



THE FOREST PRESERVE DISTRICT OF COOK COUNTY

Study and Recommendations

Phase II
October 2002

Friends of the Forest Preserves
5225 Old Orchard Road, Suite 37
Skokie, IL 60077
(847) 965-1150

Friends of the Parks
55 E. Washington, Suite 1911
Chicago, IL 60602-2174
(312) 857-2757

© 2002 by Friends of the Forest Preserves and Friends of the Parks. All rights reserved.

Contents

Preface	iii
Executive Summary	1
Foreword	5
The Board	7
Introduction.....	7
Interview questions and answers.....	8
Discussion.....	21
Committees.....	21
Public participation	22
Focusing the forest preserve board on the forest preserves	23
Recommendations	24
Staffing and Operations	27
Staff interviews	27
Methods.....	27
Forestry.....	28
Law Enforcement.....	30
Conservation.....	32
Maintenance	35
Planning & Development	38
Recreation	41
Finance & Administration	43
The General Superintendent’s Assistant	45
Off-the-record comments	46
The staff and operations	46
The board	47
Observations from outside.....	48
Discussion.....	49
Relationship between staff and the board.....	49
Policies.....	51
Staffing levels	52
Organizational issues	52
Hiring procedures.....	54
Recommendations	54
Public Outreach and Involvement	57
Public relations.....	57
Discussion	61
Publications	62
Print media	62

CONTENTS

Internet 64
Discussion 64
Outreach..... 65
 Citizen initiatives 65
 Advisory groups 68
 Discussion 69
Recommendations 69
Analysis of 2002 Budget 73
 Total 2002 revenue..... 73
 Distribution of property-tax dollars 74
 Distribution of 2002 appropriations: corporate fund 75
 Comparison with prior years' budgets 77
 Changes in the total budget (all funds) since 1980..... 77
 Budgeting changes in the corporate fund since 1980 79
 Discussion..... 79
 Accounting practices 79
 Forest Preserve District's response in the 2002 budget to its deficit..... 80
 Chicago Botanic Garden and Brookfield Zoo 81
 Recommendations 82
Afterword..... 85

Figures

Figure 1. Budgeted vs. actual headcount, selected departments..... 52
Figure 1. Portions of 2002 total budget derived from tax revenues (\$69.2 million)..... 75
Figure 2. Breakdown of corporate fund (\$44.7 million) by department..... 75
Figure 3. Budgets by fund (from all sources, both tax and non-tax), 1980–2002..... 78

Tables

Table 1. Budget summary for 2002..... 73
Table 2. Budget allocations from property taxes, 2002..... 74
Table 3. Budgets by fund (from all sources, both tax and non-tax), 1980–2002..... 78
Table 4. Budgets by department (from corporate fund), 1980–2002 79

Preface

Friends of the Forest Preserves is a citizen group dedicated to supporting the Forest Preserve District of Cook County in its mission of protecting land for conservation, recreation, and education. Friends of the Forest Preserves has brought together picnic grove users, hikers, bike and horseback riders, birders, boaters, restoration volunteers, and many others to advocate good conservation and recreation in our forest preserves. Friends of the Forest Preserves researches problems and opportunities and has produced a variety of reports and testified at District at many board meetings on a variety of issues. Friends of the Forest Preserves was incorporated as an Illinois not-for-profit organization in 1998. It is a member of the Chicago Wilderness consortium.

Friends of the Parks is a 25 year-old environmental organization whose mission is to protect, preserve, and improve parks and open spaces. As part of the CitySpace task force, Friends of the Parks has been obtaining information about Forest Preserve District holdings and operations to determine how city residents can benefit further from the District. Friends of the Parks is also a member of the Chicago Wilderness consortium.

Nearly two years ago Friends of the Forest Preserves and Friends of the Parks began a joint study of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County. Our intention was to review the District's operations, structure, and budget along with its key programs of land acquisition, management, recreation and education. The Forest Preserve District of Cook County has a noble and inspiring mission:

To acquire...and hold lands...for the purpose of protecting and preserving the flora, fauna, and scenic beauties within such district, and to restore, restock, protect and preserve the natural forests and such lands together with their flora and fauna, as nearly as may be, in their natural state and condition, for the purpose of the education, pleasure, and recreation of the public.¹

Today, the Forest Preserve District holds in trust for present and future generations a tremendous asset—the emerald necklace of woods and marshes, prairies and savannas that constitute eleven percent of the land in Cook County. These precious lands contribute incalculably to our quality of life.

Yet, as with any public agency, the District's operations deserve periodic review. How well is the District doing at acquiring and holding natural lands? At protecting and

¹ Enabling legislation (“Cook County Forest Preserve District Act”), 70 ILCS 810/7.

PREFACE

preserving them? Restoring and restocking them? How well is the District fulfilling its mission?

The goal of this study was to conduct a comprehensive review and to present recommendations that will lead to improved land conditions, operations, programs, educational opportunities, and access. We have released our report in two phases. The first contained our review and findings on land acquisition, land management, and public use. The second phase, presented here, addresses the District's board, organizational structure, outreach programs, and budget.

Stephen F. Christy, Jr., has served as principal author of the report. Christy has been the Executive Director of the Lake Forest Land Foundation since 1999. Prior to this, he was the Executive Director of the Lake Forest Open Lands Association, starting in 1985. From 1978 to 1984 he served as Supervisor of Planning and Design for the Lake County Forest Preserve District. A Chicago resident since 1977, Christy has been active in numerous open space issues over the decades. He has written extensively about the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, the Chicago Park District, and land preservation issues in the Chicago region.

We owe thanks to many people who have contributed to this report. At the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, General Superintendent Joseph Nevius gave us his time and allowed us access to District staff. His assistant P.J. Cullerton arranged times for our interviews. The staff members themselves and almost all of the commissioners generously contributed their time to this effort. We also thank people in various agencies and conservation groups, former District employees, and interested citizens who provided information for this report.

We thank the staff and commissioners of the Forest Preserve Districts in DuPage, Kane, Lake, and Will Counties for granting us interviews and numerous follow-up calls.

We appreciate a grant from the Bridgestone/Firestone Trust Fund that supported this report.

Executive Summary

This report, nearly two years in the making, has been issued in two phases. In the first phase, issued in March 2002, we examined the history of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County (“the District”), users’ perceptions, land acquisition, and land management. In this phase we have reviewed:

- ◆ **The Board:** How do the Commissioners of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County see the District—its mission, opportunities, and problems?
- ◆ **Staff and operations:** How is the staff organized, and what do they see as the accomplishments and the problems of the District?
- ◆ **Public outreach:** How well is the District doing in communicating with its owners, the public?
- ◆ **Budget:** Where does money come from and go? What have the trends been, and how well does the budget reflect the District’s mission?

Key findings are:

- ◆ **The board** has not been effective in guiding the District in a positive direction. Major budget shortfalls this year are symptomatic of a deeper problem. The board has structured itself to leave little role for most of its members or for public input. Essentially all authority resides in the hands of just one person, the president. The president is also responsible for the entire Cook County government, an operation vastly larger than the District. Although some board members are keenly interested in the District and its mission, the current system leaves little opportunity for them to contribute.
- ◆ **The staff** shows a brave face. But off-the-record comments reveal deep frustration and poor morale. The general superintendent has ceded day-to-day decisions to the president. Dedicated employees see no connection between performance and reward. In fact, the opposite is often true: under-performing employees are ignored, while those who are willing to work find themselves with more and more responsibilities but no additional resources. The lack of a functioning board committee structure leaves staff with poor communication with board members. Staff members believe that the board is almost completely unaware of what the staff is trying to do and the problems it faces.

- ◆ **Operations** are focused primarily on maintenance: grass mowing, garbage collection, and facility repair. The Maintenance Department makes up well over half the District staff. Law Enforcement is the second largest department. The third-largest department, Recreation, runs the golf courses, swimming pools, and toboggan slides. Very few jobs in the District are focused on the core mission of acquiring and protecting natural lands.
- ◆ **Public outreach** is nearly nonexistent. Unlike all the surrounding counties, Cook receives almost exclusively negative press. While all the surrounding counties make use of a wide range of tools to inform and involve the public, Cook has few programs for public information and does not look to the public as a resource for advancing its mission.
- ◆ **The budget** lacks detailed information, such as a balance sheet, needed for useful analysis. It does not always reflect the true costs of operations. The District has for years ignored repeated requests from civic groups—and from its own auditors—for clarity, timeliness, and transparency in its budget.

Our key recommendations are the following:

Develop an active board of commissioners.

- ◆ Commissioners need to educate themselves and be more involved in District policy-making and performance reviews.
- ◆ Commissioners should activate committees, hold regular meetings, and use the committees to interact more with staff and the public.

Select a separate president of the Forest Preserve District.

- ◆ The current format provides the same president for both the County and the Forest Preserve District. With its enormous responsibilities for health care, prisons, roads, and courts, not only is the County a full-time job for its president, but it also requires an expertise different from that of the Forest Preserve District.

Develop and reorganize the staff.

