

**Forest Preserves of Cook County
Conservation & Policy Council
Meeting Minutes for September 23, 2019**

River Trail Nature Center ▪ 3120 Milwaukee Ave, Northbrook, IL 60062

Call to Order. Council chairperson Wendy Paulson called the meeting to order at 9:30 a.m. The following Council members and others attended:

Advisory Council Members

Wendy Paulson, Chairperson
Mark Templeton, Vice-chairperson
Michael DeSantiago, Secretary
Alan Bell
Emily Harris
Laurel Ross
Maria Pesqueira
Shelley Spencer
Terry Guen

Forest Preserve Staff

Arnold Randall
Eileen Figel
Cathy Geraghty

Presenters

Alice Brandon, FPCC
Zach Taylor, Friends of the Forest Preserves (FOTFP)
Jane Balaban, Key Steward
Steve Hughes, FPCC

Sylvia Jenkins and Commissioner Moore did not attend.

Representatives from the Chicago Zoological Society, Chicago Botanic Garden, Friends of the Forest Preserves, Openlands, and the Trust for Public Land were also in attendance.

Approval of minutes. A motion was made by Laurel Ross, seconded by Mark Templeton, to approve minutes from the meeting of June 12, 2019. The minutes were approved.

Public Comments. The following comments were shared:

- Shelley Davis from the Forest Preserve Foundation reported that the Sun Times published a letter about the Foundation's effort to promote racial equity in the preserves. Shelley also invited Council members to join the Foundation for a nature walk at Cap Sauers; Eileen will forward the details.
- Stuart Strahl stated that he is being interviewed by WBEZ and will highlight the benefits the preserves and its partners provide related to clean air, clean water, and jobs. He added that the zoo leverages public support and has been very successful promoting minority and women owned businesses and hires.

Tracking Outcomes for the Conservation Corps. The FPCC and FOTFP are tracking the long-term impacts of the Conservation Corps by conducting pre- and post-employment surveys of participants. Alice Brandon and Zach Taylor reported the following key findings:

- ✓ Most alumni reported the program positively influenced their view of conservation issues and the Forest Preserves. They visit the preserves more often and feel it is important to protect them for future generations.
- ✓ Alumni reported the program has given them real-world training and experience to pursue other positions in conservation fields, and over 50% are interested in conservation or science careers.

The FPCC and its partners recommend a formal evaluation of the Conservation Corps program be conducted to analyze its current strategies, metrics, costs, and sustainability, and to provide recommendations to improve and expand the program. The estimated cost of the evaluation is between \$50,000 and \$80,000.

Wendy suggested there is an opportunity to partner with universities for this type of research project. Alice expressed concern that the scope and length of the research may make it a bad fit for this; she stated that it takes more than a full-time position to track 1800 people and the tracking must be done for a long period. Laurel Ross asked if the survey indicates whether children who participate in nature experiences (like a visit to a nature center) are more drawn to the CCC. Alice responded that FPCC and its partners are recruiting youth from communities that don't always have these opportunities. Cathy Geraghty suggested an alumni association, like that of the Youth Outdoor Ambassadors, might help keep Conservation Corps graduates more connected. Zach answered that there is an informal alumni association; he will also explore the YOA model.

Position Papers Updates. The committee chairs presented the following updates for the four position papers:

