

# Forest Preserves of Cook County Conservation & Policy Council

## Meeting Minutes for February 5, 2020

Chicago Botanic Garden's Farm on Ogden at 3555 Ogden Ave, Chicago, IL 60623

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**Call to Order.** Council chairperson Wendy Paulson called the meeting to order at 9:00 a.m. The following Council members and others attended:

### Advisory Council Members

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

### Forest Preserve Staff

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Arnold Randall  
Cathy Geraghty  
Eileen Figel

### Presenters

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Angela Mason, Farm on Ogden  
Benjamin Cox, Friends of the Forest Preserves  
Bob Megquier, Openlands

Michelle Jordan and Cicely Fleming from Commissioner Suffredin's and representatives from the Chicago Zoological Society, Chicago Botanic Garden, Friends of the Forest Preserves, Openlands, and the Field Museum were also in attendance.

Wendy Paulson stated that Council members were filled with hope when they last met in September. Although much has changed since then, Wendy urged Council members not to abandon the enthusiasm developed over the last five years. Wendy also asked Council members to take time before each meeting to look at the Next Century Conservation Plan (NCCP) and to review background information included in the agenda packets.

Jean Franczyk welcomed the Council to the Farm on Ogden and described various collaborations between the Garden and the Forest Preserves. For example, the Garden is exploring how to grow native seeds that the Forest Preserves need.

**Approval of Minutes.** A motion was made by Laurel Ross, seconded by Mark Templeton, to approve minutes from the meeting of September 23, 2019. The minutes were approved.

**Public Comments.** There were no comments.

**Story.** Angela Mason, Senior Director of Windy City Harvest, explained how the Chicago Botanic Garden worked with Lawndale Christian Health Center to develop the Farm on Ogden which serves as the city headquarters for Windy City Harvest. The program focuses on food, health and jobs. There are 200 participants in the program each year, including 150 teenagers who work at the youth farm. The core

program helps young men and women who need a second chance and others with barriers to employment.

**Budget Strategies Update.** Wendy acknowledged that a door was shut when the referendum failed to advance, but nonetheless the Council remains committed to the NCCP and will continue to focus on securing the resources needed to move it forward--including ideas and volunteers. Wendy added, "We need to find new solutions and implement them."

Mark Templeton stated that the Council has dug deep into programs and plans and reviewed financial resources to make sure resources are being leveraged and spent wisely. He added, "I have reviewed this each year and feel the resources are being spent well. But to achieve our objectives, more resources are needed. It is frustrating we did not move forward with the referendum. We are now at the point where we need to look at options for what can be done." Mark reminded the Council that the Forest Preserves' pension deficit will require additional payments of \$9M to \$10M per year. The most critical capital needs are estimated at \$4M to \$5M per year for FPCC, and the Zoo and the Garden also have on-going capital needs. Resources are also needed to implement the NCCP.

Mark reiterated Wendy's point that this is a time for creative solutions. He suggested that the Council and others collectively spend time on the most important things which have the biggest impact.

General Superintendent Arnold Randall thanked the Council for all their work. Arnold acknowledged that, although a referendum did not advance, the Council, the Zoo, the Garden and many partners worked very hard to build support. Arnold has asked his senior team to analyze various scenarios for moving forward; he asked Eileen Figel to provide an overview.

Eileen walked through three scenarios outlined in the agenda packet. She explained that a second phase of analysis is being conducted for 18 initiatives designed to cut costs or raise revenue. This work builds upon earlier analysis conducted by the Civic Consulting Alliance in 2016 and 2017. Mark reminded everyone that some Council members were not on the Council at that time and may need to be briefed on the previous work. Mark asked Arnold, Steve and Eileen to providing briefings to any Council member who requests additional information.

Wendy added that the guidelines recommended in the position papers are relevant to several of the initiatives being explored. Alan asked how the Council can help move the initiatives forward.

**Legislative Update.** Arnold explained that the Forest Preserves is focusing on several legislative initiatives, including:

1. A bill that would allow the Forest Preserves to use various funding sources to contribute to the pension fund.
2. State support for capital funding for restoration and facilities.
3. An agreement with the County to use motor vehicle fuel tax funds for repairs and other improvements to FPCC roadways, parking lots and trails.
4. A Design-Build bill to allow forest preserves and conservation districts to bid out the design and build portions of projects in a single request for bids. This will make development more efficient and result in significant savings; the effort is supported by forest preserve districts and conservation districts across Illinois.

5. A bill sponsored by the Illinois Association of Park Districts to amend the Illinois Grants Recovery Act to allow more than two years to complete projects funded by OSLAD grants.

