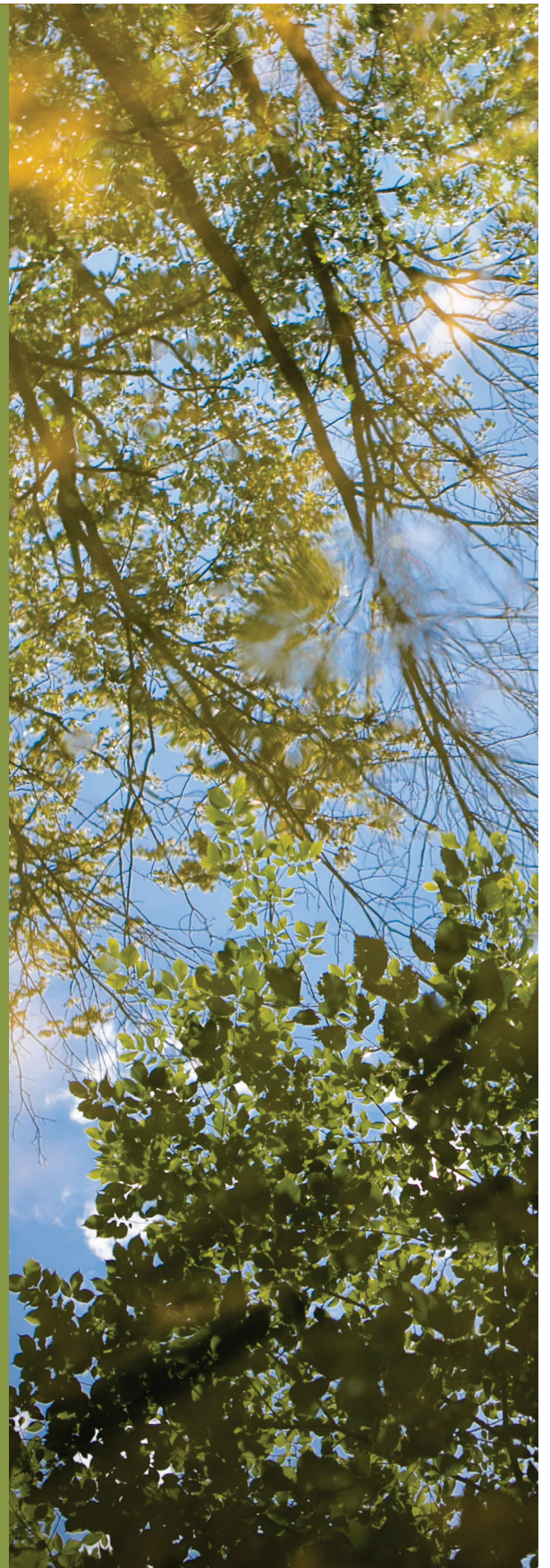


Next Century Conservation Plan

PHASE 2 IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY



**Annual Report on Progress
to Date October 2, , 2021**

Next Century Conservation Plan Vision

The people of Cook County will celebrate and nurture our thriving woodlands, prairies and waters as world-class treasures that sustain our great metropolis.

Introduction

In 2014, President Toni Preckwinkle and the Forest Preserves of Cook County Board of Commissioners adopted an ambitious plan to restore the Forest Preserves to health and sustain them as a world-class treasure for the people of Cook County. The Next Century Conservation Plan (NCCP) lays out a set of bold actions to affirm Cook County as a national leader in urban and regional conservation and calls for a massive commitment to restore habitat, acquire and protect more land, and make the preserves more inviting and accessible to all Cook County residents.

A Phased Approach

As indicated in Figure 1, the Forest Preserves and its partners are implementing the 25-year plan in five phases. During the first phase of implementation (which was launched in 2016 and concluded in 2020), more than 70 partners worked with the Forest Preserves to implement 64 priority programs and projects which could be advanced with limited new resources. During this initial phase, the Forest Preserves of Cook County (FPCC) and its partners researched best practices and piloted a broad range of initiatives to expand engagement, recruit volunteer stewards, advance ecological restoration, document the economic impact of the preserves, cut costs, expand revenue, improve transparency, and more. By the end of phase 1, 88% of these initiatives were completed or on-track, 6% were redirected to respond to an unforeseen challenge or opportunity, and 6% were stalled due to a lack of resources or other reasons. As detailed in the [Conservation & Policy Council 2020 Annual Report](#), the Council concluded these results reflect a healthy balance of steady progress, adaptability, and risk taking. However, the Council noted its on-going concern regarding the Forest Preserves' inability to scale up to fully achieve NCCP goals. Furthermore, the pressures of addressing the backlog of deferred maintenance and on-going pension deficit will continue to constrain the availability of public resources to support restoration, acquisition, accessibility improvements and other NCCP goals. The Council concluded, therefore, that Phase 2 must focus on stabilizing the Forest Preserves' finances and securing resources needed to fully implement the NCCP.

Assuming phase 2 goals are met, phases 3 and 4 will focus on scaling up stewardship and expanding the preserves. During the plan's final phase, the FPCC and its partners will begin planning for the next 25 years. This phased implementation strategy is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: NCCP Phased Implementation Strategy

Phase 1	2016 to 2020	Learn, share and implement best practices
Phase 2	2021 to 2025	Build support and secure needed resources
Phase 3	2026 to 2030	Stewardship
Phase 4	2031 to 2035	Expansion
Phase 5	2036 to 2040	Plan for next 25 years

This report focuses on the over-arching goals of phase 2, describes the work to be completed throughout this phase, and summarizes the progress made during the first year of phase 2 implementation. It is organized into the following sections:

- 1. Goals**
- 2. Process and Structure**
- 3. Implementing the Position Papers**
- 4. Demonstrating the Value of the Preserves**
- 5. Securing Needed Resources**
- 6. Advancing Other NCCP Goals**

1. Goals

During the second phase of implementation, the Forest Preserves will work with the Conservation and Policy Council, partners, volunteers, and advocates to advance four key goals. These include:

- 1. Continue the legacy of civic leadership by implementing the policies and recommendations of position papers.** The position papers developed by the Council outline a set of principles and recommendations about key issues that face the Forest Preserves today and in the foreseeable future. These papers continue an important legacy of civic leadership by setting clear guidelines for the actions and direction of the Forest Preserves staff, its Board of Commissioners, and its partners and supporters.
- 2. Demonstrate the value of the preserves.** The pandemic has pushed record numbers of visitors to avail themselves of the wonders and assets in the forest preserves; this presents an historic opportunity to demonstrate broadly the value of the preserves in people's lives.
- 3. Secure the public resources needed to achieve NCCP goals.** Additional resources are needed to stabilize the FPCC's finances and achieve the ambitious goals of the NCCP. Securing these resources is a priority goal of phase 2.
- 4. Advance other key NCCP initiatives.** The District must continue its work with partners, volunteers, and advocates to advance a wide range of NCCP initiatives related to acquisition, restoration, sustainability, programming, accountability, etc.

2. Process & Structure

Five committees (Nature, People, Economics, Leadership and Steering) comprised of staff and partners coordinated the first phase of NCCP implementation. As implementation transitioned from phase 1 to phase 2, roles and responsibilities were restructured to better meet the needs of phase 2 as follows:

Conservation & Policy Council. During this second phase, the Conservation and Policy Council is focused on building support for the preserves, advocating, and overall guidance—especially via implementation of the position papers.

Steering Committee. A smaller steering committee co-chaired by Friends of the Forest Preserves’ Executive Director Benjamin Cox and Deputy General Superintendent Eileen Figel meets bi-monthly to closely monitor and facilitate plan implementation, and to measure and document progress. The Phase 2 Steering Committee members include:

- | | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Benjamin Cox, FOTFP | Chip O’Leary, FPCC | Jacqui Ulrich, FPCC |
| Beth Dunn, Chicago Botanic Garden | Chris Adas, FPCC | Jane Balaban, Key Steward |
| Bob Megquier, Openlands | Delio Calzolari, FPCC | Jenn Baader, CZS |
| Carl Vogel, FPCC | Eileen Figel, FPCC | |
| Cathy Geraghty, FPCC | | |

Alice Brandon, Programming Manager for the Department of Resource Management, is working with the Steering Committee to coordinate the Challenge Sites initiative described in Section 4.

Working Groups. The phase 1 committees (Nature, People, Economy, Leadership) have been replaced by small, flexible working groups which are convened to advance specific projects. Figure 2 summarizes the roles and responsibilities for phase 2 implementation.

Figure 2: Roles & Responsibilities for Phase 2 Implementation

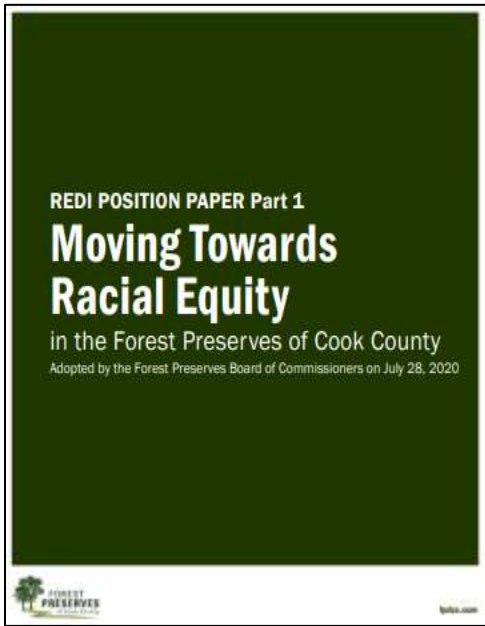
Conservation & Policy Council	Steering Committee	Ad Hoc Working Groups
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Build awareness & support ▪ Advocate ▪ Provide guidance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Develop overall implementation strategy ▪ Monitor & report progress (via Key Performance Indicators/public dashboard) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Develop and implement specific initiatives, programs, and projects

The phase 2 process and structure are intended to be flexible and can evolve further as needed throughout implementation.

3. Implementing the Position Papers

Four position papers were published in 2020 by the Conservation and Policy Council to address key issues that face the Forest Preserves today and in the foreseeable future. A fifth paper currently being developed builds upon the racial equity position paper and focuses on diversity and inclusion.

The papers establish guidelines and recommend specific actions to address key challenges. The implementation of the position papers is a priority goal for phase 2; this section presents a report on progress to date.



This paper presents long-term, comprehensive recommendations to promote racial equity throughout the preserves, including:

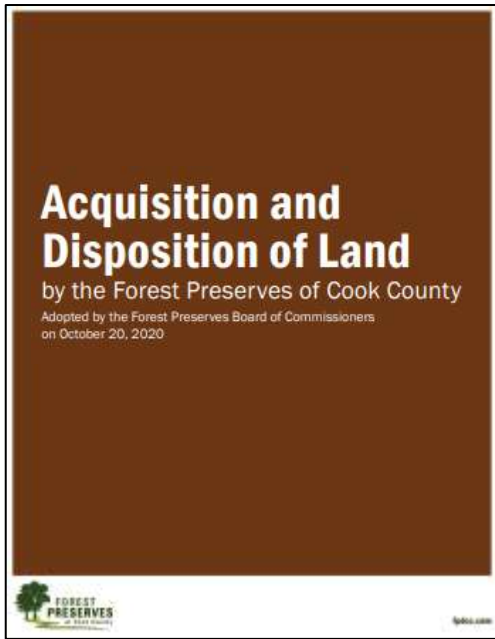
1. **Apply a racial equity lens to all future plans, programs, policies and investments.**
2. **Expand outreach to engage residents of impacted communities.**
3. **Consider racial equity in land acquisition decisions.**
4. **Build a staff that is diverse and promotes racial equity.**
5. **Provide all residents with access to nature-related recreation by ensuring major recreational facilities are well-distributed across the Forest Preserves, accessible and well-maintained.**

Key Actions	Progress to Date
1. Institutionalize the FPCC REDI staff committee so that its work becomes integrated with FPCC policies and procedures Districtwide.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Implemented hiring panel practices that introduce racial equity both in who participates in panels and questions that are asked. ✓ Convened racial identity caucuses to provide a safe place for employees to discuss and process the murder of George Floyd and systemic racism in the U.S. ✓ Conducted staff-led REDI 101 workshops for staff and volunteers.
2. Complete implicit bias training for all FPCC staff and embed REDI principles in annual trainings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The police department completed implicit bias training in 2020 and CEP and Permits staff completed training in April 2021.