- ◆ Decentralize the District, and hire professional, qualified staff. Provide the staff with the power to make its day-to-day decisions and be responsible for them.
- ◆ Combine some departments and refocus the District on its core mission—the acquisition and care of its lands.
- ◆ Rebuild the Law Enforcement Department to focus more on conservation goals and forest preserve needs. Cooperate with other police agencies in cases of general criminal activity.
- ◆ Turn over recreation pursuits (such as swimming pools) not central to the District’s mission to local governments.

- ◆ Establish clear performance standards for all District jobs. Train staff in necessary skills, and hold staff accountable for meeting approved standards.

Start taking care of the District's most precious asset, its land.

- ◆ Create a new Land Management department out of the existing Forestry and Conservation departments, and greatly increase its staffing.
- ◆ Map all of the District's natural communities, and prepare and implement management plans for them.
- ◆ Engage the efforts of Chicago Wilderness and volunteers to restore these areas.
- ◆ Increase public education and outreach about land management.

Open the District to public involvement.

- ◆ Restructure and reinvigorate the Department of Public Information.
- ◆ Revise the rules of the board to allow citizens to comment on agenda items before the board acts on the items.
- ◆ Stop using Forest Preserve printed materials for free political advertising.
- ◆ Welcome and work closely with "friends" and advocacy groups.

Improve both the format and the specific allocations in the Forest Preserve budget.

- ◆ Produce budgets that include the prior year's actual figures and a comparative balance sheet showing surplus (deficit) from the previous year. The budget should provide more realistic projections of revenue and expenses, as well as comparisons to the previous year.
- ◆ Allocate more budget dollars to the departments of Forestry and Conservation to fulfill the core mission of the District.
- ◆ Take immediate steps to control financial losses and initiate systems to improve financial controls.
- ◆ Work to increase public participation in the budget review process by releasing each year's budget in sufficient time to enable public review.

Foreword

If you visit the Cook County Forest Preserve District headquarters today in River Forest, you will see a strange apparition the moment you walk in the door. This ghostly image is a large portrait dominating the vestibule.

The subject of this portrait is Dwight Perkins. Dwight Perkins is largely forgotten today, but he is the person who, more than anyone, created the Forest Preserve District of Cook County. His vision, energy, and devotion to the District spanned nearly a half-century, beginning with his dream of forest preserves in the early 1890s and ending only with his death in 1941.

Dwight Perkins deserves the eternal gratitude and respect of both the District and all Cook County citizens. Yet his portrait will shock you. Something terrible has happened to it. The colors are faded, the artist's original intent is washed out and hard to see. It is as though Dwight Perkins himself were slowly disappearing, slowly fading away. His portrait desperately needs restoration and care.

Sadly, Dwight Perkins's fading portrait is very similar to what our report has seen in the District itself.

Our report, nearly two years in the making, has been issued in two phases. The first phase, released in March of 2002, dealt with the history of the District and with how well it is upholding its mission of acquiring and holding land in its natural state. We found that the District's proud history of acquiring land had nearly ground to a halt. Through a scientific "checkup" on the quality of the District's 50,000 natural acres, we found that much of the land is in poor health.

The second phase of our report looks at the workings of the District itself: its board of commissioners, staff, and operations. It also looks at how the District relates to its owners: the public. Last, we take a look at the budget.

Our review of the District's entire life-span has found that the District has never been in such a sorry state as it is today—a situation made even more glaring when contrasted with the tremendous public successes enjoyed by other forest preserve districts in the region. By chance, two articles on two different forest preserve systems appeared on two consecutive days recently: Lake County in the *Waukegan News-Sun* and Cook County in the *Chicago Tribune*. Even accepting that the *Tribune* piece is an editorial, the differences are striking:

Lake County: “Voters will be asked this fall to approve a slight tax increase to finance access, maintenance and public safety for preserves....[Commissioners] voted Friday to put the referendum measure on the November ballot....

“Also, a recent countywide survey...showed a 2–1 willingness by voters to pay more in property taxes....The survey also showed that those who use the preserves gave the district very high ratings on issues such as cleanliness and safety.

“The district has grown by leaps and bounds since 1993, when the first of three land acquisition referendums were passed. The tax increase would help the district keep up with access and maintenance for preserves that have grown 27 percent...since the early 1990s.”²

Cook County: “This environmental treasure [the District] has rested in the hands of so many bumlbers, thieves and patronage hacks....Against very stiff competition, this may be the most shoddily run unit of government in Illinois.

“...The District’s shabby finances remain an ongoing embarrassment....In March, the advocacy group Friends of the Forest Preserves issued a devastating analysis of neglect and decay in the preserves....

Overstaffing, patronage, and lax supervision abound...Trashcans routinely overflow, broken glass covers parking areas, and bathrooms are a filthy disgrace.

“High on the massive list of missed opportunities at the Cook County Forest Preserve District is its poky pace of acquiring land....”³

The forest preserves are by far the most valuable assets owned by the people of Cook County. At a conservative estimate of \$100,000 an acre, they are worth nearly \$7 billion dollars.⁴ Yet the District is pushed to the corner, becoming the “forgotten child” of Cook County government—except, for decades, being a politician’s playground, as our report shows.

As we go to press with this report, there is talk of abolishing the District altogether and folding it into the county government. This seems to us like the old story of tearing down your house because you have mice in it. It would be a sad end for a noble mission.

² *Waukegan News-Sun*, “Forest Tax Hike Headed to Voters,” August 10–11, 2002

³ *Chicago Tribune*, “Fixing Cook’s Forest Fiasco...and Saving One Imperiled Gem,” August 12, 2002.

⁴ This assumption is taken from the District’s current efforts to buy 31 acres of land in the Palos region with the \$2.9 million generated from the sale of land in Rosemont in 1999.

Chapter One

The Board

Introduction

The Board of Commissioners of Cook County is also charged, by law, with the responsibilities of being the Board of Commissioners of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County. And also, by law, the District's board president must be the same as the president of the county board. Thus the same board wears two hats.

We sought to interview all Forest Preserve District commissioners about their work and views on the District. The results are a snapshot of their daily life in this effort, and are certainly tailored in some cases by political posturing. Nonetheless, the answers are revealing and, in many cases, clearly show the understanding and care these elected officials have for the District—and their own frustration with its current state.

The process began with a generic written request for an interview. Several commissioners answered this letter immediately, setting up appointments. Telephone calls by the author secured, after some time, personal interviews with twelve of the other commissioners, either at the County Building or at their district offices. Three additional interviews were conducted by telephone. Commissioner Lechowicz was too busy to schedule time for an interview. His aide Gary Weintraub kindly spoke for him. Commissioner Hansen flatly declined to be interviewed.

President Stroger was mailed the generic letter requesting an interview in the beginning of the process. There was no response. At the end of the process a personal letter was sent asking for a leadership interview, noting that his entire board had already been (with one exception) interviewed. President Stroger never responded.

Since we issued the first phase of this report, commissioners have taken a more active role in District matters. In March of 2002, representatives of Friends of the Parks and Friends of the Forest Preserves spent an hour at the regular Forest Preserve board meeting discussing findings from Phase I of our report and answering commissioners' questions.

THE BOARD

Forest Preserve board committees are as follows:

- ◆ Annexation
- ◆ Botanic Garden
- ◆ Finance
- ◆ Litigation
- ◆ Industrial Claims
- ◆ Law Enforcement
- ◆ Legislation and Governmental Affairs
- ◆ Real Estate
- ◆ Recreation
- ◆ Rules
- ◆ Zoological

Interview questions and answers

The interview process involved twelve questions. The first question was factual, being an attempt to determine the length of that person's service on the board. The statistics of length of service on the board are:

- ◆ 3–10 years: 10 board members
- ◆ 11–20 years: 5
- ◆ Over 20 years: 2

The rest of the questions involved opinions. These questions, and the answers, follow.⁵ Some of our initial observations follow each question; final views appear at the end of the chapter.

⁵ Interviews on file were conducted as follows:

Butler: Telephone, November 28, 2001.

Carr: Telephone, October 16, 2001.

Collins: Personal at County Building, December 18, 2001.

Daley: Personal at County Building, October 23, 2001.

Goslin: Personal at County Building, December 3, 2001.

Lechowicz (by Gary Weintraub): Personal at County Building, November 6, 2001.

Maldonado: Personal at his district office, 2615 W. Division St., Chicago, October 31, 2001.

Moran: Telephone, January 10, 2002.

Moreno: Personal at his law office, 55 W. Monroe St., Chicago, October 31, 2001.

Quigley: Personal at County Building, October 25, 2001.

Schumann: Personal at County Building, October 24, 2001.

Silvestri: Personal at County Building, November 6, 2001.

Sims: Personal at County Building, December 10, 2001.

Sutker: Personal at County Building, October 23, 2001.

Steele: Personal at County Building, November 6, 2001.

What are Forest Preserves for?