Arnold explained that the FPCC does not have the authority to install billboards, but nonetheless started to explore this revenue source even though he is not thrilled about it. However, FPCC has not found a state legislator willing to sponsor an amendment to the Cook County Forest Preserve District Act to allow billboards; therefore, this initiative is not moving forward.

Representative Crespo has again introduced a bill to disband the FPCC police force. Arnold explained that people will not visit the FPCC if they do not feel safe. The FPCC is adamantly opposed to this bill.

**Building a Community of Support.** Bob Megquier and Benjamin Cox provided the following updates.

Bob began with a review of what has happened so far. Many people worked hard to build a community of support for the forest preserves, and the FPCC has expanded programming, created inviting spaces, and exhibited leadership in order to build trust and expand support. This combined effort changed the game. Three years ago there was 50% public support to pass a referendum; now public support is at 70%. This nexus of FPCC leadership and the efforts of partners and volunteers is effective and should continue.

Bob offered several suggestions for what should happen next, including:

- Analyze how the referendum went off the rails and what can be done to make sure it doesn't fail again.
- Recognize smaller wins that can add up to a large amount of money. For example, the motor fuel tax passing and FPCC leveraging some of that funding for its roads is important. Passing design/build legislation could save up to 20% on the cost of a project. These small steps are important, and we should be inspired by them.
- Celebrate the position papers. Bob believes the position papers are insightful, rigorous, influential pieces of work. He encouraged the Council to do more papers.

The NCCP co-chairs committee will reconvene to discuss these tactical issues.

Benjamin added that politics in Illinois put the brakes on this whole effort. Because the brakes were put on in Springfield, there may be some opportunities to stabilize things.

Emily Harris asked how we can keep the drumbeat of public relations going.

Terry Guen stated that County residents are more aware of the FPCC. She added that we cannot be consumed by the budget issues.

Maria Pesqueira added that the messages need to focus on community, mission and values. And a lens of equity must be applied to future decisions.

Wendy noted that a lot of progress has been made. The working relationship with staff is very constructive and there has been genuine effort to forge stronger partnerships. We moved the needle on public support. We have more communication with commissioners. We clarified principles through the position papers. And the Council better understands its role as advocates and communicators. Wendy asked the Council to think about how they can keep this going. She also noted that the board of commissioners under-appreciates the incredible public asset the Forest Preserves represent. Wendy suggested that the Council can help with the quarterly briefing to the board and perhaps take a more

active role in meetings in Springfield. She also suggested partners and others who use and love the preserves continue to share their stories with the board.

Mike DeSantiago explained that the compatible recreation committee focused on connecting to nature the residents in communities far from the Forest Preserves. He was surprised that participants at the recent roundtable were not concerned about proximity; they were focused on safety.

Laurel asked, “If 70% of the public supported the referendum, why wasn’t there a public outcry when they didn’t have an opportunity to vote on it? Who can do this? Is it too late?”

Arnold acknowledged the frustration but also reminded everyone that the state is trying to achieve a more progressive tax structure.

Eileen explained that the Forest Preserves is structurally under-funded—it simply does not have adequate resources to fulfill its mission, let alone scale up to meet NCCP goals. It has been this way for decades and it will soon come to a head. If the FPCC is unable to secure on-going resources, deep cuts to programs and services will be necessary.

Mark added that the role of the Council is to safeguard, expand and bring additional resources to the District by providing public recommendations to the President, Board, and Superintendent. Mark stated that the Council did make recommendations. He suggested the Council consider issuing a statement noting the progress that has been made and their deep disappointment that the referendum did not move forward. Mark cautioned that the costs and benefits of this should be carefully considered prior to proceeding.

Maria concurred that there is a cost to every statement the Council makes, but there is also a benefit to pointing out the impact of decisions and actions. And it may be a way to plant the seeds to continue this work.

Sylvia Jenkins shared that she recently worked with a consultant to determine if the community is ready for a referendum to support improvements to the community college. Although the community said yes, the college board said no. The consultant advised Sylvia that it is not the broader community that needs to be engaged: it is the college board. Sylvia suggests the Council needs to have the same strategy. “Let’s put the people who are very passionate about the preserves in front of the board,” she suggested.

Terry agreed the Council should write a letter and suggested a tiered approach. If stormwater detention could help create partnerships with neighborhoods, could that gain acres or constituents for FPCC? Terry was impressed by how much the FPCC has engaged communities. There are many things that should be included in the letter, including opportunities FPCC can leverage with partners to help advance the plan.

Mike noted that when more folks get out into the woods, a lot of good things happen. He suggested, “We need to be out here, in communities like Lawndale and other communities that are under-served, telling people about the Forest Preserves.”