1. **Racial Equity.** Emily Harris noted that the first phase of this paper addresses only racial equity; diversity and inclusion will be addressed in the next phase. Emily stated that the draft paper is in good shape; she indicated that the real challenge will be to apply the racial equity lens to future policies and decisions as recommended in the paper. The committee will convene a roundtable to vet the draft paper with key stakeholders.
2. **Compatible Recreation.** Terry Guen explained that the committee changed the title of the paper from “Non-conservation Recreation” to “Compatible Recreation” to focus on recreational uses that fit the long-term aspirations of the FPCC. Key findings and recommendations include:
 - Although the preserves are not equally distributed throughout the County, the FPCC’s programs staff are conducting outreach to connect people to the preserves, and this has been very effective. The committee is recommending that outreach be expanded and scaled up.
 - The committee spent a lot of time identifying evaluation criteria and creating a tool that is not politically based. They recommend that this tool, the DeSantiago matrix, be further refined and used by staff to evaluate various scenarios.
 - South of I-80 there are few FPCC facilities. The committee recommends applying the racial equity lens defined by the REDI team to address this.
3. **Scaling Up Volunteers.** Jane Balaban explained that a strong core of volunteers is needed to achieve NCCP goals, and volunteer leaders play an especially critical role. These leaders teach and recruit volunteers, reach out to the public, and do the work on the ground. Identifying, training and supporting volunteer leaders requires more effort and a strong collaboration with partners and community leaders. The FPCC’s path to stewardship is a strong training program, but it must be ramped up to turn out more volunteer leaders. This requires more resources and collaboration. Volunteer retention is also critical, and one thing that keeps volunteers engaged is seeing the results of their work. Therefore, acknowledging their work and empowering volunteers is key. Jane also explained that, during any given week, there are 20 to 30 volunteer workdays occurring around the County. This requires a lot of coordination from the VR team via supplying tools, advising commissioners where the work is occurring, etc. The committee is recommending additional resources to sustain the volunteers program. Jane thanked Carl Vogel for his help shaping and editing the paper and indicated that the committee plans to share the draft paper with key stewards and other partners to get further feedback.
4. **Land Acquisition and Disposition.** Laurel Ross stated that land protection has been the hallmark activity of the forest preserves for 100 years. The committee’s challenge is to explain why we need more land--especially since the cost is so high. One reason, Laurel explained, is that the preserves play a key role in climate resilience. The

committee also focused on the inequitable distribution of land throughout the county and debated how selective the FPCC should be in acquiring land when the funding is limited and there is no guarantee more funding will be available. Laurel explained, “We have our eye on more funding and want a significant portion of that allocated to land acquisition.” The committee is also recommending non-traditional strategies such as easements and partnerships be explored, and they recommend that the FPCC hire staff with these specific skills. Laurel explained that the committee also reviewed land disposition and is recommending a moratorium on disposition until a review of the current policy is completed. Finally, the committee also found that over 1000 acres of public land is currently not being used for FPCC’s mission, and the staff and County Board are constantly being lobbied to devote more land for other uses. The committee is recommending a strong stand to prevent functional disposition of FPCC land.

Council members and attendees offered the following comments:

Stuart Strahl reported that the Zoo has documented how guests feel about conservation and how they support conservation (by giving to the Zoo’s conservation fund, etc.) Stuart also suggested that the FPCC can utilize Zoo programs in Englewood and other under-served areas to connect more residents to nature.

Michael DeSantiago thanked the FPCC staff for their hard work to help develop the position papers.

Wendy reiterated that the Council should not feel pressured to complete the papers quickly; it is important that the papers are thorough and thoughtful.

Mark Templeton suggested we be mindful of other efforts---such as the work being done by the Trust for Public Lands, and make sure we are all pulling in the same direction.

Terry asked that we step back and make sure all four papers are consistent and coordinated with each other.

Update from Superintendent Arnold Randall. Arnold thanked staff and the Council for having the hard conversations needed to develop the position papers. Arnold noted that there are very different points of view around these issues, and he believes we are fairly unique in the level of work being done to develop the papers. Other updates from Arnold include:

- Major progress has been made on Horizon Farm. The FPCC is looking at what must be done to get it into good shape and re-open it to the public.
- Friends of the Forest Preserves, Openlands and other partners are talking with commissioners about the possibility of a referendum in 2020.
- Arnold reiterated Laurel’s point that the FPCC is constantly asked to provide land for uses which are not aligned with its mission. Local elected officials are often focused on immediate needs to build a school, etc. It is important for them to understand that this land is being protected by the FPCC for the very long-term. The President has been very supportive of this and the FPCC is working hard to eliminate existing encroachments. Arnold thanked the Council for addressing this in the position paper.
- Alternatives are still being studied for Quentin Road. There will be a conversation with Arnold, John Yonan of County Highways, and the President. The process has been very thorough and everyone is working in good faith.
- Alan Bell thanked Arnold for allowing the Council to develop the position papers and asked Arnold to make sure the papers are fully reviewed with staff so they can be implemented. Arnold agreed the FPCC staff should look at them once more.

