

2021 Annual Report & 2022 Budget Recommendation

Conservation and Policy Council of the
Forest Preserves of Cook County



Submitted on October 21, 2021

To President Preckwinkle and the Board of Commissioners
Forest Preserves of Cook County

By Alan Bell, *Chairman*, Conservation and Policy Council



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October 28, 2021

Dear President Preckwinkle:

When the pandemic hit in 2020, the Forest Preserves responded quickly to changing public health guidelines and was able to keep open the vast majority of sites and trails. Nearly two years later, record numbers of visitors continue to flock to the preserves seeking the solace of nature. This presents an historic opportunity to demonstrate the value of the preserves in people's lives, and we need to leverage boldly this opportunity to propel the Forest Preserves forward. To do so, we have introduced a new initiative which targets investments in three geographically distributed sites. General Superintendent Arnold Randall is recommending a \$900,000 draw on reserve funds to support the "Challenge Sites" initiative. As indicated in the attached report, we support his recommendation.

We have also conducted a review of the District's 2022 budget. The proposed \$64.6 million corporate budget largely holds steady, but does not allow the District to scale up work to achieve the Next Century Conservation Plan (NCCP) goals, or to address the under-funding of its pension obligations. And once again the FPCC must draw upon its reserves to meet the most urgent capital maintenance needs. As we have said before, this is simply not sustainable; we must secure long term, sustainable resources needed to achieve the ambitious goals of the Next Century Conservation Plan and to address the District's structural budget deficit. Securing needed resources is a key focus of the phase 2 implementation efforts. As always, a report on overall progress on NCCP implementation accompanies this annual report.

Sincerely,

Alan Bell, Chairman
Conservation and Policy Council of the Forest Preserves of Cook County

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.

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. This annual report provides an overview of the phased approach to implementing the NCCP and highlights several current initiatives which are a focus of phase 2 work. This includes:

- Implementing the position papers
- Challenge sites
- Securing needed resources

A detailed progress report on each of these initiatives and other NCCP goals is presented in the NCCP Phase 2 Implementation Strategy which accompanies this report. The Council's recommendation for the Forest Preserves 2022 budget is presented in the final section of this report.

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

Phase 2 Implementation Strategy

Along with this annual report, we are also submitting for your review the Phase 2 Implementation Strategy for the Next Century Conservation Plan. The implementation strategy presents 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.

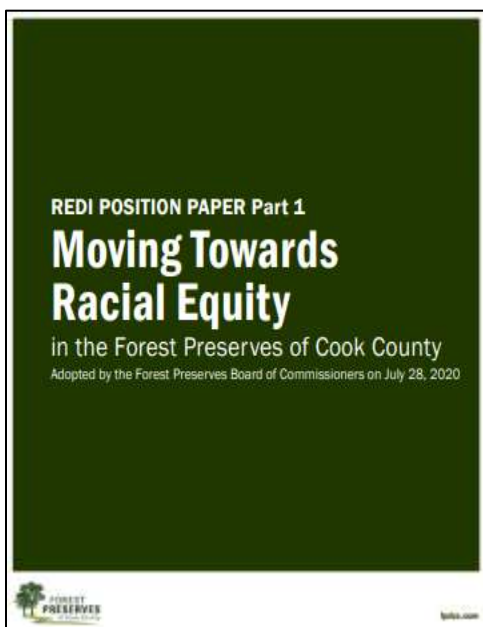
As indicated, during phase 2 the Council will work with staff, partners, volunteers, and advocates to:

- 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. Raise awareness.** 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.

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. Throughout 2021, the Council worked with staff and partners to ensure new policies and investments are consistent with the guidelines and to complete specific actions. A summary of key progress to date is presented here; a more detailed report is included in the Phase 2 Implementation Strategy.



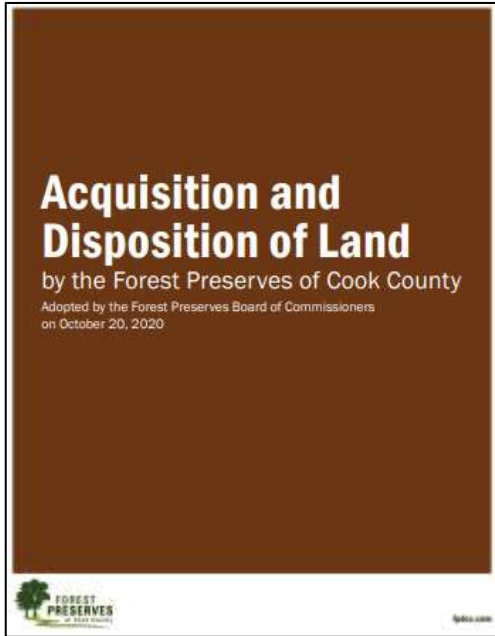
This paper presents long-term, comprehensive recommendations to promote racial equity throughout the preserves, including:

