

The Forest Preserves of Cook County
Conservation and Policy Council
Minutes for September 12, 2016 ▪ 69 W. Washington Street, Chicago

Call to Order. Council chair Wendy Paulson called the meeting to order at 2:03 p.m. The following Council members and others attended:

Advisory Council Members

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

Forest Preserve Staff

Arnold Randall
Eileen Figel
Cathy Geraghty

Presenters

Andy Schwarm, Civic Consulting Alliance
Stephen Hughes, FPCC CFO
Troy Alim, FPCC Budget Director

Peter Ellis, Linda Mastandrea, Sylvia Jenkins and Commissioner Robert Steele did not attend.

Representatives of the Chicago Botanic Garden, Chicago Zoological Society, Openlands, 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 Falona Joy and seconded by Michael DeSantiago to approve the minutes of the 7.19.16 meeting; the minutes were approved unanimously.

Implementing NCCP – Strategic Scenarios (Mark Templeton, Andy Schwarm)

Mark Templeton introduced Andy Schwarm of the Civic Consulting Alliance (CCA) and explained that CCA analyzed the existing FPCC budget structure and refined estimates for land acquisition, restoration and other major cost drivers related to NCCP implementation. CCA also assessed several dozen suggestions for raising revenues or cutting costs. To ensure a thorough examination, CCA was asked to keep all ideas on the table for now—including ideas which are inconsistent with the mission of FPCC (such as selling land.)

FPCC Budget Structure. Andy Schwarm presented an overview of the CCA findings, including:

- FPCC relies heavily on taxes which account for 85% of FPCC’s budgeted revenue in 2016.
- Benchmarks with nearby forest preserve districts and similar organizations reveal that FPCC tax revenue per capita is low compared to peers.
- FPCC relies less on non-tax revenue (permit fees, licenses, etc.)
- FPCC expenses per acre are more in line with surrounding peers, but still on the low side.
- About 75% of FPCC’s operating budget goes to personnel costs. This is not unusual for a government agency.

- FPCC has two core pillars: Bring people to nature AND protect and restore nature. FPCC currently spends about 54% of its operating budget on people-related services and programs and 46% on nature-related initiatives.
- Most of the people spending is on law enforcement and landscape maintenance. Programming makes up only 8% of FPCC's operating budget.

Cost to Implement NCCP. CCA also analyzed the cost to implement three of the major components of NCCP: (i) land acquisition, (ii) restoration, and (iii) making the preserves more welcoming and accessible. Some major programs and improvements (including a broad range of capital improvements, as well as transportation programs and improvements which would be born largely by CTA, PACE and other agencies) were not included in the CCA estimates. Other estimates, including restoration costs, are significantly lower than previous staff estimates. CCA findings include:

- NCCP creates a \$2.1B budget gap over 25 years.
- Land acquisition is by far the most expensive component of the plan, accounting for \$1.7B of total \$2.1B estimated cost.
- Restoration is estimated to cost \$344 million over 25 years.
- To make the Preserves more welcoming and accessible is estimated to cost \$42M over 25 years.

Andy noted that these findings assume FPCC pays for all costs outlined above, but in fact other partners may bear a portion of these costs. CCA did not take any position related to the source of revenue.

Discussion with the Council and Participants. Members of the Council and others offered the following suggestions and comments:

Stuart Strahl stated that there are skills each partner agency offers and he welcomes opportunities to share expertise and leverage new resources.

Wendy Paulson suggested that some NCCP costs are fixed, such as land acquisition, but there are different models for implementing restoration and programming. These models may point to other ways to achieve many NCCP goals.

Mark Templeton suggested that, although these estimates will be continually refined, the CCA analysis helps establish the scale and scope of funding needed.

Review of Initiatives

Andy explained that CCA was asked to explore several dozen ideas for raising revenues and cutting costs, including ideas which are not aligned with the FPCC mission, and are unpopular or controversial. The goal was to leave all ideas on the table in order to stimulate discussion about the costs, benefits, limits and consequences of different strategies. CCA looked for initiatives that are high impact and easy to do; none of the suggested initiatives fit both these criteria. Based upon the analysis, CCA concludes:

- It would be very difficult to generate major impact solely through non-tax initiatives; these initiatives simply do not generate adequate cost savings or revenue.
- The highest impact would result from a tax referendum; there are obvious political and economic challenges associated with this.

Preferences Related to People- and Nature-Related Goals

Andy also presented a summary of input received through one-on-one interviews with various council members, NCCP partners, and FPCC staff. The interviews revealed that stakeholders have different preferences for balancing the people- and nature-related goals of NCCP. No one wants to sacrifice either, but there are different opinions on which should be emphasized and different priorities in terms of how to go about this.

Discussion with the Council and Participants. Members of the Council and others offered the following suggestions and comments:

Stuart Strahl noted that people in the highly urbanized areas do not have easy access to the pristine, restored areas of the preserves and asked how we can involve these people and ensure they have input.