Key Actions	Progress to Date
3. Provide buses to connect residents from impacted communities to events and sites throughout the preserves, including the Zoo and Garden.	✓ The CEP team developed and funded a Nature Express bus program. (Note: Due to the pandemic, the launch of this program has been delayed until 2022.)
4. Incorporate best practices for inclusive place-making into the implementation strategy for each Gateway Plan and into new plans and capital investments.	<p>In Progress:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ We are conducting outreach to internal and external stakeholders to get input on restoration and on improvements to be constructed at Caldwell Preserves. <p>Next Steps:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Outreach relating to renovation of the Crabtree Nature Center is planned in 2022. ▪ Community engagement around new information, wayfinding signs and programs at Eggers Grove is also planned in 2022 if we receive an IDNR Coastal Management Grant.
5. Convene a racial equity impact assessment training for the senior team.	✓ Completed
6. Make racial equity impact assessments part of the process for all major policy, planning, and budget decisions. Embed racial equity assessments in all FPCC requests for proposals and contracts for goods and services.	<p>In Progress:</p> <p>Departments are doing a good job incorporating a REDI lens in decision-making, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ REDI team’s work on hiring, promotion, training, and engagement ▪ Model policing initiative (including adoption of ten principles/virtual town hall, implicit bias training for all police, de-escalation/use of force changes, rollout of body cameras, initiatives for stronger community relations, recruitment strategy to improve diversity, commitment to procedural justice) ▪ CEP’s engagement/listening work with AAPI, BIPOC communities ▪ Incorporating REDI lens and evaluation tool into “fit exercise” to assess programs ▪ Piloting engagement best practices for legacy use analysis ▪ Applying REDI lens for land acquisition and capital investments ▪ We met with MBE/WBE consultant in July 2021 to explore how we can further expand and embed REDI goals in our procurements process.

Key Actions	Progress to Date
<p>7. Continue outreach to Indigenous and people of color and other groups to seek input and provide opportunities to co-design strategies to promote racial equity at the Forest Preserves.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The MBE/WBE consultant is completing a disparity study to determine if there is justification to continue setting aspirational MWBE goals. <p>In Progress:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The FPCC’s CEP team continues to expand a broad range of programming and engagement activities such as community leadership workshops, gear libraries, training and other resources to help community partners bring their members out to the preserves. ▪ Staff are convening listening sessions with the AAPI community and the American Indian community. ▪ To better understand the communities we serve, staff are participating in community meetings and events and actively listening. ▪ CEP is providing small grants to organizations that engage new audiences in connecting to nature at the preserves.
<p>8. Seek funding to expand the Conservation Corps and Forest Preserve Experience.</p>	<p>In Progress:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ FPCC is supporting an effort led by Openlands to include federal funding for a new Climate Conservation Corps. If successful, this will substantially scale up these programs.
<p>9. Evaluate how applying a racial equity lens changes decision-making and/or revises FPCC priorities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ FPCC is tracking REDI efforts and presenting an annual progress report to the Board. <p>In Progress:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ FPCC is working with the County’s Office of Research, Operations and Innovation to develop key performance indicators to measure and document our REDI efforts. This information will be incorporated into a performance dashboard which will be easy to access and understand. A demonstration of the new performance dashboard will be presented to the Council in 2022.

Part 2 of the REDI position paper is currently being developed and will focus on diversity and inclusion throughout the preserves.

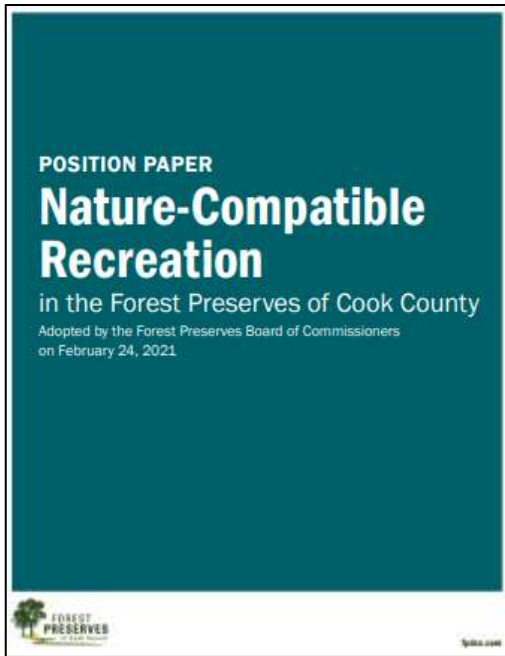


This paper addresses how the Forest Preserves should expand and manage land acquisition, disposition, and land-use policies to achieve the goals adopted in the Next Century Conservation Plan. Recommendations include:

1. **Find creative ways to continue to buy more land.**
2. **Incorporate land conservation models that do not include ownership.**
3. **Ensure that Forest Preserves' current land remains in the Forest Preserves and is maintained in accordance with its mission, including recreation that is compatible with nature.**
4. **Continue to consider equity and access among the key factors when determining where to acquire land.**
5. **Build public support for robust successful land conservation.**

Key Actions	Progress to Date
1. Explore aggressively the potential to secure funding for land acquisition through a voter referendum, a tax levy increase and other alternative strategies.	✓ The Board of Commissioners unanimously introduced a resolution that would bring a referendum to voters to increase funding available to the Forest Preserves. (The referendum will be on the November 2022 ballot.)
2. Place a moratorium on disposition of land and empower a body led by the Conservation and Policy Council to review and develop a final disposition policy that makes land disposition possible only in rare and extreme instances.	In Progress: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Great progress has been made with Superintendent Randall and staff leadership in fine-tuning a framework to help guide the decision-making process until the final, updated land use policies are completed, with incorporated provisions relating to the moratorium recommendations.
3. Clarify, rewrite, and improve the current Land Use Policy of the Forest Preserves and the corresponding State Code provisions for consistency and clarity. Create a comprehensive executive summary of both the policy and code.	In Progress: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A land use policy task force is conducting a comprehensive overhaul of land use and land disposition policies to provide clarity and guidance and to better align with the mission of the Preserves, the Next Century Conservation Plan and the recommendations contained in the land acquisition and disposition position paper.
4. Coordinate approaches that are in line with the Council's Racial	✓ Equity was added to the list of land acquisition criteria as a key factor in decision-making.

