

Forest Preserves of Cook County Conservation & Policy Council Meeting Minutes for April 15, 2019

Call to Order. Council chairperson Wendy Paulson called the meeting to order at 1:30 pm. The following Council members and others attended:

Advisory Council Members

Wendy Paulson, Chairperson
Mark Templeton
Alan Bell
Commissioner Stanley Moore
Emily Harris
Maria Pesquiera
Michael DeSantiago
Terry Guen (by phone)

Laurel Ross, Shelley Spencer and Sylvia Jenkins did not attend.

Forest Preserve Staff

Arnold Randall
Eileen Figel
Cathy Geraghty

Presenters

Benjamin Cox, Friends of the Forest Preserves
Brenda Elmore, Friends of the Forest Preserves/Conservation Corps
Daniel Suarez, Audubon
Jane Balaban, Key Steward
Radhika Miraglia, Friends of the Forest Preserve

Brian Cici from Commissioner Miller's office attended. Representatives from the Chicago Botanic Garden, Openlands, and the Field Museum were also in attendance.

Approval of minutes. A motion was made by Alan Bell, seconded by Mike DeSantiago, to approve minutes from the meeting of February 4, 2019. The minutes were approved.

Public Comment. There were no comments from the public.

Partnering for Birds and FPCC spring brochure. Cathy Geraghty shared copies of these recent publications.

Story. Brenda Elmore shared a story about growing up on the south and west sides of Cook County. Brenda landed a job in conservation and developed a passion for it. She started as an assistant crew supervisor and worked her way up to senior crew supervisor. Brenda is inspired by the growing number of people engaged in conservation, and hopes to see more diversity in the field. Brenda explained, "When I walked in, there weren't enough people that looked like me. Before I leave here, I need to see a whole lot more people that look like me; that has been my mission."

Building the community of support. Benjamin Cox reported on efforts to build the community of support. The committee has met with all seven new commissioners. Terry, Mark, Wendy, Maria and Laurel have participated in these meetings. All the new commissioners are eager to be involved and want to learn more about the forest preserves. Benjamin also met with Commissioners Daley and Suffredin and attended Conservation Lobby Day in Springfield. Benjamin and Eileen will convene a meeting to talk about following up on ideas or questions that come from these meetings. Eileen will add a "follow-up" column to the building the community of support progress reports. Wendy asked staff to consider organizing tours of the forest preserves for new commissioners. Commissioner Moore agreed this is important—especially for those who do not have forest preserves in their districts. Commissioner Moore asked

whether elected officials have expressed support for more revenue for the FPCC; Benjamin indicated there is not currently a proposal on the table, so no one will comment at this time.

Eileen Figel presented a summary of other efforts to build awareness, including presentations to village boards, rotary clubs, and chambers of commerce. Mark Templeton asked that these efforts incorporate racial equity goals. Wendy asked that Council members be invited to participate in upcoming meetings. Maria Pesquiera added that, even if Council members aren't able to attend a meeting, they can use their relationships to help with follow up. Mike DeSantiago concurred and added that, when he reached out to Representative Crespo, it was a great conversation and Representative Crespo was eager to learn more about the FPCC. Emily Harris stated that this is a great start, but the work needs to be scaled up. She asked how we can get these stories into the mainstream. Wendy suggested we make an effort to get information into community papers AND make sure there is a speaker at each board meeting to share a personal story about connecting to nature in the forest preserves.

Update from Superintendent Arnold Randall. Arnold reported that he and his team have met with all the new commissioners and have taken several on tours. Arnold also provided the following updates:

- State Representative Crespo introduced a bill to have the Cook County Sheriff take over the Forest Preserves' police force. Arnold explained that having a force dedicated to our mission--especially in an urban area like Cook County--is critical to making sure people feel safe in the forest preserves. This is the highest priority of the FPCC police. Arnold added it was important for Crespo to hear from people other than FPCC employees and thanked the Council for their advocacy. Mike's call to Crespo was especially helpful. Representative Crespo has backed off on his proposal.
- A portion of Quentin Road bisects Deer Grove. There is a proposal to reconstruct the 2-lane road to create either a 3-lane or 5-lane road. FPCC is not yet ready to take a recommendation forward and won't take anything to the board without another conversation with the working group.
- The Illinois Tollway Authority is reconstructing the I-294 Mile Long Bridge over the Des Plaines River in Willow Springs which will cause a portion of the FPCC trail to be closed down for five years. FPCC staff have negotiated an agreement to mitigate impacts.
- Horizon Farm. FPCC continues to fight a series of lawsuits filed by the previous land owners who stopped paying their mortgage and lost the site via foreclosure.
- President Preckwinkle lost her bid to become mayor, but will remain as President of the board of commissioners. She is very aware of the challenges FPCC faces and is very supportive of the FPCC.