Laurel Ross expressed concern about having to choose between people and nature; Laurel stated that all this work benefits people and the Council should not be forced into a false choice.

Greg Mueller suggested that the condition of the forest preserves greatly impacts the enjoyment of visitors, and the preserves must be in good shape so people can enjoy them. Greg explained that he took students to a buckthorn thicket, then to a restored area, and they were amazed at the difference.

Andy Schwarm reminded the Council that, without additional resources, there will be some tough choices about where funding is cut.

Mark Templeton agreed and explained that, if a \$10,000 cut is required, a decision must be made about where the cut falls. Does it come from programming, support for volunteers, etc.? Mark stated that everyone favors more efficiency, but at some point there will be less of something.

Terry Guen stated that many people don't engage with the preserves, and therefore it is important to focus on big factors that benefit the whole county such as public health and climate change.

Stuart Strahl suggested that it is easier to get funding for the people-related goals and harder to get funding for land acquisition. Stuart added that there won't be more state, federal or local funding, but the philanthropic sector may offer a lot of opportunity.

Benjamin Cox stated that this decision was made when the preserves were established—nature was set aside for people.

Wendy Paulson agreed that the founders focused on nature for people, but they were not yet dealing with the degradation that has gone on during the past 100 years. This makes it harder for people to benefit. Wendy stated that the CCA analysis is useful because it focuses discussion on broad areas of agreement including the fact that the work is for nature and people. Wendy added that an important model for restoration with citizen volunteers has emerged and FPCC is on the path to become a national model for engagement. Wendy emphasized that it is not just a public agency restoring nature for public benefit; it is about bringing everyone together to enjoy nature for everyone's benefit.

Rob Castaneda asked how many acres are currently restored. John McCabe answered that approximately 7000 acres (10% of the preserves) is restored. Rob suggested the Council should carefully consider whether or not FPCC should acquire more land.

Mike DeSantiago asked if we should emphasize restoration and de-emphasize acquisition. In addition, Mike asked if restoration investment is targeted to achieve ecological health or greater access for more residents. John McCabe answered that the restoration investment is designed to achieve ecological health.

Falona Joy asked how we establish a rubric to help set priorities. Falona stated that people of color share values for love of land and it is important to make the preserves more accessible to them. Falona asked which partners are doing this now, how these successful models can be scaled up, and how we can get more people from underserved communities to express their value of natural lands by visiting the forest preserves.

Wendy Paulson observed that there is strong agreement amongst Council members to remain focused on people AND nature. There is also strong agreement to focus on underserved populations.

Laurel Ross asked about Cleveland's model and how to integrate other priorities such as public health. Andy Schwarm answered that cultivating new partnerships takes staff resources. It may be possible to use anti-violence funds or money from public health to bring different communities to the preserves, but

there will be tradeoffs. Laurel Ross added that, to build a broader community of support, it is important to talk about public benefits beyond animals and nature.

Arnold Randall explained that FPCC will need resources to get to where the Forest Preserves should be. Until that happens, there will be some tough choices to make. Arnold added that he believes nature is tied to people and that whatever we do to nature, must connect to people.

Falona Joy stated that when she goes to the Zoo and the Garden, she doesn't realize she is in the forest preserves. Falona asked how we can better cross promote so people realize this is all part of a larger system. Stuart Strahl responded that the Zoo is using banners and signage to promote FPCC, and the partnership has gotten much stronger since President Preckwinkle arrived. Stuart added that it is hard to get people to vote for resources to buy more land if the land isn't where the people are.

Wendy Paulson reported that she had a great discussion with Jean Franczyk about how the Garden can support the Forest Preserves. Both the Zoo and the Garden attract many people and can be megaphones for the rest of the system. Ginny Hotaling added that the partners must cross-promote constantly and keep telling people how closely we work together.

Mark Templeton noted that many people use the preserves for an annual picnic and asked how FPCC can build upon this. Mark believes FPCC has a wonderful vision and needs to achieve it. He stated that FPCC has done a great job wringing efficiencies out of the system, thereby earning the right to ask for more resources in the long term. In short term, we need to engage everyone.

Mike DeSantiago noted that the biggest cost driver is land acquisition. Mike asked if we should eliminate the \$1.7B estimated cost to acquire new land and focus limited resources on the remaining priority goals.

Terry Guen suggested there may be opportunities to work with a non-profit to acquire land. Emily Harris added that land can also be protected via conservation easements. Stuart Strahl added that private conservation buyers may provide loans to purchase property.

Lenore Beyer-Clow suggested there are ways to restore nature so it benefits people, as well as design programs to connect people to nature.