- 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 Achievements to Date

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Institutionalized the FPCC REDI staff committee so that its work becomes integrated with FPCC policies and procedures Districtwide.✓ Convened a racial equity impact assessment training for the senior team. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Completed implicit bias training for Police, CEP, and Permits staff.✓ Tracked REDI efforts and presented an annual progress report to the Board. |
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Part 2 of the REDI position paper is currently being developed and will focus on diversity and inclusion throughout the preserves.

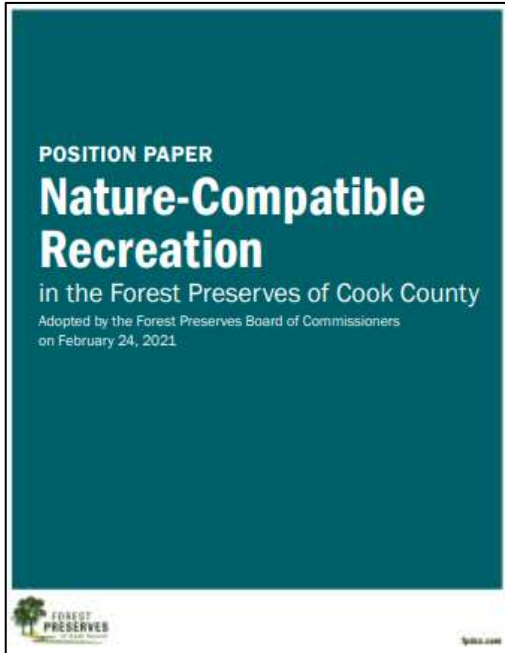


This paper addresses how the Forest Preserves should expand and manage land acquisition, disposition and land-use policies to achieve the goals adopted in the Next Century Conservation Plan. Recommendations include:

- 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 Achievements to Date

- ✓ 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.
- ✓ 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.
- ✓ Equity was added to the list of land acquisition criteria as a key factor in decision-making.
- ✓ 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.

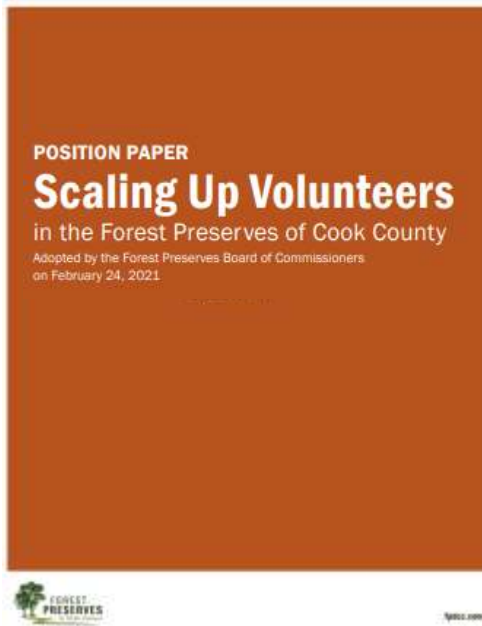


Over time, recreational programs and/or facilities that do not align with the Forest Preserves’ mission and are not financially sustainable have been developed throughout the preserves. Even today, there is constant pressure to develop new uses which are more appropriate to municipal parks. This paper 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 Achievements to Date

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Researched relevant models and develop best practices for community engagement at the FPCC. ✓ Increased the use of multiple languages, targeted marketing, and social media to reach target audiences. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Completed phase 1 of pavement reduction study. |
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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 Achievements to Date

- ✓ 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.
- ✓ 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.
- ✓ The VR team held four meetings with Commissioners and their staff since the SUV paper was adopted.

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."

In response to the Council's recommendations, the Steering Committee created the Challenge Sites initiative. The initiative is designed to increase investments in targeted 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.

Three geographically-distributed sites have been selected for this pilot initiative. They are:

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

General Superintendent Arnold Randall is recommending a draw on reserve funds of \$900,000 to fund this important initiative. The Council supports this recommendation.