"The enjoyment by all residents of Cook County." (Commissioner Moreno)

"Forest Preserves are to preserve nature in its pristine condition as nearly as possible."
(Commissioner Collins)

"Conservation purposes." (Commissioner Goslin)

"Basically for the enjoyment of Cook County residents, and the preservation of the trees, wildlife, and native landscape." (Commissioner Moran)

"Creating open land for the enjoyment of the citizens of the county—our predecessors had the vision to set aside a certain amount of land in its natural state." (Commissioner Maldonado)

"To provide natural beauty, enhance the quality of life, and be a natural resource for air quality. They are also an outlet from an urbanized setting, and provide recreation appropriate to their settings." (Commissioner Silvestri)

"Recreation." (Commissioner Sims)

"To preserve open space, the flora and fauna, and keep people in touch with nature."
(Commissioner Sutker)

"The enjoyment of the people, recreation, and the natural beauty of the forest preserves. Trails, bike paths, lakes, fishing ponds." (Commissioner Daley)

"Natural lands for their open purposes and public enjoyment. The land has its own intrinsic values." (Commissioner Quigley)

"For the people." (Commissioner Lechowicz, through his aide Gary Weintraub)

"I could give a stock answer, but I have a different viewpoint...The District is a major enhancement to the quality of people's lives; offers opportunities to enjoy natural beauty, natural wonders, and recreation appropriate to its purpose; to keep us warmer in the winter and cooler in the summer; and it is an escape." (Commissioner Schumann)

"Exactly as it says: preserving our forests." (Commissioner Carr)

"For esthetic values and to maintain the foliage, clean air, and our local ecosystems."
(Commissioner Steele)

"67,000 acres to be preserved and kept in as natural a state as possible—but oft-times our constituents want to use them as parks." (Commissioner Butler)

Observations: While this is a tough question to answer in a few minutes, nearly all the commissioners showed a good grasp of the District's purpose and expressed interest in its operations.

What District committees do you serve on, and in what capacity?

Note: The commissioners' committee roles are public fact. Only comments on the operations of committees follow.

"The District is really a committee of the whole. Rarely do we have a bunch of committee meetings; most matters are decided by consensus of the entire board."
(Commissioner Butler)

"Committees don't meet that much—I wish they would meet more, weekly and separately as a Forest Preserve board. This is the only fresh approach and the most honest way to solve the problems with District staff." (Commissioner Moran)

"There was a good start on the issue of sorting out differing trail uses, but disappointment followed because the Advisory Committee for Trails has not met since then to share concerns and ideas. Why? We have lots of whys with the District."
(Commissioner Schumann)

"Committees never meet." (Commissioner Quigley)

Observations: Discussions and decisions seem centrally controlled. Committees appear to have no real say, and seldom meet. The board conducts nearly all business "by consensus" — which seems to mean that the real decisions are made outside the board meetings.

What portion of your time do you spend on District matters, as opposed to county matters or your other work?

"I don't think anyone could ever sort it out. Even though the county and the District are two different forms of government, they are really similar." (Commissioner Butler)

"10–15%" (Commissioner Collins) (Commissioner Steele)

"Very hard to answer. For instance the land management hearings brought out 300 people, the budget hearings only four." (Commissioner Lechowicz, through his aide Gary Weintraub)

"30%" (Commissioner Moreno) (Commissioner Schumann) (Commissioner Sims)

"In the summer 60%, in the winter 20%. (Commissioner Moran)

"60% District, 40% county." (Commissioner Goslin)

"It really varies." (Commissioner Maldonado)

"50%" (Commissioner Silvestri)

"I am a full-time county commissioner and District commissioner. I estimate I devote 15–20% of my time to District matters." (Commissioner Sutker)

"A mix. April to October takes more time to ensure areas are clean and ready. Some weeks 50%; some 5–10%." (Commissioner Daley)

Observations: A wide range of estimates; in general, about 30% of time. The time reported is surprisingly large for an operation with 1/40th of the county's total budget.

How do you work with other commissioners on forest preserve matters?

"If there are other District matters near a commissioner's district, or if he or she has an issue, they may come to me, discuss it, and I may agree to support what they want. Most matters are handled by consensus." (Commissioner Butler)

"I have good relationships with all commissioners: a pragmatic committee philosophy to keep the greenery going." (Commissioner Steele)

"We are commissioners of the whole [Forest Preserve] District, but often commissioners get mad if you come into their own district." (Commissioner Moran)

"It is a different game, since commissioners went to their own districts—now everyone guards their own turf." (Commissioner Carr)

"The District has pretty broad support among commissioners. There is no Republican vs. Democrat stuff; but now commissioners are beginning to think 'how does it affect my own district?' In general, the more District lands in one's own [voting] district, the greater the interest on the part of the commissioner." (Commissioner Schumann)

"The board as a whole tries to work on a consensus basis rather than along partisan lines." (Commissioner Maldonado)

"Through committees." (Commissioner Moreno)

"No problem. We all work together." (Commissioner Collins)

"Very cooperative interaction." (Commissioner Goslin)

"Fairly well." (Commissioner Sims)

"Collegial" (Commissioner Sutker)

THE BOARD

"If a problem comes up, it goes to committee. All of us are out to help the District. If something helps one commissioner, it helps the entire county." (Commissioner Daley)

"I counsel, advise, cajole, beg, and educate." (Commissioner Quigley)

Observations: On the face of it, there appears to be surprisingly good cooperation among the commissioners on District matters. Some have little or no District land in their areas, but all represent citizens who use the preserves. District issues do not seem to be caught up in politics, as is sometimes the case in other counties. However, if one accepts the commonly held belief that the District is an excellent source of jobs, it certainly would be in the interest of the commissioners to keep it on a steady course.

Do you think the District supplies you with adequate information to make decisions regarding its operation?

"Not enough information, and often a *fait accompli*." (Commissioner Quigley)

"No, due to budget fiasco: garbage in, garbage out." (Commissioner Butler)

"Yes, I get information every two weeks in a meeting with President Stroger." (Commissioner Steele)

"In general, financial information bad, but operational information good." (Commissioner Lechowicz, through his aide Gary Weintraub)

"**No**, they always keep you in the dark until the last minute." (Commissioner Moran)

"On a scale of one to ten, a four." (Commissioner Moreno)

"**No**, absolutely—especially in a timely fashion." (Commissioner Collins)

"When they have it, they will share it—but I've never had a lot of confidence in what they're giving me." (Commissioner Goslin)

"Yes, except for budget matters." (Commissioner Maldonado)

"I believe so; I call for extra information if I need it." (Commissioner Silvestri)

"Sometimes." (Commissioner Sims)

"Whenever I call General Superintendent Joe Nevius, he responds." (Commissioner Sutker)

"I always get good information. If I don't have the information, the District will get back to me." (Commissioner Daley)

"Sometimes the District provides just enough information. The budget machinations had a deceptive character to them." (Commissioner Schumann)

Observations: A mixed bag here. In general, while the "yes" answers were mild, the "no" answers were emphatic. Commissioner Collins perhaps put it best: "We need access to more information before making decisions. The information exists, but the process of getting it is hard." The continuing budget fiasco seems to confirm this statement.

How important are forest preserves to your district, compared to other issues facing the public?

"I have no District holdings; however, forest preserves are very important to the region, as I have learned from NIPC." (Commissioner Steele)

"Public awareness versus public interest are two different things." (Commissioner Quigley)

"Very important. I want Green Lake pool fixed up." (Commissioner Moran)

"In this regard I don't like the current single-member district setup in the county, because the forest preserves are for everyone in the county." (Commissioner Butler)

"The District is like an automobile—if it starts everyday, you don't think about it. The District is taken for granted by most everyone. Yet it is one of the most valuable things we have left in the county." (Commissioner Carr)

"The District is critical in every part of my area. Its importance cannot be measured. Along with Lake Michigan, it is in the 'top two' regarding quality-of-life issues." (Commissioner Schumann)

"The jewel of Cook County." (Commissioner Lechowicz, through his aide Gary Weintraub)

"The District is a very important component of life for our people. It gives them some time off." (Commissioner Moreno)

"Portions of my [voting] district understand and appreciate the necessity for preserving and restoring nature; others use them mainly for picnics." (Commissioner Collins)

"A very important quality-of-life issue. Most people take them for granted and are just glad that they are there, even if they don't use them. But people get very upset if the forest preserves are threatened." (Commissioner Goslin)

"Since September 11, even more important. We need good recreation for all people." (Commissioner Daley)

THE BOARD

“Not ranked high—I have no [forest preserve] land in my area.” (Commissioner Maldonado)

“Very important.” (Commissioner Silvestri)

“The District is not on the upper concerns in my area.” (Commissioner Sims)

“Very important—but not the only issue. The District is a jewel. We are here to protect the environment, not sell it.” (Commissioner Sutker)

Observations: Here we see the fact that the District has no physical presence in nearly half the commissioners’ districts. Thus for some, support for the District is more a reflection of personal or constituent interest. In general the commissioners evinced good public support for the District.

The constituents of some commissioners’ districts with no forest preserve land use the preserves heavily. In other districts that’s less true. The District itself, as shown in Chapter 3, “Public Outreach and Involvement,” has virtually no outreach or programs that make the District physically or culturally accessible.

Do you have many District inquiries, and how do you promote District awareness in your area?

