



2016 Budget Recommendation Address for President Toni Preckwinkle

October 28, 2015

Good afternoon.

I want to welcome members of the public, our Forest Preserves of Cook County Commissioners and staff and the various partners here today all of whom help us advance the mission of the Forest Preserves of Cook County.

As you know, we are coming to the end of what has been a three-year celebration of our Centennial. The ambitious effort to protect open space in Cook County began in the early 1900's by a group of visionary Cook County leaders.

In 1913 the Forest Preserve District Act was established. In 1914, under the new law, the residents of Cook County voted in favor of creating a Forest Preserve District, and the first meeting of the Forest Preserve Commissioners was held February 11, 1915.

One hundred years later, the Forest Preserves have grown into nearly 70,000 acres; 11 percent of the Cook County footprint, offering residents in the nation's third largest metropolis the ability to experience nature in an unparalleled way.

Of the 102 counties in Illinois, the most ecologically diverse is Cook—with forest woodlands, prairies, wetlands and savannas—that shelter thousands of native plants and animals.

The celebrations of this historic milestone have included a special Centennial Board Meeting commemorating the very first Forest Preserves board meeting. In attendance were descendants of Jens Jensen and Dwight Perkins, the founders of the preserves.

We hosted a Centennial Symposium in partnership with DePaul University, and several gatherings were organized in honor of long-time restoration stewards and a large scale appreciation day for all volunteers was hosted at Busse Woods.

We most recently concluded "100 Years / 100 Events" a week-long, county-wide celebration of more than 100 events and activities hosted by staff and partners attracting nearly 10,000 participants.

While there has been no shortage of festivities for our anniversary, we've also been marking the occasion in a lasting way. We've been hard at work, making sure not to squander the precious legacy we've inherited.

In 2015 we've seen the results of the efforts we began several years ago to secure our legacy for future generations.

As President of the Forest Preserves of Cook County, it is my privilege to be leading these efforts with the support of the Board of Commissioners, General Superintendent Arnold Randall, his staff, as well as our many partners and volunteers.

My 2016 Budget Recommendation includes a request for total appropriation authority of \$190.2 million dollars. This budget is balanced without raising taxes on individuals and businesses and with no increases to existing fees and fines.

The 2016 Budget includes no transfer from our reserve fund balance to pay for operational expenses.

This budget also incorporates key goals of our ambitious Next Century Conservation Plan which lays out a set of bold actions to make Cook County a national leader in urban conservation and calls for a commitment to restore and protect more land, and to connect more individuals, groups and families to nature.

Much of what is being proposed in the coming year are recommendations to maintain the huge strides we've made until now.

Before presenting the specifics of our plan, let me begin with our noteworthy 2015 accomplishments.

The culmination of our Centennial Celebration included the formalization and launch of the Conservation & Policy Council. I appointed this council of civic leaders to serve as advisors on how to implement and operationalize the Next Century Conservation Plan. The Council will also provide an annual update on this strategic plan the first of which is being introduced this year and is the foundation of our 2016 Budget Recommendation.

The members of this council bring with them the knowledge of their own various disciplines providing us with a well-rounded perspective on how to advance the four areas of the Next Century Conservation Plan: Nature, People, Economy and Leadership.

One of the most significant 2015 accomplishments is directly tied to our main mission of restoration and preservation. This year we released our Natural and Cultural Resources Master Plan—the first-ever formalized comprehensive plan outlining the prioritization of restoring 30,000 acres of Forest Preserve land to ecological health. Already, restoration has been initiated at four of the top priority sites identified.

This endeavor was achieved in partnership with the Prairie Research Institute and also outlines a process to surveying and recovering the cultural artifacts that exist in the preserves.

Harms Flatwoods in Skokie was submitted for review to the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission to achieve formal Illinois Nature Preserves Status adding approximately 107 acres to grade-A, high quality nature.

Resource Management staff along with contractors and volunteers also completed the most successful burn season on record—4,768 acres in spring 2014 which is a 35% increase over the same time in the previous season.

We also completed 15 years' worth of collaborative research on the Cook County Coyote Project, the largest and longest-running study of urban coyotes in the United States.

