

**The Forest Preserves of Cook County
Conservation and Policy Council**

Minutes for July 19, 2016 • Volunteer Resource Center • 6100 N Central Ave, Chicago, IL

Call to Order. Council chair Wendy Paulson called the meeting to order at 3 p.m. The following Council members and others attended:

Advisory Council Members

Wendy Paulson, Chair
Falona Joy, Vice Chair
Mark Templeton, Secretary
Michael DeSantiago
Rob Castaneda
Sylvia Jenkins
Terry Guen

*Peter Ellis, Linda Mastandrea, Laurel Ross and
Commissioner Robert Steele did not attend.*

Forest Preserve Staff

Arnold Randall
Eileen Figel
Cathy Geraghty

Presenters

Cynthia Moreno, FPCC
Rebecca Sanders, Audubon
Jacqui Ulrich, FPCC
Willene Buffet, U of IL Extension (UIE)
Alison Paul, Field Museum
Marilyn Brink, Chicago Zoological Society

Representatives of the Chicago Botanic Garden, Friends of the Forest Preserves and other partners and FPCC staff also attended.

Public Comments. There were no comments from the public.

Approval of Minutes. A motion was made by Dr. Sylvia Jenkins and seconded by Falona Joy to approve the minutes of the 5.18.16 meeting; the minutes were approved unanimously.

Topic 1: Connecting People to Nature. Rob Castaneda introduced the working group and explained their efforts to welcome people to the preserves and connect them to nature using various models with different levels of partner involvement. Rob stated that a broad range of programs is critical to meet people where they are and offer different ways to connect to the forest preserves.

Cynthia Moreno explained that FPCC programming and community engagement has increased significantly over the past three years as follows:

- 56% increase in programs from 948 in 2012 to 1,478 in 2015,
- 50% increase in program participants from 66,656 in 2012 to 99,505 in 2015, and
- 230% increase in number of community groups engaged from 50 in 2013 to 115 in 2015.

Jacqui Ulrich described how FPCC works with partners to promote, support or participate in special events, and to make people aware of all the things they can do in the forest preserves.

Five examples of partnerships were highlighted as follows.

- **Example 1: FPCC-led program supported by a partner.** Wilene Buffet of the University of Illinois Extension (UIE) described the organization's on-going partnership with FPCC. Through this

partnership, UIE targets schools with a high population of low income students who may not have a lot of exposure to nature and introduces these students to the forest preserves.

- **Example 2: Partner-led program supported by FPCC.** Alison Paul of the Field Museum described how the Field Museum works with local schools to engage youth “to know nature, then to love nature, and finally to have a life-long connection with nature.” Alison described how FPCC provides support to overcome barriers such as transportation.
- **Example 3: Strategies to cultivate new partners.** FPCC’s Camping Leadership Immersion Course (CLIC) and Community Leadership Workshops are two strategies designed to engage new community partners, introduce them to FPCC staff, and provide them access to FPCC programs and resources. CLIC is an overnight training course which teaches campground cooking, equipment use and care, teamwork and nature-based education. After completing the training, organizations are eligible to borrow tents and other camping equipment for a campout. Community Leadership Workshops focus on the mental health benefits of being in nature. Rob Castaneda, who participated in both CLIC and CLW explained, “For someone like myself who works in a working poor community where you see a high level of violence, we always want to give our kids access to places that will be healing. The whole point is exposing community leaders to the resources the forest preserves have. You go to this training and they educate you in terms of the benefits.”
- **Example 4: Connecting partners through non-traditional paths.** Marilyn Rick from the Chicago Zoological Society (CZS) described how the Zoo partnered with Mary Crane Centers, El Valor, and FPCC to develop best practices for connecting young children and their families with nature. Staff from all the organizations trained together over two years, learned how to leverage each other’s resources, and formed lasting relationships enabling them to connect to each other’s settings, spaces, programs and resources. FPCC is providing nature play programs at Mary Crane and El Valor sites and at FPCC nature centers. Families of the children report they are now making trips to the forest preserves on their own. Marilyn explained, “This network has resulted in connecting people. We are there for each other; it just takes a phone call to get us connected again.”
- **Example 5: Partners leading programs independently.** Rebecca Sanders explained that many organizations and programs use the forest preserves on their own. For example, through Birds in My Neighborhood, Audubon and Openlands work with schools to prepare the students in the classroom environment, then take a walk in their neighborhood, then take the students out to a forest preserve. For many students, this is their first visit to the forest preserves and it is an eye opening experience. Rebecca added that, although we don’t know about all the partners using the preserves or the number of visitors they bring out, it is great that organizations are visiting on their own.

Discussion with the Council. Members of the Council offered the following comments.

- **Partnering with the Zoo and Garden.** Falona Joy stated that there are so many people visiting the Zoo and Garden; these are incredibly promising portals and they offer great opportunities to connect with more people. Cynthia Moreno replied that FPCC staff had a very productive meeting with the Zoo, and the Zoo is sharing its expertise to help FPCC develop strategies for marketing and concessions, and to develop an interpretive plan for FPCC sites. Council members asked how this relationship becomes institutionalized and how goals will be set for what we want to achieve. Cynthia answered that FPCC is identifying where expertise is needed and what services or programs should be provided by others. For example, FPCC launched a pilot program this year to outsource operation of the aquatic centers.