“Not a whole lot.” (Commissioner Sims)

“Constant inquiries. Literature in my home office is always being taken.” (Commissioner Sutker)

“I talk about it a lot at local meetings.” (Commissioner Steele)

“I talk about the District at two to three meetings a night, and I also promote it in my newsletter.” (Commissioner Quigley)

“I have 33 towns in my district, and we will distribute District literature in my booth at each town’s special events. I get a lot of inquiries by telephone too.” (Commissioner Carr)

“Lots of inquiries. It’s easy for me to promote, as I know a lot about District history and its current problems.” (Commissioner Schumann)

“I do two clean-ups of District land per year. I send out flyers, have a van, and go out to District land and work with people.” (Commissioner Moran)

"He distributes monthly District activity pamphlets to all local committeemen."
(Commissioner Lechowicz, through his aide Gary Weintraub)

"I have a weekly column in the local paper and promote the District there."
(Commissioner Moreno)

"Mostly through phone calls. We don't get much money for mailings, etc. — we really have no way to communicate." (Commissioner Collins)

"I promote a number of events at the Zoo and Botanic Garden. I promote the District at community groups, and have done property walk-throughs with District staff."
(Commissioner Goslin)

"It fluctuates." (Commissioner Daley)

Observations: Again, interest varies depending on the presence of District holdings in commissioners' areas or proximity thereto. One standout was Commissioner Moreno who, despite having no forest preserves in his district, has organized a youth event called "Fish with the Comish." The event is run completely by volunteers, and sporting goods stores donate rods and reels. About 300 children come out, and all take home a free rod.

What do you think of the condition of the facilities on District lands?

"The District is understaffed, and there are large areas of deferred maintenance."
(Commissioner Maldonado)

"In a perfect world, they would be better if we had more money. Generally, they are acceptable to good." (Commissioner Silvestri)

"They could stand room for improvement. Some are kept up and replaced, some not. Why, I don't know." (Commissioner Sims)

"They could and should be improved for better serving the public, particularly sanitary facilities." (Commissioner Sutker)

"Considering all the people that use them, they're in pretty good shape. Picnic tables and toilets could use improvement." (Commissioner Steele)

"They could do better with the bathrooms. The ones we have never work. Tear them down." (Commissioner Moran)

"An embarrassment. They are unsafe, dirty, and covered with graffiti, showing a lack of respect." (Commissioner Quigley)

THE BOARD

“Our staff does a fairly good job. Most of the groves are well taken care of.”
(Commissioner Butler)

“Pretty good overall.” (Commissioner Carr)

“Restroom facilities are an absolute disgrace—a common complaint and an embarrassment. The District has no new approach to its facilities and just puts up the same old stuff.” (Commissioner Schumann)

“We hear very few complaints from the public. Maintenance is doing a decent job.”
(Commissioner Lechowicz, through his aide Gary Weintraub)

“They have been neglected for so long due to money shortages.” (Commissioner Collins)

“Not acceptable; we should have certain minimum requirements.” (Commissioner Goslin)

“For the most part, the facilities are OK.” (Commissioner Moreno)

“An ongoing problem to keep them clean, because vandalism is so high.”
(Commissioner Daley)

Observations: By and large, a fair and realistic assessment on their part. The commissioners need to supply their personal “magic” in the field however. Commissioner Goslin noticed a bathroom with no door or lights at the Jensen slides. He called it in and it was fixed immediately. Would an ordinary citizen have gotten the same service? The experience of regular citizens says no.

What do you think of recent efforts to manage the natural areas of the District?

“Very controversial in my district, but positive and necessary. The District failed to transmit the necessary information and education, but commissioners have learned a lot as a result of the controversy.” (Commissioner Silvestri)

“If you don’t manage the land, it will get out of hand. As beautiful as the preserves are, the buckthorn and weed trees will make a mess. I have seen [controlled] burns and their aftermath. I’m in favor of them.” (Commissioner Sims)

“Land management is absolutely necessary. We don’t let our hair grow or not brush our teeth. Why shouldn’t the forest preserves’ health be similarly cared for?” (Commissioner Sutker)

“The District first bought into the environmentalist idea to undertake restoration by removing everything invasive. We [commissioners] bought it, but only one perspective was being presented. The ‘tree-lovers’ lambasted us, but this is the other side, and to

hear both sides is a great act of democracy. The commissioners over-reacted to them, and we shied away from our original position. We are not doing a good job in persuading people of the correctness of this approach. The truth is not going to be communicated by osmosis.” (Commissioner Maldonado)

“We need to pay more attention to it. Savannas and wetlands are just as important as picnic groves and grass.” (Commissioner Steele)

“I’ll be guided by the advice of conservationists and scientists. More public relations are needed. People would come home and find the woods on fire next to them, with no prior warning.” (Commissioner Goslin)

“We need to restore the forest preserves to what they originally were before we came here. We need to maintain the balance of the ecosystem and get rid of the vegetation that is not native.” (Commissioner Moreno)

“The District could do a better job. They could do more, but need more volunteers.” (Commissioner Moran)

“There needs to be a fine balance. It got out of hand earlier, with people who don’t even live in the community telling locals what to do.” (Commissioner Daley)

“If you care about the District, you need to think like an accountant—an accountant with a green backbone. We have neglected our forest preserves and forgotten their purpose.” (Commissioner Quigley)

“We hired experts to tell us the right things to do. I don’t go to the doctor if I’m not going to take the medicine he prescribes.” (Commissioner Butler)

“I guess we have to go along with the experts, though sometimes I think we’re doing it just to create a few new jobs.” (Commissioner Carr)

“Managing natural areas needs to be more of a District commitment. The volunteers have stumbled very badly under the new set of District rules, which discourages them.” (Commissioner Schumann)

“President Stroger and Joe Nevius are making some progress, but there is still a lot more to do.” (Commissioner Collins)

Observations: These comments convey an odd position. While the District’s staff and volunteers labor under a set of restrictive rules that discourage land management, virtually all the commissioners are strongly in favor of more land management. The land restoration controversy appears to have been an excellent forum for the

THE BOARD

commissioners to educate themselves and form opinions on this matter, but changes have come slowly.

Name three things you would do to improve the organization and operations of the District.

Note: Golf course privatization has been effected since the date of these interviews.

Commissioner Butler

1. "Privatize golf courses, but you may lose quality when you do that. Everything is tied together, as in the budget: if you cut somewhere, you have to make it up somewhere else."
2. "Take a real hard look at how we collect funds for things we do, as in cash transactions at golf courses. If you give an honest man the key to your purse, you make him a thief."
3. "Take a hard look at what the District charges for services. Study carefully; it's a balancing act."

Commissioner Carr

1. "Privatize the golf courses. The Chicago Park District is very successful at this. They don't make a lot of money, but aren't supposed to, and are better run and maintained."
2. "Abolish the District police, and have the county take over. When you are sitting on the county board and see all these duplicate bills coming in, you wonder, 'Why are we doing this?'"
3. "Fix up Cermak Pool and give it to [the Village of] Lyons. Give Whelan Pool to the Chicago Park District. Park districts are the experts in running these."

Commissioner Collins

1. "We need more financial accountability with purchasing and contracts. There is no way of knowing we are getting the bang for the bucks we spend."
2. "We need a better process to know who special consultants are and what they are paid."
3. "We need to cut down on accidents and lawsuits on the part of both employees and the public."

Commissioner Daley

1. "We need to look into purchasing more land, in cooperation with other park districts and Chicago, and provide more accessibility to it."
2. "We need to get our finances in order."
3. We need better public relations, to get the message out. The more knowledge, the better."

Commissioner Goslin

1. "We need to professionalize our financial management."
2. "Let's improve the maintenance and care of District facilities."
3. "Improve volunteer operations."

Commissioner Hansen

(Declined to be interviewed; see start of chapter.)

Aide Weintraub for Commissioner Lechowicz

(For obvious reasons he correctly refused to answer for the commissioner but said he would have Mr. Lechowicz send us his own answers. Nothing was received.)

Commissioner Maldonado

1. "We need much more recreation at the District: soccer, special events, skating, and so on.
2. "We need to increase revenue sources. We should raise the costs of tobogganing, skating, golf, and increase the fees at the Zoo and Botanic Garden."
3. "We need to buy more land in Chicago. I don't believe it should necessarily be land connecting other preserves, but two- to five-acre parcels for forests and sports."

Commissioner Moran

1. "Get rid of the general superintendent and all supervisors; clean house and start from the beginning. How can you be captain of the ship and not know what your crew is doing?"
2. "Reinvigorate the committee structure, and have the board focus more on its work."
3. "Golf courses must be self-sufficient, but do not privatize them. Keep the courses, and show we can make a profit and get back on our feet. I want to put pride back in the District."

Commissioner Moreno

1. "I want more financial information and regular reports to the board from various District departments."
2. "I want management reports on our campgrounds, picnic groves, lakes, concessions. Let's see what's really happening— who is using the District and why, and why others are not."
3. We need to continue to expand the District. We need a more aggressive approach to buy more land, particularly in Chicago. We need to put nature back in the city, which would promote more use of nature by inner-city folk."