Council members offered the following comments:

Mark stated that it is great to get these updates proactively, rather than wait until Council members see something in the news. Mike added it is helpful for the Council to become educated on specific issues and was glad he had done a ride-along with a FPCC police officer. Wendy added that John McCabe did a conference call with her and Mark to educate them on the IL Tollway project.

Wendy asked if there is anything the Council can do to help with Horizon Farms. Arnold answered that it is important to people understand the value of having a property like Horizon Farm protected as public open space in perpetuity. Wendy stated that one of the most important roles of the Council is to be advocates and ambassadors for the Forest Preserves.

Scaling up volunteers position paper update. Jane Balaban, Radhika Miraglia, and Daniel Suarez presented an update from the Scaling Up Volunteers committee. The committee is exploring the following questions:

What is the value of volunteers?

What do they do for the Preserves?

Why do we need more volunteers?

How many do we need?

How do we scale up?

In 1977, a small group of volunteers began taking care of forest preserves along the north branch of the Chicago river. Today volunteer programs include trail watch, littler clean-up, restoration, and monitoring.

Jane explained that restoration work is never complete; restored sites must be actively maintained forever. It is difficult to estimate the number of site stewards and other volunteers who will be needed to maintain 30,000 acres, but if we assume one site steward for every 100 acres, 300 site stewards will be needed. There are less than 100 today.

Council members offered the following comments:

Maria asked about the strategy for recruiting volunteers and how the Council can help. Jane explained that volunteer groups are using social media and word of mouth for recruitment. Radhika added that it is important to meet people where they are at, and establishing partnerships with community leaders is critical. Daniel added that it is also important to create a social environment people want to be part of. Maria offered to help link to communities and schools she works with.

Wendy stated that the engagement of local people in places like nature centers is a great way to knit local communities with the forest preserves. The training of volunteer leaders needs to be a high priority, and this requires having trusted partners who can help with training, rather than relying entirely on FPCC staff.

The draft position paper does not yet address racial equity goals; Mark asked if these can be explicitly incorporated into the position paper. Emily noted that there are far fewer stewards in areas with impacted communities and urged the Council to think about how we can engage people in these areas. Emily also suggested it is important to set benchmarks we can be accountable for. Wendy added that Jane and all the members on the committee take this seriously, and one way to do this is to engage Brenda, Daniel and others who come up from this path.

Racial equity position paper update. Emily explained that the committee is exploring how to promote racial equity by applying a *racial equity lens* to key decisions around budgeting and policy. The committee is starting with racial equity and will add diversity and inclusion as a second phase. Emily also explained the importance of broad stakeholder input. She explained, “If people who are impacted by inequity are at the table, there is a much better chance of correcting that inequity.”

The committee suggests a racial equity lens be applied to major decisions by asking the following questions:

Does it benefit an impacted community? If so, how can we prioritize this work?

Does it burden an impacted community? If so, how can we mitigate or remove the burden?

How have we reached out to impacted communities to seek input (both broadly and for specific proposals), and how are we using that input to shape plans and inform decisions?

Will the proposal contribute to a cycle of disinvestment, and if so how can we reverse that cycle?

The committee asks each position paper to consider these questions, along with specific questions related to volunteers, land acquisition, and compatible recreation.

Council members offered the following comments:

Mike asked if proximity to a forest preserve (or lack thereof) is a barrier. If it is, and we can't bring the forest to the people, how do we bring the people to the forest? Wendy reminded people that the founders were trying to capture a

necklace of preserves encircling the forest preserves. She suggested that having vibrant partnerships can bring more people to the forest preserves. Emily added that restoration sites in south Cook County could also be used for nature education.

Alan asked if the focus should be solely on racial equity, or should the lens also consider economically disadvantaged individuals? Emily responded that the committee used a combination of race and income to identify impacted communities.

Commissioner Moore added that the forest preserves are very important to the surrounding communities. He grew up in the Dan Ryan Woods and lived in Dan Ryan's former home. His grandfather started an annual family picnic and the family has continued this tradition for nearly sixty years.

Election of officers. Benjamin Cox presented the recommendations of the nominating committee for Council officers as follows:

For chair – Wendy Paulson

For co-chair – Mark Templeton

For secretary – Mike DeSantiago

A motion was made by Alan Bell and seconded by Commissioner Moore to approve the slate as recommended. The motion passed unanimously.

Sharing stories with the Board. Eileen reviewed a list of personal stories that are being shared with the Board to illustrate how people are connecting to nature at the forest preserves. Council members were asked to send to Eileen suggestions for future stories.

Adjournment. Mark moved to adjourn; Mike seconded the motion. The meeting was adjourned at 3:33 pm.