Key Actions	Progress to Date
<p>Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (REDI) position paper.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Funding was secured for the first two parcels of the Deer Creek Corridor Acquisitions (part of the Southeast Cook Plan which benefits residents of impacted communities). ✓ The FPCC acquired approximately 24 acres in Glenwood, located in southeast Cook County, next to Glenwood Woods in Chicago Heights. The property contains the confluence of Butterfield Creek and Thorn Creek. <p>In Progress:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ FPCC is working with CTA and the City of Chicago to secure additional open space at Beaubien Woods. ▪ FPCC has pending land acquisition proposals with IDNR and the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation; if funded, these grants would help acquire additional parcels in the Deer Creek Corridor.
<p>5. Create a Community of Support for the forest preserves by building awareness of the value of the preserves to the quality of life of our region. The success of all recommendations above depends on this.</p>	<p>In Progress:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ In recent years, FPCC staff met with 87 village boards and civic organizations to share research related to the economic value of ecosystems and other ways the preserves add to the quality of life in our region. More than 2000 elected officials, civic leaders, and residents participated in these discussions. Due to the pandemic, presentations were suspended in 2020. Presentations were restarted in July of 2021.



Over time, recreational programs and/or facilities that do not align with the Forest Preserves’ mission and are not financially sustainable have been developed throughout the preserves. Even today, there is constant pressure to develop new uses which are more appropriate to municipal parks. This paper calls upon the Forest Preserves to support recreational facilities and programs which provide all residents with a connection to nature, oppose new uses which are not aligned with its mission, and phase out existing recreational programs and facilities which are incompatible and/or unsustainable. Specific recommendations include:

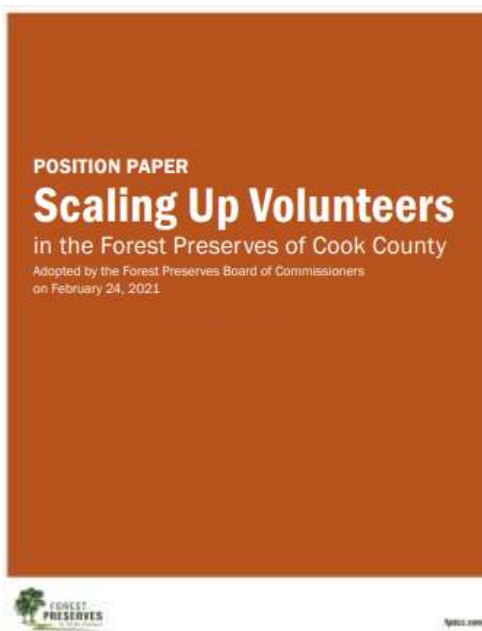
1. **Ensure all residents have access to nature-compatible recreation.**
2. **Transform or repurpose programs and facilities that are incompatible or unsustainable to nature-compatible uses.**
3. **Ensure all future investments support nature-compatible and sustainable uses.**
4. **Throughout the planning and decision-making process, engage stakeholders to help plan and implement nature-compatible and sustainable programs and new facilities, and to develop re-use plans for incompatible and unsustainable uses.**

Key Actions	Progress to Date
1. Research relevant models and develop best practices for community engagement at the FPCC.	✓ Completed
2. Select and customize an evaluation tool which incorporates criteria related to alignment to mission, community benefit, ecological impact, etc.	In Progress: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ An evaluation tool is being developed as part of the legacy use pilot studies.
3. Utilize best practices identified in #1 above to engage stakeholders.	In Progress: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Various engagement models are being tested in the 2021 legacy use pilot studies.
4. Report on 3-year gains by CEP and goals for upcoming year(s).	In Progress: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ CEP is seeking a consultant to analyze past work and assist with visioning and strategy development for its next stage.

Key Actions	Progress to Date
<p>5. Increase the use of multiple languages, targeted marketing, and social media to reach target audiences.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ FPCC used community news outlets to reach target audiences for the 2021 ad campaign. ✓ During COVID, FPCC made targeted buys on FB to reach people in communities that were near sites being closed due to over-crowding. We are exploring using FB buys to target impacted communities. <p>In Progress:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The REDI committee identified impacted communities by zip code to expand distribution of FPCC events guide to target communities. (This was put on hold due to the pandemic but will restart in 2022.) ▪ The FPCC will designate a language access liaison and piggy-back on a Cook County contract to improve language access.
<p>6. Explore new signage, differentiated from FPCC’s traditional red signs, to highlight and promote the zipline course, boating facilities, and other special attractions.</p>	<p>In Progress:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ This recommendation will be reviewed by the sign committee in 2021.
<p>7. Explore opportunities to partner with DIVVY or other bike share providers to connect residents near bike sharing hubs to the FPCC trail system.</p>	<p>In Progress:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ FPCC will explore a partnership with Northeastern Illinois University which has a DIVVY hub and is located about 1 mile from the North Branch trail. This was delayed due to the pandemic.
<p>8. Complete phase 1 of pavement reduction study (evaluation)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ FPCC purchased pavement management software and updated pavement conditions to create a more accurate, comprehensive assessment. ✓ FPCC incorporated pavement reduction into parking lot repairs when and where appropriate, including the Beaubien Woods boat launch, Northwestern Woods, and Campground Woods. ✓ FPCC used green infrastructure grants from MWRD to remove a significant portion of the Dam 4 parking lot and convert the remainder to permeable pavers. <p>In Progress:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Possum Hollow Woods parking lot will be reduced; remaining pavement will be converted to permeable pavers.