Budget Update. Mark Templeton reported that the FPCC is recommending a status quo budget. CFO Steve Hughes provided an overview of key aspects of the budget as follows:

- As in previous years, the FPCC is capturing inflationary growth in property taxes.
- The total levy for 2020 is \$98.6M.

- The Department of Resource Management will receive 63% of the Construction and Development funds (approximately \$4M) for their restoration work.

Emily asked how much funding goes toward ADA improvements to make the preserves more accessible and whether this funding can be tracked and reported. Chris Slattery explained that the FPCC generally expends about \$500K to \$700K per year for ADA improvements.

Maria Pesqueira asked why there is capital funding leftover from 2019. Arnold explained that it often takes several years to spend capital funding. The \$8M bond issued this year is a drop in the bucket towards the \$80M needed for urgent deferred maintenance AND the more than \$100M needed for additional work. Mark stated that it took him a couple of years to get familiar with the FPCC budget and thanked Eileen and Steve for their help.

Annual Report. Eileen reported that outside counsel has provided legal guidance on the role of the Council related to a potential referendum. The attorney advised that the Council is free to recommend that a referendum be placed on the ballot. However, because the Council meets at FPCC facilities and the FPCC staff provide it support, he recommends that the Council not advocate for the referendum as Council members. Laurel asked if they are free to do so as private citizens and asked Eileen to seek further clarification.

Wendy stated that a few years ago the Council was not ready to recommend proceeding to referendum, but now feels comfortable and confident advocating for this. This is a significant change.

Emily suggested that the Council “unbury” the recommendation to place a referendum on the ballot. She added, “This is what the Council has agonized over for the past four years; this is a critical first step.”

Terry suggested that the report highlight the role of the preserves in helping mitigate climate change. Wendy suggested adding “this is about saving nature for Chicago, for the region, for our planet.” Will Abberger of TPL agreed this point is very important. Will also suggests the Council be more specific in their recommendation, explaining they recommend a referendum on a .025 percent increase in property tax rate which is equivalent to \$17.01 per year for the average household in Cook County.

Benjamin Cox indicated that there are very specific issues which resonate with the public, and he hopes the Commissioners will approve specific ballot language reflecting these issues. Benjamin added that the recommended amount of the levy increase is lower than what was suggested two years ago and will only generates half of what is needed for NCCP. He added, “That’s okay. We need to do something.”

Council members were asked to email specific edits to Eileen; Eileen will send a redlined updated draft report to all and will work with the officers to finalize the report.

A motion was made by Emily that the Council approve the report subject to final review and approval by the Council’s officers and with the following changes:

1. Unbury the recommendation that a referendum be placed on the March 2020 ballot.
2. Integrate and highlight nature-based solutions to climate change; explain these solutions are right in front of us.
3. Add the specific language proposed for the ballot measure, the specific funding mechanism, the amount of increase proposed, and the average cost per household.
4. Make the point that voters support this and highlight the specific benefits voters are getting from the Forest Preserves.

The motion was seconded by Laurel Ross and passed with unanimous support.

Will Abberger reported that TPL, FOTFP, Openlands and TNC are working together to plan for a campaign to build awareness and support for the measure.

Nominating Committee. Wendy reported that current terms for both Sylvia Jenkins and Terry Guen end in December 2019. Wendy is very appreciative that both have agreed to continue at this critical time. She added that many Council members have been on the Council from the beginning and there are three excellent new members. Wendy also urged everyone to think about how we build a pipeline for new members. Maria asked what skills sets we are looking for. Eileen will distribute the full matrix and criteria used to recommend new Council members. Emily suggested we think about skills needed on the Council to help document and measure progress.

Approval of 2020 Council Meeting Schedule. The 2020 agenda topics will be discussed and finalized during the Council's next meeting. Mark added that, if we are unsuccessful in securing additional resources and need to scale down, we may need to add additional meetings in 2020.

New Website. Maria congratulated staff on the great redesign of the FPCC website. Eileen reported that the work was done entirely in-house by web manager Ryan Lothian who worked very hard to complete this project.

Adjournment. Mark moved to adjourn; Alan seconded the motion. The meeting was adjourned at 11:58 am.