Securing Needed Resources

To address structural budget challenges and fully implement the ambitious goals of the Next Century Conservation, 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.

Advancing Other NCCP Goals

In addition to the actions outlined in the previous pages, the Forest Preserves and its partners also continue to advance a broad range of high priority NCCP goals related to restoration, acquisition, etc. A report on the progress to date is presented in the NCCP Phase 2 Implementation Strategy.

Recommendation for the 2022 Budget

Each year the Conservation and Policy Council reviews the FPCC's annual budget and makes a recommendation to the General Superintendent, the President and the Board of Commissioners about the budget and its alignment with the five-year implementation strategy. Council Chair Alan Bell, Vice-chairman Mark Templeton, and Council member Henrietta Saunders met with CFO Steve Hughes to review the FPCC's proposed 2022 budget. The Council members and the CFO presented an overview of the proposed budget to the full Council at the September 1, 2021 meeting. (See Attachment 1.)

The Council concludes that the FPCC continues to use its limited resources in an effective and efficient manner. The proposed \$64.7 million corporate budget eliminates hiring freezes and budget cuts imposed during 2020 and 2021 due to the pandemic. The FPCC proposes once more to make a significant draw on reserve funds in 2022 to stabilize the self-insurance fund, pursue acquisition of priority sites which have become available, demolish structures which are not needed, replace aging vehicles, and address deferred maintenance. The Council supports this approach to stabilize FPCC operations into 2022. However, we continue to sound the alarm about the FPCC's inability to scale up work to achieve the NCCP goals, the under-funding of its pension obligations, and its backlog of deferred maintenance. Either the FPCC must secure long-term, sustainable funding, or it must reallocate funding and restructure operations in ways which will require a reduction in services and have a negative impact on protecting nature and connecting more residents to nature.

Based upon our review of the FPCC's recent accomplishments, current needs and future goals, the Conservation and Policy Council recommends approval of the proposed 2022 budget for the Forest Preserves of Cook County.



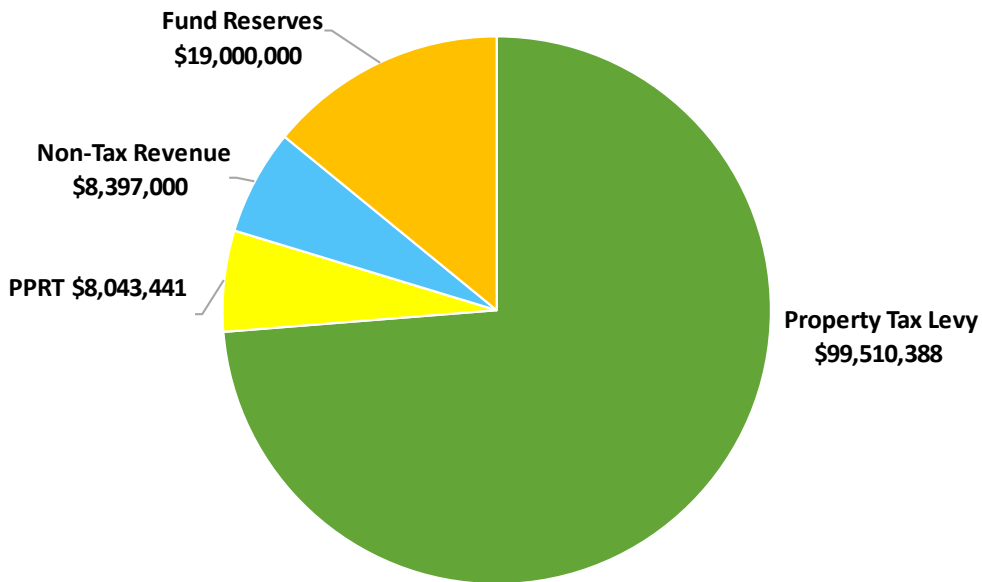
FPCC Budget Overview FY 2022

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FY 2022 Budget by Revenue Source