Key Actions	Progress to Date
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ FPCC has a pending grant with MWRD requesting support to reduce and retrofit the remaining parking lot at Westchester Woods. ▪ FPCC is exploring a blanket agreement with MWRD to create a partnership to identify other locations for permeable pavement and/or pavement reductions.
<p>9. Engage stakeholders and conduct second phase assessment for aquatic centers.</p>	<p>✓ Engineering/design students from Northwestern University developed proposals to incorporate nature-themes into the Whelan Aquatic Center.</p> <p>In Progress:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The pools are part of the legacy use pilot study which is examining how/if pools can be re-positioned to better align with nature.
<p>10. Engage flying clubs to develop a long-term strategy for model plane flying fields and runways.</p>	<p>In Progress:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The model plane flying fields are part of the legacy use pilot study which is examining how/if pools can be re-positioned to better align with nature.
<p>11. Complete phase 2 of pavement reduction study (programmatic approach)</p>	<p>This has not yet been initiated.</p>
<p>12. Develop a donor equity program which encourages donors supporting investments in higher income communities to provide a corresponding “matching” benefit to an impacted community.</p>	<p>This has not yet been initiated.</p>
<p>13. Develop a plan for recreational facilities south of I-80. Prioritize investments in new programs and facilities serving this region.</p>	<p>This has not yet been initiated.</p>
<p>14. Develop strategies to provide compatible recreation opportunities for residents living far from the forest preserves.</p>	<p>In Progress:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ FPCC initiated pilot programs with Enlace Chicago and the American Indian Center to develop strategies to connect residents to nature. ▪ Many of the initiatives (Nature Express, partnerships with park Districts, etc.) were delayed due to the pandemic.
<p>15. Use the selected evaluation tool to assess all new proposals for</p>	<p>In Progress:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The first step of a new process was developed as part of the Trail and Rec Committee and the committee will move

Key Actions	Progress to Date
recreational facilities and programs.	forward with it as a pilot. The tool will be adjusted as part of the legacy use pilot studies and will be used for new proposals.
16. Engage key stakeholders and develop long-term strategies to transition exclusive uses such as dog parks and model plane fields to a natural state or transition the site to a broad public use, rather than invest significant capital resources to perpetuate the exclusive use.	<p>In Progress:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Model plane fields are part of the 2021 legacy use pilot studies. Dog parks will be studied in the next phase.



To attain the ambitious goals of its Next Century Conservation Plan (NCCP), the Forest Preserves of Cook County and its partners must invest in the best available strategies to engage, train, inspire and retain dedicated volunteers and, especially, volunteer leaders. The Scaling Up Volunteers (SUV) paper presents the following recommendations:

1. **Engage:** Involve a variety of partners to attract and enlist volunteers that reflect the diversity of Cook County.
2. **Train:** Work with partners to foster a culture of learning and teaching among volunteers.
3. **Retain:** Embrace and empower volunteers as critical partners in the common mission.
4. **Sustain:** Ensure that the resources, relationships, and systems are in place to continue and expand volunteer programs.

Key Actions	Progress to Date
1. Work with partners to develop a plan for recruiting and training volunteer leaders.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Conducted a survey of existing volunteer leaders (site stewards) to gauge site leadership needs and better understand where recruiting resources should be distributed. ✓ Mapped volunteers by zip code to determine where existing volunteers live to better target marketing efforts.

Key Actions	Progress to Date
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Conducted a review of dormant programs to identify which programs might be reimagined and relaunched to enhance diversity and expand volunteer engagement. ✓ Worked with the REDI team to create and implement a racial equity, diversity, and inclusion (REDI) training for Stewardship Leaders and other public facing roles. ✓ Hired a consultant to review the Volunteer Resources (VR) section of the website with a REDI lens and make recommendations for improved communication. <p>In Progress:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The Centennial Volunteers (CV) initiative was launched in 2014 to build a self-sustaining volunteer community that is geographically diverse and that lays the foundation for a next generation of volunteer leaders. An evaluation of the initiative was completed in 2019 to assess the benefits of the initiative and identify modifications needed. The initiative is currently being re-designed based upon lessons learned.
<p>2. Work with the Forest Preserves Board of Commissioners to connect with constituents and local leaders.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The VR team held four meetings with Commissioners and their staff since the SUV paper was adopted. <p>In Progress:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Partners are engaging with Commissioners in separate but complementary ways.
<p>3. Identify and deploy new resources to support and accelerate restoration at existing volunteer stewardship sites, in consultation with site stewards.</p>	<p>In Progress:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The development of volunteer leadership requires a variety of community building strategies to establish trust along the engage-retain-train-sustain continuum. FPCC and partners have secured small-scale, short-term funding from individuals, foundations, and government sources. A new strategy for multi-year funding is a priority need. ▪ FPCC and Partners are developing strategies for ‘resource stacking’ or combining complementary efforts of contractors, Conservation Corps crews, and volunteers to accomplish habitat restoration goals.

4. Demonstrating the Value of the Preserves: Challenge Sites

When the pandemic hit, the Forest Preserves responded quickly to changing public health guidelines and an influx of visitors and was able to keep open the vast majority of sites and trails, even as local park Districts and beaches closed down. As a result, record numbers of visitors flocked to the preserves seeking the solace of nature. This presents an historic opportunity to further engage these new visitors and to demonstrate broadly the value of the preserves in people's lives.

To propel the Forest Preserves forward while the support for the preserves is so strong, the Council recommended in its 2020 Annual Report to use "FPCC reserve funds to continue outreach and engagement, make the preserves more welcoming and accessible, and to acquire targeted parcels while they are available." The Council also asked that revenues from mitigation fees be used to fund highly visible restoration projects "in order to build awareness and understanding of this critical aspect of the District's mission."