Commissioner Quigley

1. "We need to merge more functions with the county."
2. "We need better public information. How can folks get involved?"
3. "We need to focus more efforts in Chicago."

THE BOARD

Commissioner Schumann

1. "We need new sources of money from corporations and public/private partnerships. But we need to get our house in order so the public will support improvements and the acquisition of more land."
2. "We need to eliminate most of the rules that currently limit restoration work. Let's get restoration out from under policy control and into the hands of experts, to free it up for volunteers to do their work."
3. "We need to learn from other forest preserve districts surrounding us. We are not even a follower anymore."

Commissioner Silvestri

1. "We need to transfer nonessential and duplicative District efforts to the county, such as finance and maintenance. The county should also manage our books."
2. "The Zoo and Botanic Garden should be more than a county issue. They need a broader base of tax support."
3. "We need to improve the cleanliness of the District's bathrooms, shelters, and parking lots, and protect and restore the District's WPA/CCC-era shelters."

Commissioner Sims

1. "Let's take a look at how we do things and what our employees are doing. No matter what decisions you make, you're not going to please everyone. Everybody thinks he's an authority."
2. "We need more nature centers for hands-on kids' learning and shorter trails for a quick walk, say at lunch."
3. "We need to get some vendors on the trails, selling hot chocolate, cold drinks, and so on, and we need to get some banquet halls at our golf courses to increase revenue."

Commissioner Steele

1. "The District needs to share financial information with the commissioners on a more regular basis and solicit their input."
2. "We need to lift the land-management moratorium rules to encourage volunteers to stay active. The more terms we impose, the less cooperation we'll get from local residents."
3. "We need to do more marketing, more promotion of recreational and educational opportunities. We have five nature centers, but I'm not sure if all our public schools know about them. People don't pay attention to us."

Commissioner Stroger

(Never responded to several requests for an interview; see start of chapter.)

Commissioner Sutker

1. "We should insist on quarterly reports on every activity in the District, and special reports on the condition of bike trails, horse trails, and other specialized activities such as swimming pools and golf ranges."
2. "We need regular audits on the fees we get and periodic review of all fees."
3. "We need more hands-on involvement with District bureaucracy, emphasizing their obligation to keep us informed."

Discussion

Many of the commissioners' comments are well informed and wise, and they demonstrate a commitment to improving the District. The media love to gore the board, and not without reason. Typical is this vivid description of the commissioners: "...sitting wide-eyed in their big blue leather chairs, [looking] shell-shocked as new disclosures of financial mischief made them feel clueless."⁶

But as the above commissioner interviews show, there is clearly a wealth of good ideas and interest among these people. Most commissioners are not "snoring loudly at the switch," as the media have described them.⁷ So why do their good ideas seem not to be reflected by the actual function of the board? Why, for instance, do nearly all the commissioners show strong support for increased land management, but there is little change? Why do so many want to see more land bought, yet have never been able to place a referendum before the public?

An observer of District board meetings would think this group of people to be one big, happy family. "Consensus" rules. The commissioners effusively compliment each other and the leadership of their president.

The explanation? We cannot mince words here. The District's operations are a closed club, in this case controlled by a president who has demonstrated little interest in the District's mission.

Interestingly, change may be in the air. The March 19, 2002, primary saw the *de facto* unseating of five commissioners, and at least three of their probable replacements have expressed strong concern over how the District is currently run.

Committees

On paper, the place seems well organized, with an extensive committee structure.

However, these committees rarely meet. An active board member of the Brookfield Zoo, for instance, had no idea who the chairman of the Zoological Committee was, or what if

⁶ *Chicago Tribune*, Editorial, March 4, 2001.

⁷ *Chicago Tribune*, Editorial, January 7, 2002.

THE BOARD

anything the committee did.⁸ A former District commissioner reports that committee chairs cannot set their own agendas for meetings: “The president controls everything.”⁹ The large number of committees—nearly three times the number operating the forest preserves in Lake and DuPage County, for instance—also may be so cumbersome as to create an institutional inertia by itself.

Instead, everything is settled by the famous “consensus,” meaning that nothing is brought out for discussion unless it is sure to pass. Committees seem rather to serve as a “graveyard” for independent or controversial ideas.

Some commissioners have a deep interest in the District, but they have little power to accomplish anything. The feelings of an anonymous District employee expressed in Phase I of this report apply here too: “Everything has to go through downtown.”

Do other forest preserve districts operate this way? No, they don’t. The president of the Lake County Forest Preserve District notes, “50% of our commissioners run for office out of forest-preserve interests.”¹⁰ The current chairman of the DuPage County board was the past head of The Conservation Fund, a nonprofit group supporting that district. During that time he raised \$100,000, working through the Republican Party, to support the successful passage of a \$75 million land-acquisition referendum. In 1998 he ran for the county board, using open space as one of his main issues. He received 58% of the vote. Today he plays a major role as a forest preserve commissioner.¹¹

All other forest preserve districts have active committee structures that regularly work on issues and present them to the board for open debate. These committees are training areas for future forest-preserve leadership: the current district president in Lake County was formerly chair of the Land Acquisition Committee, a powerful and active committee that under his tenure recommended to the board (which debated and approved) the purchase of thousands of acres.¹² In other districts, those commissioners with special forest preserve interests chair committees such as recreation and land management that recommend real decisions and expenditures, again for public debate by their respective boards.

Public participation

Citizens play a larger role in the activities of other forest preserve districts than they do in Cook, and they have easy access to commissioners who have an interest in forest preserve matters. A long-time observer of the region sums this up nicely:

⁸ Anonymous interview, October 12, 2001.

⁹ Bud Fleming, in a conversation with Debra Shore.

¹⁰ Al Westerman, Interview, December 6, 2001.

¹¹ Conservation Foundation presentation at the Morton Arboretum, March 9, 2000.

¹² Westerman, December 6, 2001.

It's a whole different situation in DuPage and Lake Counties. There you have access to people who care about and will champion your project because it is a good thing. Cook County is different—it's dead.¹³

At a meeting of the forest preserve board in Cook County, an interested observer might (if lucky) get an agenda at the meeting—but never beforehand—and watch as a bewildering array of contracts are rushed through with little discussion or dissent, and with no citizen comment. There are no minutes for public review. The board then adjourns the District meeting and goes into county business.

Also, it is unclear how a citizen might meaningfully participate in this process. One can sign up to speak but is recognized only at the end of the meeting, after all business is done.

Many local governments hear what interested citizens have to say before board action. In Lake County, members of the public may be recognized and invited to speak as each District issue comes to the floor. Public input in Cook County is minimal and discouraged, being given a scant few minutes at the end of District business, after the commissioners have acted on the agenda items.

Focusing the forest preserve board on the forest preserves

Keeping Forest Preserve District business and county business separate is difficult to do, as noted by staff and commissioners from every forest preserve district interviewed for this report. In fact, just such a conflict led DuPage County to establish an entirely separate board of commissioners for its forest preserves. Years ago, commissioners in that county were faced with putting a road through the middle of Emerald Woods, one of DuPage County's largest forest preserves. From a county perspective, the idea made great sense—but from a forest-preserve perspective, it was terrible. Which "hat" should a commissioner put on to vote on this? Fortunately the road did not win approval, but the conflict was so obvious and difficult that it led to a permanent separation of county and forest preserve boards.

In Lake County, the board elects a forest preserve president different from the county president. If there is one single action that would make a difference in Cook County, this is it, both symbolically and practically. Such an action would show the public that the concerns of this massive county asset are worthy of much greater importance than they currently receive. Commissioners could also put together a slate of those most interested in District matters to head appropriate committees.

While not guaranteed, having a Forest Preserve District board president who is different from the county board president would greatly minimize a repeat of the situation the

¹³ Anonymous interview, January 25, 2002.

District is currently in, where its president has little apparent interest in most forest preserve affairs.

This action would also encourage those considering running for political office to consider the affairs of the District more thoroughly in their campaigns, even making them a central part of their platform.

This action would require a change in the state law.

Recommendations

- ◆ **Reinvigorate the District's committee structure.** Having committees with real teeth, that can make decisions and recommend action on the board floor, would go a long way toward changing what is now a very centralized and tightly controlled decision-making structure at the District board. Committees would also give the commissioners with specific District interests a chance to participate. Too often, we observed that excellent commissioner ideas are ignored because the commissioner may not be an "insider" and may not have access to a committee with actual power to carry an idea through. The board should reduce the number of committees as well. There are almost enough committees so that every commissioner could be a chair! This kind of complexity sets the stage for fiat-style decision-making at the top.
- ◆ **Have board meetings that focus on District business, and invite the public to participate.** In all the surrounding counties, county commissioners hold separate, "stand-alone" board meetings for their forest preserve business. Usually these are held at forest preserve headquarters, where staff and commissioners can interact and where additional information for making decisions is close at hand. As in other counties, the board should solicit input from citizens *before* the decisions are made.
- ◆ **Require the District to have a president who is different from the county board president.** The current format provides the same president for both the county and the Forest Preserve District. With its enormous responsibilities for health care, prisons, roads, and courts, not only is the county a full-time job for its president, but it also requires an expertise different from that of the Forest Preserve District.
- ◆ **The board must increase its interest and involvement in District policy matters.**
 - ◇ Commissioners must get out more often to see the District and its activities. One current commissioner joins in volunteer "work days" and other volunteer activities. Outlying forest preserve districts regularly load their

board on busses for field trips and even send board members to national land-preservation conferences.