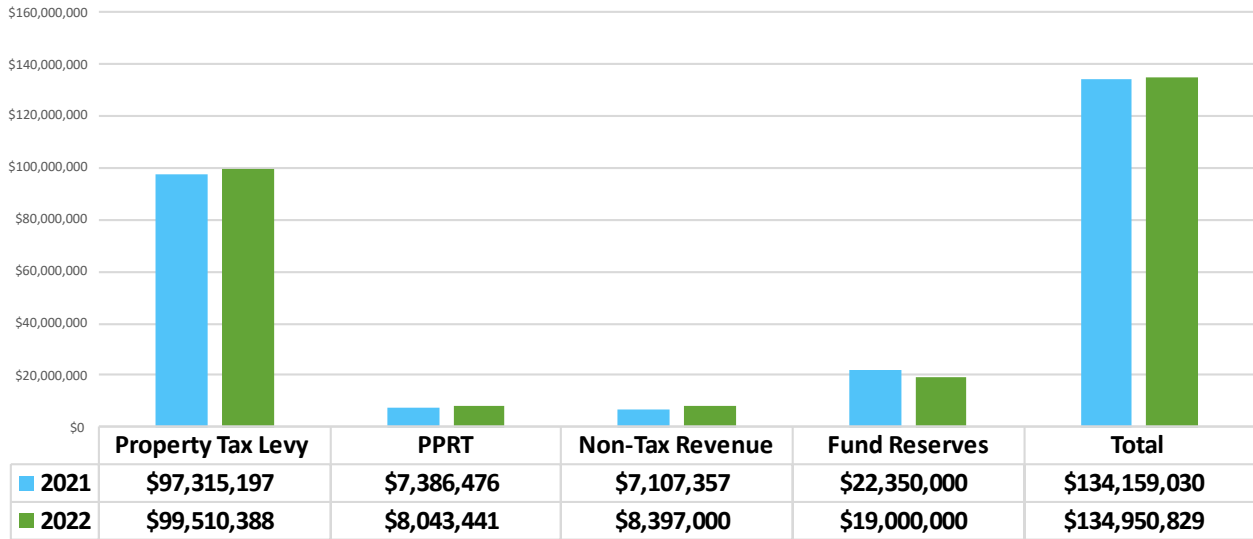
Total \$135M



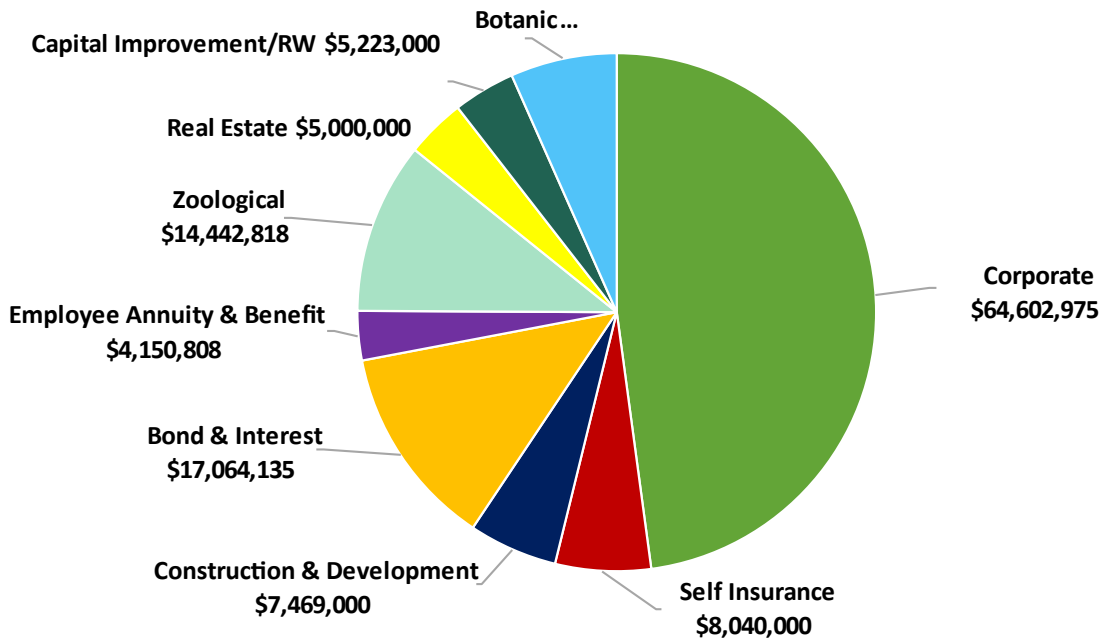
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Budget by Revenue Source