In response to the Council's recommendations, the Steering Committee created the Challenge Sites initiative.

Goal. The initiative is designed to increase investments in three geographically distributed sites to build awareness of the Forest Preserves and connect more residents to nature. Investments in healthy nature, wayfinding and interpretive signage, and public engagement will showcase what the Forest Preserves offer and provide a vision for what all sites could provide with additional support. The initiative is also designed to leverage FPCC resources with in-kind support and matching funds from partners, advocates, and others. To ensure the public is aware of the enhancements and is active in the public engagement process, a comprehensive and far-reaching listening tour and marketing campaign will be conducted for each site.

Site selection requirements. The NCCP Steering Committee reviewed dozens of sites throughout the preserves to identify sites which:

- Are highly visible sites that the public already enjoys but where improvements are needed,
- Provide access to nature for residents of communities impacted by a history of racial inequity, and/or
- Serve a wide range of constituents and have a variety of recreational offerings.

Selected Sites. Based on the criteria above, the committee selected three sites:

1. [Sauk Trail Woods](#) (South suburbs)
2. [Miller Meadow](#) (West Suburbs)
3. [Caldwell Woods](#) (City of Chicago and North Suburbs)

Site Enhancements. The FPCC utilized extensive and already existing public outreach and surveys to identify nature compatible enhancements that residents' desire. The most important survey is the

Community Recreational Needs Survey (CRNS). This survey, conducted in 2012, is an unbiased representative sample of 4,047 Cook County residents across all communities. Additionally, the survey findings align with other public surveys, outreach campaigns, and community meetings conducted for the FPCC’s Trail Master Plan and Gateway Master Plan.

Specific investments will include:

1. Community Engagement/Investment

The Forest Preserves will conduct community research and talk and work with the community to develop a robust plan to activate each site with added nature-based programming, events, etc. Each site will have a plan developed specifically with both the local and regional community interests and needs in mind. The nearby nature center, schools, NGOs, block clubs, libraries and individuals will be invited to participate in a variety of ways to give input and feedback.

2. Restoration / Native Planting Investment.

Invasive plant removal will primarily focus on clearing invasive brush that impairs public enjoyment of nature or makes people feel unsafe or unwelcome. Each site will receive a minimum of 25 acres of restoration with targeted enhancements along trails, within groves or where invasive plants hamper aesthetics and enjoyment of natural features or ability to view wildlife or bird watch. Members of the Conservation Corps can assist with these restoration activities.

3. Welcoming/Wayfinding/Interpretation

Each site will be evaluated to determine the need for welcoming, wayfinding and interpretative signage. Community input will play a role in determining the need for the specific signage at each location.

2022 Draft Budget. To advance this initiative, General Superintendent Randall has approved a draw on reserve funds of approximately \$900,000 in 2022. The proposed 2022 budget is presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Proposed 2022 Budget for Challenge Sites Initiative

Total Budget = \$935K (\$272K to \$350K per site)			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Welcoming ▪ Wayfinding ▪ Interpretation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Restoration ▪ Native Plantings ▪ Conservation Corps 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Community Engagement ▪ Investment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Publicity ▪ Outreach
\$309,000	\$272,000	\$285,000	\$69,000
Total Budget = \$935K (\$272K to \$350K per site)			

Note: Sauk Lake Complex is larger than the other sites and has historically received less funding and amenities as a site south of I-80. Therefore it receives a higher investment (\$350K vs. \$272 for Caldwell- Bunker and \$315K for Miller Meadow respectively).

Program Time Frame. The first phase of this initiative will begin in the fall of 2021 and conclude in the winter of 2022 as follows:

- Planning process and physical improvement work (e.g. restoration work, sign installation) – Fall 2021 to Spring 2022
- Community listening sessions that inform program offerings – Winter 2022
- Community outreach and publicity – Winter to Fall 2022
- On-the-ground public programming – Spring, Summer and Fall 2022

5. Securing Needed Resources

To address structural budget challenges and fully implement the ambitious goals of the Next Century Conservation Plan, the FPCC must secure long-term, sustainable funding.

In July of this year, the Board of Commissioners unanimously introduced a resolution that would bring a referendum to voters to increase funding available to the Forest Preserves. The referendum will be on the November 2022 ballot. If voters approve the referendum, it will provide funding to advance key NCCP goals and other priorities. Specifically, the FPCC will:

- Acquire more natural open land in Cook County for protection for future generations.
- Expand habitat restoration work to protect wildlife and clean our water and air.
- Continue to increase and improve programs and events, including more outreach to all Cook County residents.
- Address deferred maintenance and capital improvements in the Preserves, including making amenities more energy efficient and accessible to all.
- Fully fix the Forest Preserves' pension shortfall.
- Provide support for capital needs at the Brookfield Zoo and Chicago Botanic Garden.

Friends of the Forest Preserves, Openlands, The Nature Conservancy and the Trust for Public Lands are leading a broad coalition of partners to advocate for the referendum.

If the referendum is not successful, the FPCC will reallocate funding to address structural budget shortfalls in the pension and deferred maintenance.

6. Advancing Other NCCP Goals

In addition to the actions outlined in the previous sections, the Forest Preserves and its partners also continue to advance a range of high priority NCCP goals. This section presents the phase 2 priority NCCP goals and details the progress made during 2021.