In 2015 we also reintroduced public camping for the first time in 50 years with five new and revitalized campgrounds in Willow Springs, the South Holland / Calumet City area, Oak Forest, Palatine and Northbrook. Nearly \$30 million dollars in investments resulted in campsites which include small and large cabins, tent camping and small RV and trailer sites accommodating more than 1,200 campers managed by Billy Casper Golf.

After a staggered opening which began Memorial Day Weekend, 8,500 campers have visited our campsites.

In less than six months the Forest Preserves of Cook County Camping program has generated \$425,000 dollars in non-tax revenue. That's money coming into Cook County instead of being lost to campgrounds in Wisconsin, Michigan and Indiana.

What cannot be counted in dollars and cents are the connections people have made with nature. Camping is a gateway to the wilderness. Our campgrounds saw not only first-time campers, but many young people who had never spent time in the Forest Preserves.

With donations from the Forest Preserve Foundation, CSX, and Columbia we provided Family Campouts, Camperships or camping scholarships and the use of gear to 70 children and families. We also launched the Camping Leadership Immersion Course with the help of the Outdoors Empowered Network, offering camping skills and the use of equipment to leaders of large groups.

In total, the Forest Preserve Foundation has assisted with funding totaling \$277,600 in 2015. This funding supports Forest Preserves' priority programs such as camping, Conservation Corps, Nature Express transportation assistance, the printing of the Forest Preserves' first Family Activity Guide, and workshops that forge deeper connections between community-based organizations and the Forest Preserves. In addition, the Forest Preserve Foundation has provided support for the protection of Shoe Factory Nature Preserves, a beautiful and ecologically important site in Hoffman Estates.

Finally, the Foundation manages the tree and bench dedication program, which directs donors' memorial gifts to the Forest Preserves. The November grant cycle is projected to include new and renewed funding for a Gateways site plan for Chicago locations, for Conservation Corps groups, and for the Forest Preserves' volunteer recognition program.

These programs and many more are helping us reach new audiences. Our relatively new Department of Conservation and Experiential Programming increased public attendance at our six nature centers by nearly 43,000 people according to third quarter reports from 2014 to 2015. Our CEP Department further developed the curriculum of Mighty Acorns as part of the new Core Science Programs of the Illinois State Board of Education and was the recipient of the National Association of County Park and Recreation Officials Award for “It’s Cooler in the Forest,” a summer program that has served more than 3,000 summer day-campers.

Non-tax revenue also increased through the efforts of our Permits and Concessions Department. An additional \$2 million dollars was generated through ongoing amenities such as our 3 aquatic centers, 10 golf courses, 2 boathouses, Oak Park Tennis Club, kayaking and permit sales for 274 picnic groves, 3 off-leash dog areas, equestrian licenses, and snowmobiles.

And new this year to our concessions offerings were zorbing and the implementation of a bike rental system at six locations along popular trail routes.

In 2015, we committed an additional \$6 million dollars in major new trail improvements in addition to completing three loop trail projects that started in 2014. Trail improvements better connect people and communities to the preserves, increasing transportation options, creating links between the preserves themselves, improving residents’ health through the use of natural spaces, and contributing to the region’s economic vitality.

In total we built or renovated 24 miles of trail across 8 major trails across the County. The largest section was a 7-miles stretch of the western segment of the Calumet-Sag Valley or **Cal-Sag Trail** which opened on National Trails Day this summer connecting five communities.

Our Planning and Development Department staff also completed major capital construction projects including five new campgrounds, a new boat house at Maple Lake, a visitor information Center at Dan Ryan Woods a warming shelter and bathrooms at Swallow Cliff, outdoor interpretive improvements and nature play enhancements at Little Red School House and three new comfort stations at Barrington Road Pond, Harms Woods and Schiller Woods. We also made ADA and life safety improvements at many facilities, most notably a new elevator addition at our General Headquarters in River Forest.

New zone maps in the Northwest, North, Central, Southwest & South regions have been developed as well as eight new trail maps in both English and Spanish.

Completion of the first Signage and Way-finding Master Plan will help us better communicate and engage with the public by providing easy to follow and understand signs and information.