- **Expanding programming.** Cynthia explained the challenges of providing programming for 70,000 acres and the need to work with partners to meet this challenge. Arnold Randall explained that the visitors coming to the preserves are not fully representative of the county's diversity and that many city residents were not visiting the preserves. Although FPCC nature centers always did a good job, they simply were not reaching enough visitors. To respond to this, a few years ago FPCC began ramping up programs. The goal, Arnold explained, is to get more people involved with the forest preserves and build a broad community of support needed to advance NCCP.
- **Partners using the forest preserves independently.** Wendy Paulson stated that the big growth potential is with partners, and many partners are using the forest preserves independently. Wendy explained that it is good to have data, but we shouldn't get tripped up because there is no data. When the forest preserves are in good ecological health, people will want to visit them. A fair number of community programs use the forest preserves now and these groups are making informal connections with each other. Wendy described how a number of organizations including Mighty Acorns, Bird the Preserves, and stewards, all showed up to LaBaugh Woods on a recent weekend. She added, "All of it was going on totally un-orchestrated, but it fit together beautifully. I'm such a believer in opening up, enabling and encouraging this." Rob Castaneda agreed this is good, but also cautioned that it is important to document the visits. Rob stated that, in the funding world, "If you can't prove it, it didn't happen."
- **Making connections.** Cynthia Moreno explained that the Nature Start initiative looked at peoples' awareness of forest preserves. Because some of the participants weren't aware of the forest preserves, FPCC was very intentional about convening trainings at the forest preserves. Because FPCC has only nine staff doing community programming, the People Committee is promoting nature ambassadors to expand outreach and connect to communities. Other programs, such as Wild Indigo, hire staff from a community to build relationships with local organizations. Through this model, Wild Indigo has successfully engaged the African American community in the Calumet region. In addition, FPCC is identifying community organizations near specific forest preserves and developing strategies to get these groups to use the forest preserves on their own.
- **Nature & public health.** Falona Joy stated that there are a lot of opportunities related to public health, and hospitals and other health care providers might be good partners. Cathy Geraghty agreed and explained that FPCC is partnering with Cook County Public Health to promote the forest preserves. Cathy also explained that the Chicago Botanic Garden and FPCC are part of a health and nature consortium. Falona added that FPCC should consider asking hospitals what they need from us to get clients out to the preserves. Terry Guen noted that there is also a social justice aspect of being in nature.

Topic 2: Evaluating Progress. Terry Guen and Michael DeSantiago described how FPCC and its partners are measuring implementation progress. Terry Guen explained that there are challenges, but this should not dissuade us. At the same time, she explained, a long range, ambitious plan must evolve over time. Michael stated that some stress is useful because it can help us identify what the real priorities are. He urged us to be thoughtful about where we have achieved success, which programs or initiatives are in progress, where we are hitting roadblocks, whether these roadblocks are small or large, and whether they result from challenges in our process or lack of resources. Michael also acknowledged several recent successes including completion of the Natural and Cultural Resources Master Plan, acquisition of Horizon Farm and the Holy Family Villa site, opening five new campgrounds, and an overall culture change within FPCC.

Eileen Figel stated that FPCC and more than 40 partners have focused significant time and resources on implementing NCCP, and FPCC has drawn upon best practices from around the country to develop an

implementation process and structure designed to use this time and expertise efficiently. Evaluators from the Zoo, Garden, Openlands and Chicago Wilderness have helped create an evaluation process designed to measure progress, reflect upon what is and what is not working, and make adjustments as needed.

Eileen Figel and Cathy Geraghty explained how performance management measures and interviews with FPCC staff and implementation partners are being used to report on progress as follows:

- To track progress and identify challenges, FPCC departments report quarterly on 144 metrics aligned with NCCP goals.
- The metrics are incorporated into progress reports highlighted on the [Next Century Conservation Plan website](#) and posted on [Cook County's performance management website](#).
- Selected metrics will also be incorporated into the Council's annual report to President Preckwinkle and the Cook County Board of Commissioners.
- In addition to the metrics, twenty-three interviews were conducted with NCCP committee chairs, partners, staff and volunteers. The results of the interviews will also be incorporated into the Council's annual report.

Discussion with the Council. Members of the Council offered the following comments.

- It is helpful to highlight progress with facts and figures.
- There has been a lot of discussion about how to increase stewards and other volunteers; this should be highlighted in the report.
- The evaluation team should work with each committee to identify progress measures for each initiative. Consider adding a "measures" column describing number of people served, etc.
- Arnold Randall explained the need to remain visionary and continue to strive to achieve the ambitious goals of NCCP, but also be very honest about setting realistic goals based upon FPCC's 2017 budget.
- Justin Pepper asked how we do better with what we have now so we can get more in the future. Justin also suggested we focus on process metrics to help us establish different ways of doing business.
- Wendy Paulson asked how we can think in new ways to do this work. For example, are there things FPCC does now that it shouldn't? Benjamin Cox suggested there will have to be a reevaluation of priorities; we have to think about what is important and what we spend money on.
- Terry Guen stated that we must also acknowledge the important changes and successes that happened during the past several years, not just what has happened since the formal implementation process began in 2015. The cultural shift which has occurred should also be highlighted.

Adjournment. The meeting was adjourned at 5:05 p.m.