

Forest Preserves of Cook County Conservation & Policy Council Meeting

June 27, 2025

Little Red Schoolhouse Nature Center, 9800 Willow Springs Rd, Willow Springs, IL

Presenters: Melina Frezados, Troy Showerman, Rebecca Collings

Council Members in Attendance: Alan Bell, Commissioner Josina Morita, Jackie Samuel, Henrietta “Hank” Saunders, Vice-chairperson, Mark Templeton, Chairperson, and Laurel Ross.

Absent: Alaka Wali, Daisy Feidt, Ryen Nagle, Kim Ruffin

MINUTES

Call to Order Chairman Templeton called the meeting to order at 10:00 am and thanked Accessibility Coordinator Kenyon Duner and Deputy Director of Conservation & Experiential Programming Isaiah Ballinger for the morning tour of accessibility features at Camp Bullfrog.

Welcome. Welcome from Little Red Schoolhouse Nature Center Director George Klut and recap of Accessibility Tour by Kenyon Duner.

Land Acknowledgement. Interim General Superintendent Eileen Figel read the Forest Preserves’ Land Acknowledgement.

Nature spotlight. Wildlife Field Biologist Melina Frezados provided an overview of the Osprey Propagation Program.

Public Comments. There were no public comments.

Chairman’s Report:

- **Nominating Committee:**
Henrietta “Hank” Saunders reported on behalf of the committee and shared that the group is working to fill the vacancy left by Megan Bang’s resignation. The Nominating Committee has collected a good list of candidates and an invitation has been extended. We expect to hear from the candidate in the next week. If anyone has candidates for future consideration, please send names to Michelle Uting.
- **Community Colleges Summit:**
Hank reported on the deepening partnership with Moraine Valley College; they will offer a non-credit conservation class which will be featured in their fall catalog. Course information will be shared among the volunteers in addition to Moraine Valley’s own marketing efforts.

- **New General Superintendent Nomination:**
Adam Bianchi was nominated for the General Superintendent position and his nomination will be voted on by the Board on July 1, 2025.
- **Eileen Figel Transition:**
Chairman Mark Templeton and committee members showed appreciation to Interim-General Superintendent Eileen Figel for her contributions, leadership and grace. Delicious cupcakes for all (courtesy of Alan Bell.)

Approval of Minutes. Motion to approve the minutes moved by Laurel seconded by Jacqueline. The minutes for the meeting of April 16, 2025, were unanimously approved.

Discussion with Interim General Superintendent Eileen Figel

- **Transitional Reflection:** Eileen appealed to the Council to support and provide continuity to the new General Superintendent.
- **Key Successes:**
 - Phase 1 Successes (2016 to 2020): Learning, strengthening partnerships, testing new approaches
 - Phase 2 Building support & securing resources. We stayed open during the pandemic, passed the referendum, land use ordinance, and surpassed 70,000 ACRES!
- **Threats and Ongoing Challenges:**
 - Encroachments, ongoing requests to post signs, Executive Orders are targeting DEI efforts and making immigrants feel unsafe, deferred maintenance, growing costs of Conservation Corps, avoiding future structural budget deficits.

Unaccompanied Minors

Committeeperson Laurel Ross reported on a call to convene a short-term working group that will discuss ways to engage youth who are unaccompanied in volunteerism and in particular in volunteer-led restoration workdays. Anyone who is interested in joining this group is asked to reach out to Laurel, Hank, Michelle or Mark. Will likely have a number of virtual meetings with the aim of presenting a proposal to the Council at the September meeting. Commissioner Morita encouraged people to share ideas, recommendations or suggestions even if they aren't able to join the committee.

Restoration Progress & Monitoring Protocols

Troy Showerman, Resource Project Manager and Rebecca Collings, Senior Resource Biologist

Troy and Becky gave a robust presentation on the methodology to evaluate restoration progress based on uniform data collection practices. The Forest Preserves' data collection was standardized in 2021.

- 2020 data shows an increase in work because it reflects work completed internally in addition to work completed by contractors.

- Technology investments have also helped to bring data management to current best practices, allowing for granular data analysis that supports staff and resource management.
 - Tech upgrades are being used for Red Gate Restoration project management and prescribed burn management.
- Red Gate Woods is the largest restoration project to date with work beginning there in winter of 2023.
- Focus on restoring 30,000 acres to high quality – how will we know when we’ve accomplished that?
 - Vegetation Monitoring Protocol, designed to be long term (every decade) and track cumulative impact.
 - Highlights: 8 years into long-term program, 685 monitoring plots across FPCC, 174 reference (high-quality) plots, 64 re-surveyed sites.
- This data collection informs future land management strategies, including seed collection for conservative species, periodic prescribed fires, etc. It also allows for comparative analysis with statewide data sets.
- Making information accessible to the public.
 - Online map and data hub
 - Interactive story map series (modeled after the IL Nature Preserves Commission’s 60th Anniversary Campaign)
- Q&A
 - Are we tracking additional impacts in addition to vegetation monitoring, including social impacts? Yes, and we want to do more.
 - Do we have goals based on different criteria, such as wildlife? Yes, when there’s a conservation directive. There’s a concern about migratory birds and a desire to partner with the FPCC for bird monitoring.
 - Any plans to differentiate which activities were made possible through the referendum? No, funds are all in the same bucket so we’re no longer tracking that.
 - Can we develop talking points that illustrate the growth and improvements made possible through the referendum? Yes, it’s in the works.
 - There is a desire and need to quantify and measure volunteer impact, and to share the information publicly. Call to develop a topics list that can be presented to FPCC Commissioners.
 - Commissioner Morita asked that committee members split the list of new FPCC Commissioners and consider ways to reach out and inform commissioners on the FPCC’s progress.

Annual Progress Report: Successes, Challenges, and the Next Phase of NCCP Implementation

Interim-General Superintendent Eileen Figel and Director of Strategic Initiatives Michelle Uting

- The Next Century Conservation Plan is treated as a living document with adaptations and flexibility welcomed. The Steering Committee has undergone a number of variations shrinking from its original 28 members to 14 and in the last year or two meeting with less and less frequency.
- For Phase 3, we recommend morphing the Steering Committee into a series of working groups that can take on the different priorities listed in Phase 3:
 1. Strengthening volunteerism
 2. Connecting people with nature
 3. Land acquisition and protecting the land
 4. Increasing sustainability initiatives and positioning FPCC to withstand climate change
 5. Develop enduring conservation leadership
 - Call to action for council and partners to lead this.
- Alan- this phase also presents an opportunity to review governance and work.
- Commissioner Morita would like the opportunity extended to the commissioners, or a proxy, to join the working groups.

Updates from Strategic Partners

- Brookfield Zoo: July 10 ribbon cutting to celebrate tropical forest exhibit.
- Chairperson Mark Templeton invited members of the public to introduce themselves to the committee; partners included representatives from The Nature Conservancy Illinois, Chicago Bird Alliance, The Field Museum, and Friends of the Forest Preserves.
- Master Naturalists try to provide volunteer work when Nature Centers are closed on Fridays for deep cleaning.
- Shout out to Carl and the communications team. The Seed Amplification Program did well in the media.

September Preview

- September 4th Please let us know if you are not able to attend the meeting by contact Mark, Hank or Michelle Uting. We want to make sure we have quorum as the Council will be reviewing the Forest Preserves budget.

Adjournment. Laurel called for a motion to adjourn, seconded by Jackie, all approved. Mark thanked all participants, and adjourned the meeting at 1:03 p.m.