Enhancing the signage, way-finding and other amenities at special forest preserves is the focus of a new Gateway Master Plan completed in 2015 with major funding from a Centers for Disease Control PICH grant, secured through our sister organization, the Cook County Department of Public Health. A major goal is to promote health and wellness by encouraging visits to the forest preserves.

This year, we closed on new properties such as the 397-acre Horizon Farms site in Barrington Hills and the 63-acre Holy Family Villa property in Palos Park increasing our total acreage to nearly 70,000.

We are striving to make our practices more sustainable and our day-to-day operations have been made more efficient with the use of propane powered mowers. Approximately 70 percent of our riding rotary mower fleet is now green, and fueled at 11 newly installed propane stations reducing our carbon footprint by 15 percent and saving approximately one dollar per gallon on fuel costs.

Contracts to improve the overall cleanliness of the preserves includes increasing the number of cleanings with our port-o-let contractor as well a recycling program by using containers funded by a KAB grant which are distributed at large scale public events in order to collect aluminum, plastic and glass cans and bottles.

Finally, our Forest Preserve Police Officers are using newly installed mobile computers for enhanced communications. Our police officers also collaborated with the Cook County Sheriff's Office in the beta testing of Computer-Aided Dispatch software.

Officers have also increased training in current practices including preparedness and emergency response for large-scale emergency events in collaboration with the Cook County Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management. And special training was provided in procedural justice and police legitimacy, ensuring all visitors are always treated with dignity and respect in our goal of ensuring people feel safe and making the preserves more inviting.

In the last four years since taking office, the Forest Preserves of Cook County has undergone tremendous improvements and growth, the likes of which has not been seen in decades. With much of the groundwork in place, I am pleased to submit my 2016 Executive Budget Recommendations to the Board of Commissioners of Forest Preserves of Cook County.

The 2016 Budget Recommendation as stated previously, includes a request for total appropriation authority of \$190.2 million dollars and is balanced without transferring money from reserve funds to pay for operating expenses, no increases to fees and fines and no increases in taxes. This assumes no increase in the number of full-time employees which remains at 535, but does include a modest increase of four, part-time and/or seasonal employees.

Next year's budget remains relatively flat compared to 2015 with an increase of less than 2 percent. In the past several years, the Forest Preserves have experienced significant growth and restructuring—now we must hold the line.

While we are only requesting a modest increase to our budget, we are still poised to achieve our goals with the investments we have made thus far.

Our Next Century Conservation Plan goals have been operationalized into the 2016 Budget Recommendation providing \$20 million to advance specific goals of the Plan in its four key areas; Nature, People, Economy and Leadership.

In order to restore nature, which is our core mission we are dedicating \$6 million dollars for landscape restoration which is the largest single line-item in our budget. An additional \$5 million dollars Corporate Funds will allow us to maintain previous sites already restored. Today the Forest Preserves has 54,000-acres that are in a natural state; of these, only 5,000 are considered to be in healthy condition.

Under our Nature Goal, in 2016 we will:

- Developing a monitoring system toward restoring and managing 30,000 acres
- Identifying priority sites for Illinois Nature Preserve and/or Illinois Land and Water Reserve designation, and
- Identifying cultural/archaeological
- Increase the number of Conservation Corps service hours

Not only is nature something to be restored and protected, it should also be experienced and enjoyed. Critical to our success is connecting people to nature. The “People” category lists various actions, all of which are aimed at attracting new and diverse audiences and ensuring sure those visitors make life-long connections to the preserves.

This involves making continued improvements to our infrastructure and consistent outreach to individuals, families, youth groups and community based organizations.

In 2012, \$110 million dollars in bonds were issued for capital improvements and real estate acquisition. These funds helped us make the intensive improvements to campgrounds, new and rebuilt trails, welcome centers and renovated facilities. These General Obligation bonds are almost completely spent, and the list of capital improvements remain significant.

In 2016 we will allocate \$5 million dollars to complete remaining priority renovations and upgrades, address emergency repairs and provide matching funds and in-kind investments to leverage grant funds.

Though \$2 million dollars of this total is being transferred from reserve funds, these are one-time expenses which will provide long-lasting improvements and avoid costly, ongoing maintenance costs. This capital funding request is well below pre-bond funding levels in 2012 when \$8.7 was allocated for construction projects.