Falona Joy stated that, with so much development, FPCC must play the long game and protect this land for future generations. Although it is hard to prioritize land acquisition in this environment, it is important that this remain a core part of FPCC's philosophy. Falona agreed it makes sense to explore various partnerships and strategies for land acquisition so that, when resources become available, we FPCC is positioned to proceed.

Rob Castaneda stated that it has taken ten years to restore 10% of the land and asked how long it will take to restore 20% of current land. Rob also expressed concern about buying land far from where most people live.

Terry Guen added that it will be hard to build support for the preserves if we aren't investing where most people live.

Wendy Paulson asked Arnold Randall how the Council can be most helpful to the Forest Preserves and if the Council should explore the possibility of a referendum. Arnold responded that he wants the Council to feel confident the district is doing everything it can to improve efficiency. There are costs to do this work and there is a need for resources. Arnold explained that there simply are not a lot of opportunities to acquire and protect natural land in the city, but, he believes, once city residents discover the preserves, they will value these lands. Arnold added, "What is helpful for us is to have you believe what we believe. Eileen and I believe we have a moral obligation to make this case. We need to ask ourselves, 'What do we want the Forest Preserves to look like?'" Arnold explained that that the Trust for Public Land (TPL), is beginning to explore various options for additional public resources and President Preckwinkle is a strong supporter of the Forest Preserves and is willing to advocate and push this forward if there is broad support.

Wendy Paulson added that it is incumbent on the Council to be strong advocates. Arnold agreed that the validation of the Council is critical and that the support of conservation advocates and partners will be critical.

Laurel Ross asked for a brief meeting to review the land acquisition criteria. Eileen will schedule a call.

Benjamin Cox added that new sites in the city will never become the high quality natural areas like the rest of the Forest Preserves.

Mark Templeton suggested it would be helpful to have a graph depicting the acreage available based upon ecological potential and cost in order to better understand how the land becomes more expensive once the lower cost land is acquired.

Arnold Randall added that it is hard to justify big expenditures on land acquisition at this time, but this land will be gone at some point. Even if we don't raise \$2.1B to acquire all 21,000 acres, we should carefully consider what we can acquire over time.

Terry Guen added that she would love to see all the land acquired through others, but appreciates that partners also need more money to pursue acquisition.

2017 FPCC Budget

Steve Hughes and Troy Alim presented an overview of the proposed budget for 2017 and highlighted three structural challenges:

1. In recent years, FPCC has transferred \$6M per year from its fund balance to fund restoration work. This is not a sustainable funding source. FPCC has not yet determined how much money should be spent on restoration in 2017.
2. FPCC is unable to increase resources to scale up NCCP implementation. This year's budget includes a 12% reduction in non-personnel spending across all departments.
3. The proposed budget does not address a \$100M+ pension deficit.

Arnold Randall added that FPCC is still operating at a high level and the team has been very thoughtful about delivering services in a more efficient way and making modest cuts which allow FPCC to largely hold steady with its work over the next year.

Discussion with the Council and Participants. Members of the Council and others offered the following suggestions and comments:

The Council asked what types of services will be reduced in 2017. Troy Alim and Eileen Figel provides several examples, including:

- Elimination of buses for litter pick up days (though buses will still be provided for restoration work days).
- Reduction in professional consulting services related to NCCP goals (such as a property valuation study.)
- The Programs team will continue to provide a range of offerings, but there will be less amenities offered at each event.

Eileen Figel added that, although FPCC is unable to scale up many aspects of NCCP, the team continues to work on structural changes such as aligning FPCC performance metrics to NCCP goals and other changes that do not cost money but are important to position the plan for success.

Wendy Paulson asked if FPCC is considering personnel cuts. Arnold answered that FPCC is operating with a very small staff and he is hopeful future cuts will not be necessary. However, if nothing changes over the next three to five years, Arnold anticipates a range of cuts will be needed and these cuts will impact

FPCC staff as well as partners funded by FPCC. Arnold added that cuts in personnel would have a huge impact and he will do what he can to avoid that.

John McCabe stated that FPCC now hires people who are qualified and want to work an 8 hour day. John added that this was not always the case in the past.

Falona Joy asked when FPCC will start addressing the pension deficit. Arnold answered that FPCC needs state legislative approval to increase our annual payments and a financial solution to go along with that.

Terry Guen stated that people who support a tax increase will want the money to fund restoration, not the pension deficit. Terry also asked if FPCC can achieve more efficiencies by partnering with other county agencies. Arnold answered that FPCC is currently partnering with the County for various services and seeking relief from the fees paid by FPCC to the County for some of these services. Arnold added that FPCC will continue searching for ways to save money, but it won't be enough to plug the gap.

Benjamin Cox stated that, in the past, there was suspicion that the County was taking money from FPCC. Benjamin added that FPCC should be more separate from the County.

Arnold indicated that FPCC will do a fund balance transfer to fund restoration work in 2017, but this is not sustainable in future years.

Adjournment. The meeting was adjourned at 4:45 p.m.