Goal 1/NATURE: Native landscapes will thrive for generations.			
Priorities	Actions	Key Performance Indicators & Milestones	Progress made in 2021
1.1 Invest in restoration and stewardship.	a. Restore land.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Maintain previously restored acres ➤ Restore new acres ➤ Measure ecological progress 	Direct (By Aug 1, 2021): 6,300 acres 1,163 new acres winter 2021 15 sites monitored; one new nature preserve (84 acres)
	b. Restore high visibility acreage.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Number of acres ➤ # of signs installed to highlight restoration efforts underway 	480 acres, 6 miles of road frontage 20 restoration projects with proper signage in 2021
	c. Increase funding for restoration and volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Increase funding ➤ Increase in acres restored and volunteers (See above) 	12 large grants or mitigation-funded projects underway
1.2 Mobilize people to heal and nurture the land.	a. Increase volunteer leadership. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Compile “best practices” to effectively recruit and retain leaders. ▪ Expand the role of current stewards in mentoring leaders. ▪ Staff and long-time stewards develop succession plans. ▪ Better define the progression from Workday leader to Steward. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Add 10 stewards per year ➤ Gather information from VR volunteer surveys, Centennial Volunteer program evaluation retreat, input from volunteer community ➤ Provide resource list of volunteers with expertise, encourage active mentoring ➤ Engage stewards who plan to retire within the next 5 years ➤ Work with VR to identify and reach out to volunteers who 	<p><i>Note: This is a very challenging goal; only 6 stewards were added over the past 5 years. There are 80 stewarded sites encompassing more than 8900 acres; approximately 50% of this acreage is actively managed by 73 stewards who are assisted by 40 Workday leaders.</i></p> <p>If the remaining half of the acreage is to be “restored”, it would take at least the same number of stewards (73) plus somewhat fewer (~35) to maintain the half already being managed. To allow for retirement and other attrition, FPCC will need to recruit and train leaders to achieve 100 stewards by 2025.</p>

Goal 1/NATURE: Native landscapes will thrive for generations.

Priorities	Actions	Key Performance Indicators & Milestones	Progress made in 2021
		desire a greater leadership role	
	b. Incorporate volunteers across departments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ # of volunteers ➤ # of volunteer opportunities ➤ Additional work accomplished 	A broad range of cross-departmental volunteer roles has been developed. Currently, this includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 55 Nature Ambassadors ▪ 12 Chicago Portage Survey Volunteers ▪ 2 Interpretive Hike Guides ▪ 1 Birdhouse Carpenter ▪ 4 Creel Clerks ▪ 6 Off Leash Dog Area Volunteers ▪ ~250 Landscape Beautification Volunteers ▪ 3 Tool Doctors ▪ 12 Tree Keepers ▪ 418 SOLO litter cleaners
	c. Expand Conservation Corps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ # of work/education service hours ➤ # of participants ➤ # of partners working with ➤ Retention ➤ Conservation field participants (college/employment) 	The Corps has grown 63% from 178 participants in 2015 to 291 participants in 2020. Work/education hours have increased from 4,140 educational hours and 48,329 total work hours in 2015 to 21,868 educational and 51,391 total work hours in 2020. <i>Note: 2021 numbers are not yet available.</i>
	d. Expand partnerships (Conservation@Home, others)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ # of partners ➤ # of partner projects 	The University of Illinois Extension and the FPCC partner on the Conservation@Home initiative. 2021 accomplishments include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Received over 600 orders and sold over 11,000 native plants at spring plant sales co-hosted with West Cook Wild Ones in Maywood and Lemont.

Goal 1/NATURE: Native landscapes will thrive for generations.

Priorities	Actions	Key Performance Indicators & Milestones	Progress made in 2021
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 23 people applied for consultations or certifications and 13 were certified as of June 2021. (A total of 186 people have applied to date.) ▪ 114 gardens have been certified since 20XX. ▪ 7 Cook County schools/community gardens received support or assistance with native gardens. ▪ Over 30 residents in Palos are participating in a Chicago Region Tree Initiative research project and receiving consultations and assistance. ▪ Gave 8 Conservation@Home presentations to garden clubs, libraries, and rotary clubs (Jan to Jun 2021).
<p>1.3 Connect the preserves to a wider wilderness.</p>	<p>a. Acquire land.</p>	<p>➤ # of acres</p>	<p>The FPCC acquired 100 acres between 2016 and 2020. We plan to acquire an additional 350 acres in 2021 and 2022; 24 acres have been acquired so far in 2021.</p>
<p>1.4 Learn from and adapt to a changing environment.</p>	<p>a. Certify low mow areas.</p>	<p>➤ # of acres ➤ # of management plans ➤ Stats on benefits (reduced fuel and habitat benefits)</p>	<p>The # of acres in designated low-mow sites increased 77% from 124 acres in 2017, to 220 acres in 2019. Due to staff shortages during the pandemic, the FPCC delayed mowing of nearly 15,000 acres during 2020 and over 10,000 acres during 2021.</p>

**Goal 2/PEOPLE: Everyone in Cook County will feel welcome at the forest preserves—
and will seek them out for discovery, renewal and fun.**

Priorities	Actions	Key Performance Indicators & Milestones	Progress made in 2021
<p>2.1 Provide programs in the Forest Preserves that emphasize holistic health benefits of being in nature.</p>	<p>a. Pursue new ways to communicate nature’s role in addressing a variety of community needs and assist the community in using the resource to meet those needs (youth development, health & wellness, etc.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ # of new communities’ strategies implemented or augmented. ➤ # of presentations at local, regional, and national level sharing importance of nature to holistic health 	<p>We are part of planning a Foster Care parent activation and recruitment event with partners that will be held on Sept. 18 at Dan Ryan Woods.</p> <p>We are using the Community Leadership Workshop model to communicate with specific community groups and are using this model in our listening sessions and to help us connect with school Districts and other entities.</p>
	<p>b. Train community leaders in FPCC messaging and how to access assets and resource</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ # of people trained ➤ # of programs led by trained partners/leaders 	<p>We are using the Greater Maywood Paddling program and the CLIC training and gear library program as a model. In 2021 we developed a Day Hike Leadership training and created a hiking gear library.</p> <p>The goal of our new Mighty Acorn model is to train teachers to be leaders in environmental education and the use of outdoor classrooms.</p>
<p>2.2 Invite, excite, and engage diverse visitors from all walks of life.</p>	<p>a. Expand and commit to long-term community partnerships to engage underserved communities. Create programs with cultural competence.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ % of partnerships reaching full potential (potential KPI for CEP) ➤ % of visitors and volunteers who are historically under-represented minorities 	<p>FPCC staff researched best practices in community engagement and used the research to evaluate current partnerships and pilot new engagement strategies. The CEP outreach team is developing next steps.</p>
	<p>b. People feel more connected to nature and FPCC through CEP and partner programs/activities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ % of people who indicate on program evaluation or survey that they feel more 	<p>FPCC staff are working on the program evaluation process as part of interpretation and messaging. The evaluation asks the question “Do you feel more connected to</p>