Benjamin Cox explained that the first phase of the referendum effort led by partners focused on building support so commissioners would feel comfortable, but there were factors outside of the partners’ control. He added, “Until the commissioners put this on the ballot, there was nothing more to do. I did not think it would be effective to do a rally or fill the board room. I think we would have led our troops to a loss. It is too late to get this on the ballot for March, but if the governor’s fair tax ballot does not go forward in the fall, perhaps we should be ready for that. In two years, commissioners will be running

again and they won't want this on the ballot." Benjamin added it may be possible to advance legislation in Springfield.

Shelley Spencer asked how the Council moves forward if so much is outside the Council's control.

Benjamin responded this would require a change in the way politics run in Illinois. He added, "Unless we build some giant amount of support, I am not sure what you do. Working with this president and Arnold and Eileen, we have gotten a lot done. So to throw a hand grenade didn't seem like a good idea. We have a very good relationship and it seemed to me the most important thing was to keep that relationship. The bottom line is the FPCC is a minutia compared to what the board deals with on the County side. At the end of the day, it is hard for them to go to bat for this. During meetings with commissioners, they were focused on the politics of it. They were seriously thinking about it. But they were all watching one person who was watching another person."

Wendy added that we need to get the message out that this is not just about the well being of nature; it is about the well-being of their constituents. She asked how the Council should communicate the position papers and added that acquisition probably needs to be put on hold, but there is definitely room to move ahead with restoration.

Emily agreed that the Council should positively frame the statement, but also acknowledge the Council's disappointment. One of the most compelling things is the structural under-funding of the Forest Preserves. Emily suggests developing a strong statement that builds on what is already in the plan. For example, pull together information about structural underfunding and how FPCC's funding compares to other forest preserve districts. Document what FPCC contributes to the region. Reiterate that the Council is here to work with the administration to find new ways to fund the Forest Preserves. Emily suggests putting together a small team to bring something to the board of commissioners in next two months. She suggests that the Council ask partners to use the statement in as many forums as appropriate.

Alan Bell suggests the Council highlight the key recommendations from the position papers to create an implementation plan to make this real. He added, "How can we synergize the priorities of the administration with these key priorities so we can implement them?"

Emily suggests it will take a long time to analyze the 18 initiatives. In the meantime, every county department should be thinking about the FPCC as an asset.

Wendy added this should also be put in the context of climate change.

Terry suggests not focusing on disappointment, but instead focusing on how people can be part of the solution.

Mike reminded folks of the RAW (restore, acquire, welcome) acronym. He suggested that, in the timeline of the Forest Preserves, getting to a referendum is a blink of the eye. Until then, Mike suggests focusing on welcoming people to the preserves.

Wendy asked the Council to continue thinking creatively and sharing ideas.

**Position Paper Update: Land Acquisition & Disposition.** Laurel Ross stated that the NCCP calls for adding 21,000 acres by 2040, but that is not going to happen via fee simple acquisition. The committee recommends an aggressive exploration of alternative routes to protect land via easements and partnerships. FPCC may have to add staff with those skill sets. The committee opposes disposing of surplus land and subtracting land through functional disposition. Using land in ways which are not

consistent with the mission (such as encroachments) should not happen. Alan explained that his law firm is doing a pro bono, comprehensive review of the FPCC code. They are proposing specific changes to the code, which would need approval by the state legislature. The committee will meet once more prior to convening a stakeholder roundtable.

**Position Paper Update: Compatible Recreation.** Terry stated that she was surprised to discover how much the FPCC is already doing to provide compatible recreation and to reach out and engage communities across the county. She suggests that the position papers present an opportunity to publicize what the FPCC is doing via presentations to the AIA and other organizations. Mike added that the FPCC has struggled with decisions related to golf courses, model airplane fields, and other uses. The committee developed a tool to evaluate programs and facilities. The committee will work with stakeholders to develop recommendations for specific sites. Eileen shared that representative from many user groups attended a recent roundtable, including horseback riders, bikers, model airplane clubs, scouts, and golfers. The participants are deeply committed to their groups and deeply connected to the forest preserves. Yet they were also able to acknowledge that the FPCC does not have adequate funding to maintain all facilities and programs and must make hard choices about how and where to spend limited resources. The representatives offered thoughtful and constructive suggestions and asked that they be part of the future decision-making process. Mike added that participants were not concerned about the lack of major recreational facilities south of I-80; they were concerned about safety.