- ◇ Many commissioners need to refresh their understanding of the District's mission and goals. For instance, District commissioners must learn, as have commissioners for outlying forest preserves districts, to "just say no" to the numerous land and special use requests from municipalities and other special interest groups. Inconsistent responses by commissioners, and the letters and requests they forward for their friends, could be deflected from the start if the commissioners had a clearer understanding of why the District exists. Instead such requests are forced to the "head of the line" on staff work schedules, disrupting staff work.

Chapter Two

Staffing and Operations

Staff interviews

A crucial part of this report was to meet with District staff, understand their operations, and get their opinions about the current state of the District. We appreciate the cooperation of General Superintendent Joe Nevius and Executive Assistant P. J. Cullerton in scheduling a series of interviews with all the upper-level professional staff.

A year has passed since most of these interviews were conducted, but we believe most of the findings to still be current. We caution, however, that the following comments reflect the staff's opinions on itself. The reader must judge the accuracy of these comments.

Following the section on staff interviews (pp. 28–46), certain staff comments are anonymously noted (pp. 46–48).

Methods

All interviews consisted of asking the following eleven questions, in the order of asking:

1. What is the purpose of the Forest Preserve District?
2. What is your job title?
3. What is your grade level?
4. How is your department organized?
5. What do you do?
6. How do you and your department work with other departments?
7. What do other departments think of what you do?
8. What have you accomplished in your job that you think is important?
9. What part of your job is yet to be done that you think is important, but hard or impossible to do in the current situation?
10. Are there things the District should be doing that it isn't? If so, what are they?
11. Where would you like to see the District in five years? In ten years?

Each interview is followed by some observations. These observations in turn feed into our recommendations at the end of this chapter. The interviews are arranged in the order in which they were conducted.

Forestry

On July 25, 2001, we visited with Chief Forester Richard Newhard and Restoration Forester John Raudenbush. Both men clearly understood the mission of the District as laid out in the enabling legislation—particularly since they had, between them, a combined 51 years of service. Newhard had been at the District for 30 years and currently holds a Grade 22 position. Raudenbush had been employed for 21 years and holds a Grade 18 position.

At the date of this interview, the Forestry Department's budget provided for 89 positions, including 11 student foresters—or 78 full-time positions. At that time only 63 of these were filled, or about 80% of the capacity. Of the 78, three to four had been placed in other departments due to work restrictions (medical, etc.) and two or three were on leave. This left a net operating capacity of about 70%.

A year later, Newhard could only remark that “the employment situation has gotten worse.” The 2002 District appropriation has cut his staff from 89 to 86. Also, “within the last twelve months I have lost five key people, most with 30 years' or more experience. I lost an area supervisor, associate forester, and three foremen. Now with the governor's early retirement incentive package I will probably lose three more key people. I've had to combine crews just to get them proper supervision.”¹⁴ He now has the equivalent of 75 full-time openings, 22 of which are vacant. He is still operating at 70% of this new, lower capacity.

Newhard noted that he was able to fill only five of his eleven available student forester positions: “Our hiring process is so slow that several candidates were notified too late and had already obtained work elsewhere.” He also notes that because of his staff shortage, Raudenbush must now assume other responsibilities that keep him from his primary task of restoration forestry.¹⁵

Work schedules are prioritized on a day-to-day schedule, addressing primarily storm damage matters, clean-up on golf courses, picnic grove maintenance, and surveying for Dutch elm disease, though the District now does this search only on the perimeter of its properties. Forestry also operates three nurseries: the Elk Grove Village and Tinley nurseries produce young trees (2"–4" diameter), and the Western Springs nursery produce young trees, seedlings, shrubs, and herbaceous materials.

Unlike the practices of forty years ago, Forestry now tries to plant only local genotypes, or plants produced from local native materials. Principal planting work includes landscape screening on golf courses and landscape restoration work.

¹⁴ Richard Newhard, telephone interview, August 14, 2002.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

In general, Forestry currently removes only diseased and hazardous trees. The department is discouraged from thinning invasive trees from forests due to current moratorium rules.

Forestry operates a river crew as well, which spends eight months of the year removing downed trees, picnic tables, automobiles, and other trash to ensure flow on major waterways through District lands.¹⁶ Logs from all work are contracted out for chipping and disposal.

The position of restoration forester originated from a grant for restoration work at the Swallow Cliff restoration effort in the Palos area. The restoration forester is responsible for woodland burning and the maintenance of restored areas, including mowing, burning, and herbiciding. In 1999 Forestry also received its first (and only) ecologist to help with this work.

Routine equipment maintenance is handled by the District's central garage, which can require a long wait. Forestry's own preventive maintenance employees service other equipment. If maintenance is required on specialized equipment such as aerial boom trucks, these are sent out to private firms.

Forestry works regularly with Planning & Development, Maintenance, and Conservation. Newhard and Raudenbush shared the same frustration expressed in interviews with both the Planning & Development and Conservation departments over the slow pace of the District's land restoration and management efforts.

Raudenbush was quite vocal about recent Forestry accomplishments, citing Swallow Cliff as the finest restoration project, encompassing over 500 acres—although the results of the moratorium have set this effort back. He had high praise for Newhard, noting “he has led this department into land management.”

Both men felt strongly that the District desperately needed current vacancies filled with more qualified staff, more input from other department heads, and more aggressive land management.

Raudenbush commented on where the District should be a decade from now: “We are the largest landholder in the state. We should be the best.” Newhard appreciated the workload of the commissioners, asking, “How can they know District issues with all their other responsibilities?” and hoped for more active interest from them.

¹⁶ A letter from General Superintendent Nevius to Commissioner Quigley dated July 31, 2002, notes that the District “has no responsibility for navigable waterways.” Nevius points out that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is responsible for the Chicago River, and adds the District has made an effort to help—until 2002, when no funds were available. Many ecologists believe that our local rivers would be healthier if natural logjams were left in place, except in cases of public hazard, to create pools and riffles for habitat diversity.

Observations: This is a dedicated department with a long employment record in its leaders. The department obviously understands the modern role of forestry as it relates to land management and restoration, a key mission of the District. Like a number of departments we interviewed, however, Forestry is operating at about 70% of its budgeted capacity. Lack of funding, coupled with resistance by some commissioners to land restoration, is blunting the goals and enthusiasm of this department. Outlying forest preserve districts with one-third to one-half the acreage have many times the land management personnel.

Law Enforcement

On July 25, 2001, we interviewed Chief of Police Charles Coleman, Jr., and Deputy Chief Terrence Lavenhagen. Coleman has been with the District 27 years, starting as a ranger and now holding an FPD 7 position, the equivalent of a Grade 23, according to him. Lavenhagen started as a ranger 33 years ago and held an FPD 6 position, the equivalent of a Grade 21. At the time of the interview he was also training at the Chicago Police Academy, but he has since left the District.

Both people agreed that the purpose of the District is to manage its lands in their natural state and that visitors' activities must be appropriate to that goal.

The District founded the Ranger Department in 1918, thus hiring its first employees. This department predates the formation of the Illinois State Police by four years and is thus one of the oldest law-enforcement agencies in the state. By 1929 the department had 50 officers: 25 on horseback and 25 on motorcycles. In 1955 it was incorporated into the Maintenance Department, but in 1980, following increasing abuse of District lands, it became its own department again.

As of July 2001, Law Enforcement department had 164 authorized positions. Of these, 15 are "non-sworn" or administrative positions, and 149 are police officers—31 ranking and 118 regular. Actual employment was 100 regular officers, 25 ranking officers, and 11 administrative positions, for a total of 136 people, or 82% of authorized capacity.

We attempted to update these figures for mid-2002, but Chief Coleman did not return our calls.

The bulk of the department is organized into five regional areas, where work consists primarily of vehicle and bicycle patrols. There is also a canine unit and a mounted unit, consisting of eight officers each and providing additional patrol support. The canine unit operates a training academy for other groups. The mounted unit, along with the canine, does 300 to 400 presentations a year to neighborhood and CAPS groups.

There is also an investigations unit. Thirty officers are trained in ground search and rescue. In the first six months of 2001 alone, Law Enforcement had to deal with 23 dead bodies found on District lands, mostly dumped there after foul play.

Officers are also trained in the use of mountain bikes, watercraft, and snowmobiles. Others are trained in DUI enforcement, juvenile law, tactical operations, internal affairs, and drug investigations. Several officers are assigned full-time to cooperate with the county sheriff's gang and drug unit, since these problems often spill over into District lands.

District officers patrol all facilities and staff all District special events. They check and enforce hundreds of picnic permits each year.