2021 vs 2022

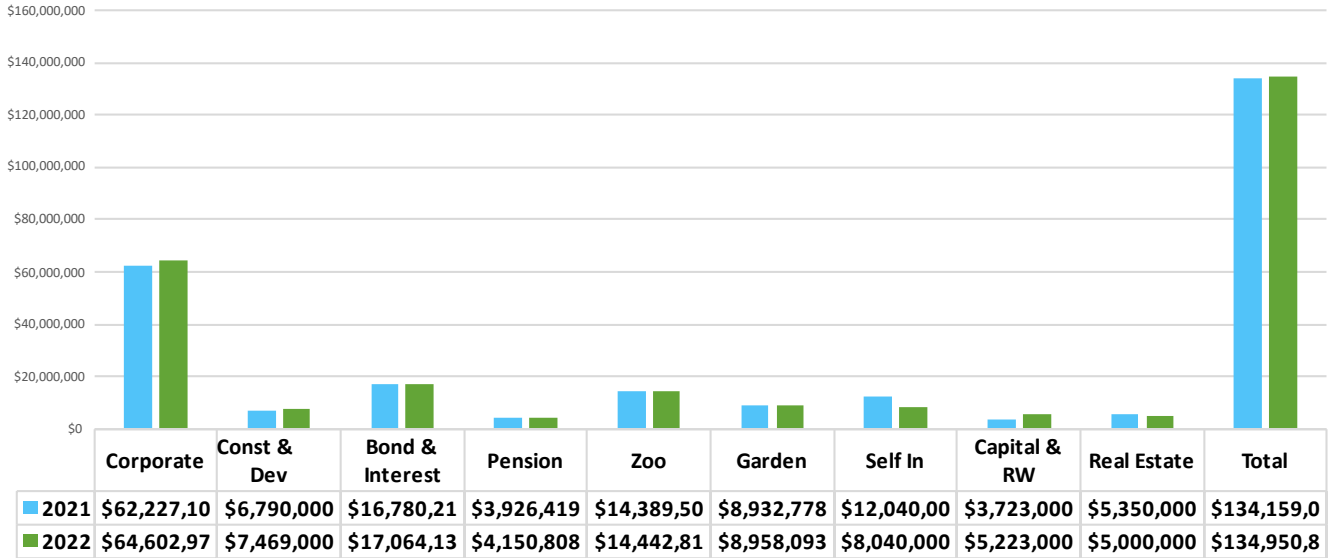


FY 2022 Budget by Fund



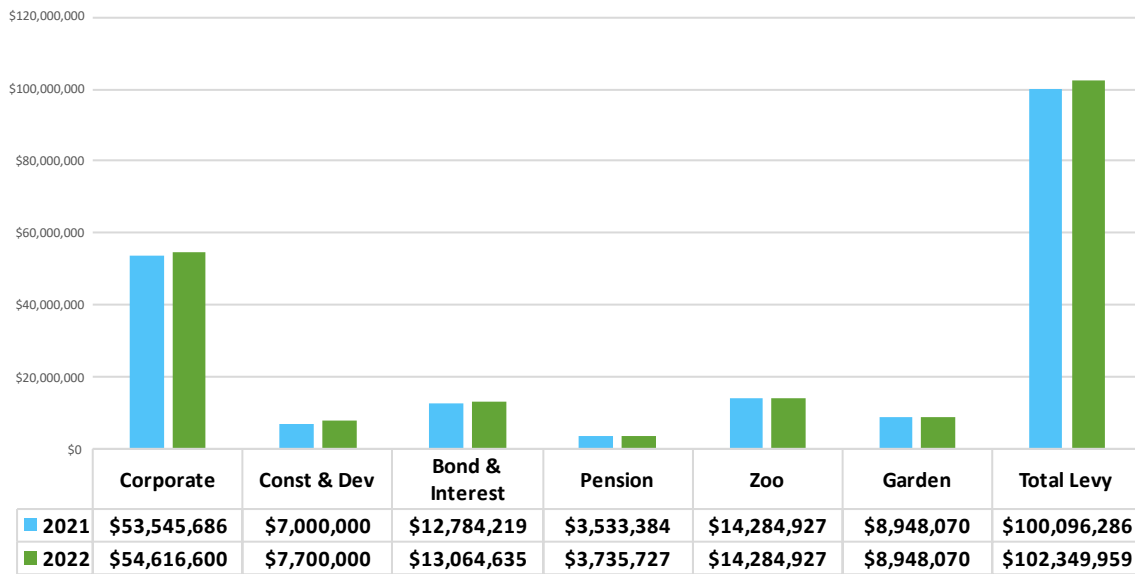
Budget by Fund

2021 vs 2022



Tax Levy Across All Funds

2021 vs 2022



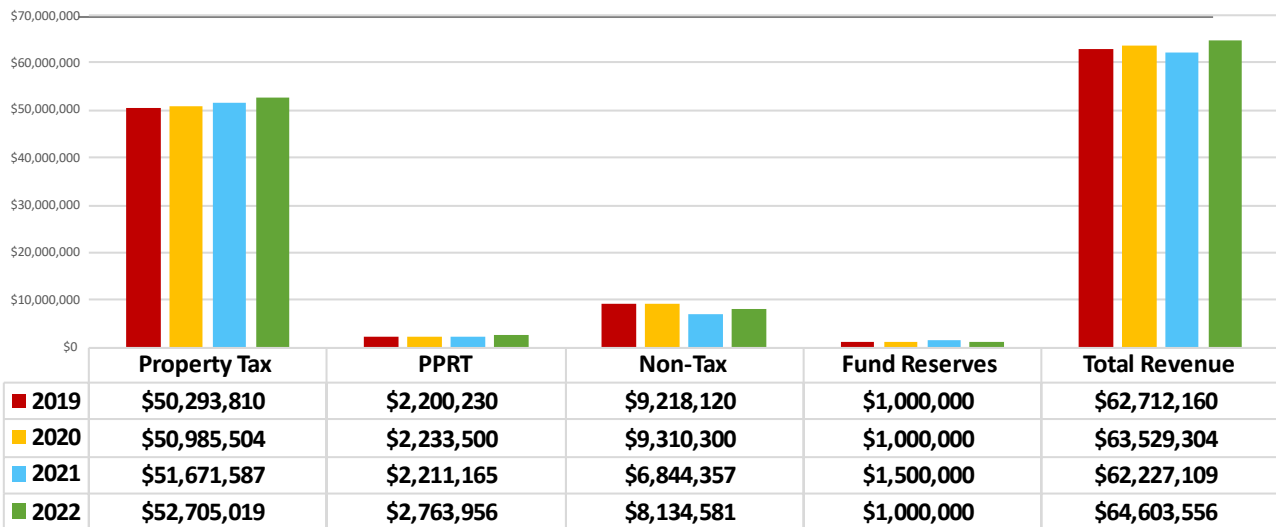
FY 2022 Corporate Budget Recommendation

- **\$64.6M Corporate Budget- Revenue**
 - **3.8% increase from last year (+ \$2.4M)**
 - Property Tax up 2.0% + \$1.0M
 - PPRT* up 25% + \$552K
 - Non-Tax Revenue up + \$1.3M
 - Use of Corporate Reserves down - \$500K

* Personal Property Replacement Tax

Corporate Revenue Budget 2019 -2022

Budgeted Revenue
2019 - 2022



FY 2022 Corporate Budget Recommendation

- **\$64.6M Corporate Budget- Expenditures**
 - **Personnel**
 - FY 2021 and 2022 COLAs planned- labor contracts expired 12/31/2020
 - Health benefit estimate (+4%)- rates not in from CC Risk Mgmt.
 - Small increase in full time budgeted positions (+4)
 - No hiring freeze but challenges filling sworn and seasonal employees
 - **Non-Personnel**
 - Opening of Aquatic Centers