2016 Capital Improvements include:

- Life safety and accessibility upgrades such as fire alarms and cameras.
- Roof and or HVAC replacements/repairs
- Driveway and parking lot repairs
- Matching funds or in-kind improvements for grant-funded projects
- Master planning for the 397-acre Horizon Farm site.

Connecting people to nature also involves increasing outreach to underserved communities and expanding educational and recreational opportunities for all residents. We will do this by broadening our relationships with partners and volunteers and continuing to take advantage of available grants while promoting our programs and events to the public.

- Provide programs in preserves that emphasize health benefits. In 2016, we plan to work with Northwestern University on a nature and health pilot study.
- Rely on our Forest Preserve Foundation on continued support for programs that connect youth with nature
- Elevate the public profile of the preserves through marketing and communications

Our Economy category includes making the economic case for nature in order to increase non-tax revenue.

To do so we are working with external stakeholders to quantify and develop data-driven research that demonstrates how our Forest Preserves can attract and retain business and can drive local economies. Specifically we are:

- Working with Chicago Wilderness to document the economic value of nature
- Completing an economic impact study to document the positive impacts of nature
- Develop and launch a targeted communications plan building upon market research exploring residents' perceptions of safety, access and other issues.

The Leadership committee is tasked with making sure the strategic goals of the Next Century Conservation Plan are implemented and operationalized.

In order to support day-to-day activities the Corporate Fund operating budget recommendation for 2016 is \$65.6 million dollars supporting 11 departments and district-wide expenses. This reflects a small increase of \$3.5 million dollars over 2015.

The major increase in the operating budget is due to anticipated Cost of Living Increase, patterned after the County's collective bargaining agreements and salary resolutions.

This budget also holds consistent the amount of money given by the Forest Preserves to support the operations of the Brookfield Zoo and the Chicago Botanic Garden with \$14.9 million and \$9.3 million dollars respectively.

This budget reflects the need for fiscal responsibility which is why the leadership has reduced personnel expenditures by \$428,000 and is identifying additional ways to save and streamline.

We are also recapturing more than \$680,000 in expired TIFs and new construction.

While the 2016 budget allows the Forest Preserves to achieve its goals without raising taxes, fees and fines we must also be cognizant of our ongoing pension deficit once statutory limitations are removed or modified. The pressures of the pension deficit will limit future resources to execute our ambitious Next Century Conservation Plan beyond 2016.

To limit this inevitability, we must start now, by exploring all our options available to us. We will continue to build upon a gain of \$2 million dollars in revenue from program fees, concessions and camping as well as license agreements while not increasing the amount of our current fees.

In order to do this we must aggressively expand concession revenue by developing a Master Plan for Concessions and pursuing non-traditional sources of funding such as corporate sponsorships, public-private partnerships as well as working with our Foundation to pursue support from the private sector. We will also continue to search for operational efficiencies and cost reductions through potential outsourcing of certain operations.

One of our biggest opportunities lies in growing our network of volunteers and advocates. Volunteers play an important role in restoring nature to health – on any given day you can find volunteers clearing invasive species and helping to maintain our restored sites. Volunteers assist with special events and programs, expand our reach to new audiences, and advocate on the behalf of nature and sensible policies.

In 2016, we will re-align our Volunteer Resources Department under the Office of the General Superintendent and expand our Trail Watch Program.

We must inspire a call to action for all Cook County residents to lend a hand in the care and preservation of our most vital natural resource as additional financial resources are quickly becoming scarcer.

Yet even as we expand our pool of supporters and advocates, the funding needed to support the long-term vision of the Next Century Conservation Plan enormous. And while future challenges lie ahead, we've laid a strong foundation. Incorporating this plan into our day-to-day operations starting with the 2016 Budget Recommendation is a step in the right direction.

The Next Century Conservation Plan is bold and calls for a massive scale up in resources. The current fiscal realities, be what they may, should not prevent us from taking action.

Cook County has been given a gift—it's not enough to merely enjoy it, we must secure it for future generations. In 100 years from now, I want future Cook County residents to celebrate not only the actions of our founders, but the actions we've outlined in our Next Century Conservation Plan and the decisions made by the Board of Commissioner in *our* time.