Both men indicated the department is under-funded. "The Forest Preserve District is the stepchild of County government, and the Law Enforcement Department is the stepchild of the District," notes Coleman. The hiring procedure is rigorous, including seven to eight months of testing to fill vacant police jobs. Recently, out of 7,000 applicants who took these tests, only 780 were found qualified and only 70 of those made the final grade for being hired by the District, according to Coleman.

Department critics suggest the District make more use of seasonal part-time help, as outlying forest preserve districts do. Coleman and Lavenhagen have tried this and don't care for it. Temporaries do not understand the purpose of the District and its rules and regulations, and Cook County's population is far more diverse than that found in collar counties, thus requiring officers with well-honed people skills.

The department is aggressive in seeking extra funds. In 2000 it received \$188,000 for marijuana eradication, and in 2001 landed a \$150,000 Local Law Enforcement Grant, which paid for 28 extra four- to five-hour shifts.

Law Enforcement interacts chiefly with the Maintenance and Conservation Departments, helping them with their police problems such as fly dumping and encroachments. Coleman reports "very good cooperation" with all other District departments as well.

Coleman believes his greatest accomplishments have been in improved training and more efficient use of equipment, electronic reports, and computer-aided dispatching. His department needs more room, specifically another building for the canine unit and a North/South headquarters.

Lavenhagen sums up his accomplishments succinctly: "We have provided a safe place in the forest preserves—a *perceived* safe place, and perception is what counts."

Both men had strong opinions about what they were unable to do for their department, given the District's current situation. They noted Law Enforcement's \$7,000,000 budget

is only 5% of the total District budget, yet was faced with a possible \$1,500,000 cut—in itself less than 1% of the total District budget. Coleman stated the District simply couldn't handle two or three corporate picnics at the same time. Too many people are needed, and as a result police resources are drained from other areas. He strongly urged the development of a corporate picnic area. (See p. 36, in the Maintenance interview, for corroboration of this problem. See p. 41 for the District's recent changes to the picnic system.) Lavenhagen noted that the current District deficit would cause police training to fall behind and would delay the purchase of crucial items such as body armor and safety vests.

Looking at where he would like to see the District in the future, Lavenhagen strongly felt the District should buy more land: "You won't get it, if not now." Coleman felt "Our department has improved greatly over the last ten years," and he joined Lavenhagen in noting, "Give us the resources to get the job done, and we will keep the Forest Preserve District safe."

Observations: Both men are clearly dedicated to their work and understand and believe in the District's mission. Between them they have 60 years of service to the District.

Sixty-eight thousand acres provide lots of room for bad guys to strut their stuff. Nevertheless, Law Enforcement has made over 60,000 arrests in the last decade alone, about 8% of which were serious felonies and misdemeanors.¹⁷ It must deal with the unique physical nature of the District, which presents criminal opportunities both on its thousands of acres of unpopulated land and in its recreational areas used by millions of people. Preserving the peace in forest preserves is a very different job from normal urban or suburban law enforcement.

Conservation

We interviewed Superintendent of Conservation Chris Merenowicz on June 20, 2001. He began his career at the District in 1981, when he worked part-time as a naturalist aide for a year. He returned to the same job in 1986 and became a full-time naturalist in the Fisheries Division in 1987. In 1989 he was promoted to fish biologist I, and he became head fish biologist in 1992. In 1999 he was appointed assistant superintendent of conservation and in 2000 became superintendent. This is a Level 22 position, a grade

¹⁷ We reviewed dozens of letters from Chicago area schools, police departments, judges, and private citizens complimenting Law Enforcement's work. Among these were letters to Chief Coleman from Steve Horton, Director of Public Safety, Northeastern Illinois University, November 17, 2000; Sergeant Brian Barth, Broadview Police Department, December 6, 2000; Alan Vodicka, Deputy Chief, City of Hickory Hills, February 7, 2001; John Koch, Chief of Police, Oak Forest Police Department, March 23, 2001; and Timothy McCarthy, Chief of Police, Village of Orland Park, July 20, 2001. All involved apprehending offenders or helping search for missing persons.

lower than any other department head and, we believe, indicative of the lack of commitment by the district to the care of its lands.

In theory the Conservation Department has 85 positions, of which 29 are part-time. However at the time of this interview, 16 positions were vacant, showing a department operating at about 80% of capacity, which was troublesome to Merenowicz: "I have nature center directors cleaning toilets right now." A year later he had 83 positions, 15 of which were still unfilled, leaving him with 81% of capacity. However four employees were also on long-term leave or disability, leaving him at about 77%.¹⁸

We should note that the 2002 budget added to the Conservation budget a "storeroom supervisor" that had been a "free-floating" position with little or no connection to the Conservation Department. That position has a \$47,000 per year salary and is held, according to some reports, by a commissioner's brother.¹⁹

The department has its administrative office at District headquarters. It also runs six nature centers. Four—Crabtree, Little Red Schoolhouse, Sand Ridge, and River Trail—are "full service" operations with educational programs, displays, and education trails. Camp Sagawau operates by appointment only for school events and weeklong programs, teacher training, and cross-country skiing. Trailside Museum, the oldest department nature center, specializes in wildlife rehabilitation.

Conservation's wildlife division manages deer, goose, and beaver populations and has cooperated with universities on study of the West Nile virus, raccoon rabies, and Lyme disease. The fisheries division handles fish stocking, working directly with the state hatchery in Spring Grove, and all related water-quality issues. Merenowicz believes the District's fish program is "one of the best in the country for the size of the region's population."

Land Management is a more recent division within the Conservation Department, begun in 1992. This division includes the District's sole Volunteer Coordinator. There are 60 land-management sites. The Land Management division must also inspect all requests for easements and inventory all new properties.

An odd aspect of Conservation's work is its management of the District's in-house print shop, which produces all District letterhead, bike maps, and brochures. This activity's location in Conservation doubtless dates to the founding of this department in 1945, when there was a need to produce the frequent wildlife and nature bulletins routinely published for outdoor education.²⁰

¹⁸ Chris Merenowicz, telephone interview, August 25, 2002.

¹⁹ See District's 2002 budget.

²⁰ See the site www.newton.dep.anl.gov/natbltn/natbltn.htm for a large and interesting sample of these early efforts by the Conservation Department.

STAFFING AND OPERATIONS

Merenowicz was amusingly brief when asked what he did: "Keep all the balls in the air." On top of managing the entire department, he also handles all departmental purchasing as well as District relations with the President's Community Advisory Council.

This department works very closely with both Forestry and Planning & Development. Employees from both Conservation and Recreation are often assigned to winter sports activities: Recreation handles the toboggan slides, and Conservation handles skiing and ice-skating. Law Enforcement helps with deer road-kill problems, and Maintenance is called on as needed. Conservation is also the clearinghouse for all trail problems.

Merenowicz is proud of his accomplishments since his recent takeover. "I have seen everything, since I began at the bottom of the ladder and worked my way up." Accordingly he has put Conservation in a better working relationship with the other departments. "I have a more realistic approach about what I can get done, along the lines of 'Cap' Sauers's thinking," says Merenowicz, referring to the practical nature of the District's legendary first general superintendent. He has redirected and reformed the wildlife rehabilitation practices at the Trailside Museum, focusing efforts on the care of native animals needing conservation ("as opposed to raccoons and pigeons").

Interestingly, Merenowicz was upbeat when asked what he yet wanted to do but was finding hard or impossible in the current District situation: "Nothing is impossible, you just have to find ways." Staff increases are most important; current department levels are based on the needs of the 1970s and 1980s. As an example, the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County has four ecologists, but Cook County only one. This is similar to the problems in other conservation areas. Cook has one land manager and one volunteer coordinator.

Conservation also needs to update its facilities and add to its buildings. Basic equipment needs are currently unmet.

When asked what the District should be doing but isn't, Merenowicz was equally straightforward. More District energy should go into conservation, forestry, and land restoration; the District currently places too much emphasis on park-district-type activities. "The District also needs to focus more attention on getting more funding," but "the stifling bureaucracy makes it very difficult to get and spend money." Last, "the general superintendent needs more freedom to do what he is accomplished at doing: being the CEO."

Where would Merenowicz like to see the District in five or ten years? "This should be the premier forest preserve district in the country. Instead, all District resources are currently inadequate in terms of staff, money, and equipment. As an example, one person currently handles all District public information. The Brookfield Zoo has 20 people."

Observations: Merenowicz is known and respected for his frank and down-to-earth style. He appears to be dedicated and hard-driving. He knows his way around the District from having started at the bottom. Unfortunately Conservation, like Forestry, is severely understaffed. This department houses the District's one Land Manager and one Volunteer Coordinator, although most of the on-the-ground land management staff is in Forestry.

Maintenance

On July 25, 2001, we interviewed William "Bill" Granberry, Tony Ponziano, and Frank Mole. Granberry is superintendent of operations and maintenance and had been with the District ten years. Frank Mole is assistant superintendent of maintenance and operations, with seven years at the District when the interview took place. Ponziano, superintendent of grounds and trails, started as a laborer at the Thorn Creek Division in 1971. Granberry holds a Grade 24 position, Mole a Grade 22, and Ponziano a Grade 21.