**Position Paper Update: Scaling Up Volunteers.** Cathy Geraghty provided an update on two recent vetting sessions. Stakeholders suggest modifying language in the draft position paper to indicate that scaling up volunteers is *the* highest priority of the FPCC. They suggest that mentorship is a key component of engaging volunteers. They also felt the paper misses the emotional piece of why people volunteer. They ask the FPCC to highlight how their work makes a difference. They ask the Council to be very clear about the goal of encouraging partners to bring more volunteers to the preserves, and to look at models in addition to the path to stewardship. Justin Pepper added that there are many paths to leadership and not everyone wants to be a leader. He explained that the participants had the benefit of knowing that a referendum was not moving forward and they felt there is a critical need to advance volunteerism to help restore the preserves.

**Position Paper Update: Racial Equity.** Shelley reported that the stakeholder roundtable was wonderful. Participants asked the Council to think about how the term “impacted communities” is used in the position paper and to make sure the term is not used to label people. We need to think about how we speak to many different groups in different ways in order to welcome them in. Participants urged the Council to value newcomers and not judge how people use the forest preserves. One participant explained that not everyone will be a conservationist, and people who use the preserves for picnics need to be celebrated. Participants appreciate how direct and clear the position paper is about what we want to do and how we will get there, and encourage us to continue having messy conversations about racial equity. Shelley added that the internal work being advanced by FPCC’s staff REDI team also served as a beacon. Shelley also shared the following reflections from roundtable participants: “I feel this is a really bold action paper. You are not sugar-coating it. I encourage you to continue being bold and stay true to your mission.” “I have been here 8 years and this is the first time I have seen this on paper. But I also feel a pressure burden with very little resources to do this stuff.” Emily cautioned that holding more roundtables could go on forever and the paper would never be finished. She urged the Council to think

about how the conversation continues and how to incorporate racial equity discussions in the vetting of the other papers. Emily added, “The NCCP has really opened the door to being a living, breathing document. This whole process has really provided an opportunity to bring people in and it is very exciting.”

**Position Papers: Next Steps.** The Council agreed to develop a plan to finalize and adopt the papers, and a strategy to roll them out to both the board and the broader public. Specific suggestions include:

- Reach out to commissioners for advice on how best to share the papers with the board.
- Consider whether the papers should be rolled out separately to give each its own time to be absorbed, or whether they should be rolled out as a set to highlight the essence of each paper.
- Develop strategies for the internal and external roll out of the papers.
- Consider whether the Council will ask the board to receive and file the papers, or adopt them.

Commissioner Moore asked if the FPCC is looking at other opportunities for funding such as Invest in Cook. He also asked if there is flexibility on using the motor vehicle fuel tax to address FPCC’s critical needs. Arnold explained that the FPCC is seeking funding from these sources, but the motor vehicle fuel tax funding is restricted to transportation-related projects.

Emily and Shelley will present the REDI paper at the Council’s March meeting.

Carl will help develop strategies to roll out the papers to commissioners and other audiences.

**Recommendations from the Nominating Committee.** Benjamin Cox stated that the nominating committee meets several times a year to ensure there is a good pipeline of candidates in place, and to nominate candidates for any vacancy which occurs. The committee was recently asked to review succession strategies for Council officers. The committee offers the following recommendations:

1. Changes to qualifications/expertise. The committee recommends the following changes to ordinance Section 1-18-3, “Qualifications of Members”:
  - a) Add “communications/media relations” to criteria to be considered for nominating potential members.
  - b) Add “racial equity, diversity and inclusion” to criteria to be considered for nominating potential members.
  - c) Include: Cannot be part of a business doing business with the District.
2. Disclosure of interests. The committee recommends the following changes to Section 1-18-2-J, “Disclosure of interests required”:
  - a) Add “The principle goal is to avoid conflicts of interest.”
  - b) Require a Council member to notify the Chair when a conflict of interest arises and recuse himself/herself from any vote related to the matter.
  - c) Require all Council members to submit a form declaring any potential conflict of interest.
3. Officers’ duties and succession strategy. The committee recommends:

- a) No automatic succession of officers. (For example, if the chair leaves, the vice-chair does not automatically become chair.)
- b) No term limits.
- c) When an officer position becomes vacant or is expected to become vacant, the chair shall appoint a selection committee consisting of 2 to 4 Council members. Council members can nominate any member of the Council to fill the vacant officer position. Self-nominations are also permitted. The selection committee will review the nominations and recommend a candidate to the full Council. The full Council shall vote to approve the nominated candidate or vote to elect an alternate candidate. *Note: The nominating committee recommends this should be primarily an internal process driven by the Council.*
- d) Promoting diversity of officer's expertise. For example, if the chair has expertise in conservation, another officer should have expertise in outdoor recreation.

Eileen will circulate the recommendations and the Council will discuss them at the March meeting.

**Adjournment.** A motion to adjourn was made by Mark and seconded by Terry. The Council adjourned at 11:35 am.