**Goal 2/PEOPLE: Everyone in Cook County will feel welcome at the forest preserves—
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Priorities	Actions	Key Performance Indicators & Milestones	Progress made in 2021
		connected to FPCC and nature	nature and to the Forest Preserves after participating in this program.” FPCC staff are training volunteers and partners on interpretive and messaging goals and process.
2.3 Make the preserves accessible to all.	a. Continue and evaluate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ % of sites that are ADA compliant (potential KPI for OGS) ➤ % of requested accessible accommodations met ➤ # of programs presented in language other than English ➤ Materials available in languages other than English 	<p>Spanish language programs are held at Little Red School House, Sand Ridge Nature Center, and Sagawau Environmental Learning Center. A Spanish language restoration workday is regularly held at Possum Hollow Woods.</p> <p>Materials available in other languages include maps, Wellness in the Woods brochure, Discover Nature, Nature Center Maps, and Explore the Forest activity book.</p>
2.4 Educate visitors and the community about the forest preserves’ natural treasures.	<p>a. FPCC to become a leader in environmental education: promote and help unify regional, statewide efforts in environmental education.</p> <p>b. Grow teachers as Environmental Educators and advocates of environmental education and outdoor classrooms.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ # of coalition groups/cohorts FPCC supports in environmental education ➤ # of schools embarking on new 5-year MA initiative to develop more environmental education in Cook County schools ➤ # of new environmental education initiatives with MA schools 	<p>FPCC is a member of the Chicago Wilderness education team and helped write the new Environmental Learning guidelines for Illinois as part of the EL4IL team.</p> <p>In fall of 2021 launching new Mighty Acorns (MA) sustainable model that has schools in the program for five years and then transitions teachers to serving as leaders and advocates for environmental education and outdoor learning. MA is part of the ladder of environmental education and experiences that the FPCC offers.</p>

**Goal 2/PEOPLE: Everyone in Cook County will feel welcome at the forest preserves—
and will seek them out for discovery, renewal and fun.**

Priorities	Actions	Key Performance Indicators & Milestones	Progress made in 2021
	<p>c. Create an outdoor classroom agenda/plan/charge that can be used by all schools in Cook County.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ # of new MA schools ➤ % of Cook County schools participating in MA programming (long term environmental education) ➤ Host Cook County Outdoor Learning/Classroom Conference 	<p>For about 5 years before the pandemic FPCC has been part of the CBG’s Inspiring Nature – a Nature Play conference focused on early childhood. The Conference took a break in 2020 and 2021 due to the pandemic. Build on that model for K-12 grades.</p>

Goal 3/ECONOMY: Communities will value the economic benefits of protected lands.

Priorities	Actions	Key Performance Indicators & Milestones	Progress made in 2021
<p>3.1 Build the case for the value of the Forest Preserves</p>	<p>a. Document and publicize nature’s benefits.</p> <p>b. Document and promote how the Forest Preserves improves the health of communities.</p> <p>c. Understand and market advantage of protected land.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Online Engagements: Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Website, E-Newsletter. ➤ On the Ground Engagements: Measuring partnerships, NCCP presentations, other “on the ground” engagements 	<p>FPCC is working with the County to develop key performance indicators which will be displayed on a public dashboard.</p>
<p>3.2 Encourage nature compatible business development</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Engagements with underserved and diverse communities: Focus on REDI position paper goals 	<p>No local partners have been identified to lead nature-compatible business attraction efforts, but members of the Council are interested in revitalizing this priority.</p>
<p>3.3 Market opportunities in the Forest Preserves across metropolitan Chicago</p>	<p>a. Capitalize on shared marketing opportunities with the Zoo and Garden, tie to tourism opportunities at major Chicago sites, and package visitor opportunities.</p>		
	<p>b. Focus on consumer marketing to expand the knowledge, interest, and commitment of the diverse residents of Cook County. (Note this is a new action step not in the NCCP.)</p>		

**Goal 4/LEADERSHIP: Visionary conservation leaders will safeguard, expand
and bring increased resources to the Forest Preserves.**

Priorities	Actions	Key Performance Indicators & Milestones	Progress made in 2021
4.1 Manage with excellence, transparency, and sound financial practice.	a. Make information and data easily available to the public.	➤ TBD (Will use Finance Department KPI.)	Developed metrics for each department to track progress toward key goals and objectives organization-wide and in alignment with the NCCP. In the process of developing Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) for each department which will be posted on our website.
4.2 Provide enduring, focused conservation leadership and increased accountability.	a. Continue on-going work.	✓ COMPLETED	Since it was launched in 2015, the Conservation and Policy Council has adopted four position papers, written several op-eds supporting the FPCC, visited and learned about dozens of sites throughout the preserves and had conversations with each commissioner. It is now well-established and well respected and is providing continuous conservation leadership and expertise.
4.3 Maximize public and private resources and use them wisely to achieve the vision for future growth and restoration.	a. Continue on-going work.	✓ COMPLETED	The FPCC has pursued funding from federal, state, local and private agencies and worked closely with the Forest Preserve Foundation to expand resources from the private sector. In 2020 the Forest Preserves raised \$3.8 M in grants that supported restoration, sustainability, recreation, and education programs. Partners secured \$2.5M in grants. Funds secured during the first half of 2021 include \$1.2M from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and more than \$2.1M secured by partners.
	b. Seek permission via public referendum to secure resources needed to achieve the vision of the NCCP.	➤ Secure needed resources	At the request of advocates, in 2021 the FPCC Board of Commissioners voted to place a referendum on the November 2022 ballot.