 - Convert to laptops to support hybrid work model
 - IGA with County under review

Construction & Development Fund

10% Increase in FY 2022 budgets (+\$680K)

<u>Department</u>	<u>Use</u>	<u>2021</u>	<u>2022</u>
Resource Management	Land Conservation & Restoration	\$4,057,600	\$4,463,360
Facilities & Fleet	Deferred Maintenance & Vehicles	\$562,600	\$618,860
Planning & Development	Capital Improvements	\$1,794,800	\$1,974,280
Landscape Maintenance	Parking Lot Improvements	\$375,000	\$412,500
Total		\$6,790,000	\$7,469,000

Planned Use of Corporate Reserves

FY 2021 Beginning Balance of \$34.1M

▪ Corporate Fund	\$1.0M
▪ Self Insurance Fund	\$8.0M
▪ Real Estate Fund	\$2.0M
▪ Capital Fund	
○ Capital work, Demolition & Vehicles	<u>\$5.0M</u>
TOTAL	\$16.0M

FY 2022 Budget Calendar*

▪ Department Meetings Held	August 2 - 16
▪ Presentation to Advisory Council	Sept. 1
▪ Budget Introduction to Board of Commissioners	October 5
▪ Public Hearing (Downtown)	To be scheduled
▪ Approval by Board of Commissioners	November 2

* dates need to be confirmed