This was a wide-ranging interview due to the number of interviewees and their strong opinions. For instance, when we raised the question, "What is the purpose of the Forest Preserve District?" Granberry enthusiastically responded: "This department **IS** the Forest Preserve!"

The Maintenance Department, with approximately 400 employees, carries well over half the District staff. For decades it has been organized into twelve divisions around the County, each with its own division headquarters. In the early 1990s, President Richard Phelan arranged these twelve divisions into four regions, each with its own supervisor:

- ◆ South Region: Calumet, Thorn Creek, Tinley Creek
- ◆ Southwest Region: Palos, Sag Valley, Salt Creek
- ◆ Northwest Region: Indian Boundary, Poplar Creek, Northwest
- ◆ North Region: Des Plaines, North Branch, Skokie

The bulk of Maintenance employees work in these divisions, 75% of them (laborers, trash removal, grounds keeping, etc.) represented by Teamsters Local 726.

Maintenance also operates a central warehouse and central garage, located at Miller Meadow. The central warehouse handles the following trades: electricians, plumbers, sheet metal workers, painters, pump and well workers, and HVAC staff. Various other unions represent these trades. The District sign shop also operates out of the central warehouse.

Ninety-five percent of the Maintenance workforce is in a union; only 50–60 employees, mostly administrative, are non-union.

STAFFING AND OPERATIONS

On August 13, 2002, we asked Ponziano for updated information on staffing and position vacancy. He spoke with General Superintendent Nevius, who asked us to call his office directly. An assistant there said she would provide such information, but we never received anything.

Maintenance has primary responsibility for the District's 13,000 acres of developed land—its picnic grounds, 240 buildings, and 900 pieces of equipment. It manufactures many items such as outhouses. As of 2000, tables are now delivered pre-cut and only assembled by Maintenance. With 4,500 tables in inventory, this is still a major task.

Maintenance removes about 33,400 tons of garbage a year in total from all District facilities. This is the equivalent of nearly 20,000 residences per year.²¹ In 2000 this took 44,500 paid hours, 16,000 community service hours, and an additional 5,500 volunteer and paid hours removing cans, bottles, and other trash from the woods.

Picnic management is the biggest challenge for Maintenance. All three interviewees were outspoken about this. Picnic groves are mostly designed for a maximum of 500 people, but many groups book multiple shelters, thereby excluding other users. Granberry and Mole described a picnic held a week before this interview. One group rented all nine shelters at Miller Meadow. District police estimated the crowd at 8,000–10,000 people. The District had to spend \$5,000–7,000 to clean up, repair turf damage, and make miscellaneous repairs, but it made only \$300 on shelter rentals. Mole summed up the problem: "There has been a big change from family-oriented picnics to more and more promotional events, where organizations even make money selling stuff on District lands at these events." (See p. 41 for the District's recent changes to the picnic system.)

What important items have these men accomplished in their jobs? Ponziano was succinct and to the point: "We get the job done." Mole noted the updated computer system, improvements in the design and construction of picnic tables, standardized division reporting for better accountability, improved safety training, and in general making the District more "visitor-friendly."

What needs to be done, but can't be, due to the current District problems? Granberry: "Improve communications between field people and management." Ponziano: "It's all about revenue." Mole: "We need more preventative maintenance. We have only one HVAC man for 240 buildings, only three electricians, four plumbers, four painters. We have no equipment to clean our storm sewers, one of our biggest problems." Granberry summed it up: "We are firemen. Fifty percent of our time is spent reacting to stuff."

²¹ Figure extrapolated from data provided by USEPA, "Municipal Solid Waste," at www.epa.gov/epaoswer/non-hw/muncpl/facts.htm, August 21, 2002, figuring 2.1 persons per household, each person generating 4.5 pounds of trash per day.

Mole used an example to illustrate what the District should be doing, but isn't: "We have only three men to maintain the District headquarters and grounds, and we need six—we are 50% short. It's the same all over the District."

Where would these men like to see the District in five to ten years? Granberry cited a "viable deferred maintenance program."

Ponziano, however, took a broader view. "We do a good job. Anyone can be on the outside looking in, but with what we have, we do a tremendous job....The District needs to progress as any business does. Our 'customers' used to come to the District mostly on weekends, but now it's full-time during the week too. As gas prices go up, more and more people will keep coming. The entire system is overused and overtaxed."

Observations: Granberry, blunt and forceful, is the classic "front man" one would expect to find running a maintenance department. Mole, quieter and more reserved, represents the other classic maintenance archetype: the organizer and scheduler. Ponziano, with a longer history at the District, projected a more philosophic tone.

Maintenance is an enormous division with a difficult-to-pierce façade. Horror stories abound about it being the "last refuge" for patronage dregs, about the Byzantine workings of the central garage and warehouse, about the non-existent workers, about the endless card games going on during working hours. For this report we did not have the means to delve to this level, for instance by following workers around for a day, going into divisional headquarters, etc. Our experience suggests that some of the horror stories probably are true. It is widely believed both within and outside the District that, when the Chicago Park District reorganized itself in the late 1980's, many patronage workers were simply hired by the Cook Count Forest Preserve District.²² However we also believe that most maintenance employees want to do a good and honest job but, like most District personnel, are frustrated by the system itself.

It would probably be more efficient, both in time and cost, if many repairs were outsourced to competent local tradesmen instead of waiting for a centrally controlled staff person. The Chicago Park District has successfully adopted this approach.

²² Anonymous interviews with field personnel, December 6, 2001, February 7, 2001; March 6, 2001; April 23, 2001.

Planning & Development

This was the largest and longest interview we had, due in part to the large number of interviewees. On July 25, 2001, we talked with the following individuals in the Planning & Development Department (P&D):

- ◆ Allan Mellis, director of planning and development, four years at District (Grade 24)
- ◆ Irene Maue, GIS (geographic information system) manager, one year at District (Grade 20)
- ◆ Pamela Sielski, landscape architect, one year at District (Grade 17)
- ◆ David Kircher, chief landscape architect, 16 years at District (Grade 22)
- ◆ Cathy Geraghty, director of grant development, two years at District (Grade 22)

In terms of length of service at the District, this is by far the “youngest” department when one looks at top staff. With the exception of Chief Landscape Architect Kircher, the only other long-time P&D employee is James Havlat, the chief building architect, who was unable to attend this meeting.

At the time of this interview, P&D had 37 positions on the books, but only 24 were filled. It was thus operating at 65% of capacity. Mellis noted he also had several people in his department who were not in his budget and that people in some of his budgeted positions were working in other departments.

A year later Mellis has 36 positions, of which 24 are currently filled.²³

As the department name implies, P&D handles the planning (above the level of routine maintenance), design, and implementation of all improvements on District land. Areas of work are landscape architecture; architecture; land analysis, inventory, and planning; engineering; and surveying. This department also handles licenses and easements on District lands, and appears to have input on purchase of new properties as well as seeking grant funding for them. For instance, Kircher claimed that every unprotected natural area identified in the District’s 1994 land acquisition plan has been secured, including all those recommended by the Illinois Natural Areas Inventory, and that current priorities focus on projects that can leverage funding.

This department routinely works with all other departments: Legal, for instance, in land acquisition matters; Law Enforcement with the provision of maps; and the General Office with the planning of special events.

As might be expected from persons in this profession, there is no shortage of accounting for past accomplishments and looking to the future. Mellis spelled out the department’s

²³ Allan Mellis, telephone interview, August 13, 2002.

philosophy: "Do things right the first time, and spend money like it is our own." A partial review of year 2000 department accomplishments shows a wide range of projects:

- ◆ Developed a complete database of the \$65 million in deferred maintenance projects
- ◆ Wrote a successful proposal for the initial \$31.5 million awarded under Illinois First
- ◆ Secured nearly \$6,000,000 in other grants
- ◆ Completed the 100th mile of paved District bicycle trails
- ◆ Worked on land purchases at Thorn Creek and Tampier
- ◆ Worked on joint projects with over a dozen other agencies and non-profits
- ◆ Continued to work on full implementation of in-house GIS database

A review of goals for 2002 shows a similar level of detail and organization. Of greater interest, however, are the long-range goals this department put forth, again having a vision:

- ◆ Create and instill an approved vision for the District, consistent with the District's mission, to make it the best in the country.
- ◆ Prioritize all projects with respect to the vision.
- ◆ Expand the emphasis on land acquisition and restoration.
- ◆ Develop computerized asset inventory, finance, and work order systems with a GIS and IT (information technology) plan.
- ◆ Determine the actual costs to bring District facilities and operations up to an acceptable standard, and then develop a ten-year budget plan to accomplish this.
- ◆ Determine the realistic number and allocation of required employees.
- ◆ Pursue additional funding sources, especially for maintenance, land purchases, and new projects.
- ◆ Increase commissioner and public involvement in setting District priorities.
- ◆ Get the decision-making process down to lower staff levels, and expedite it.
- ◆ Publicize the District's programs, facilities, and accomplishments.

As an example of a specific and important accomplishment, P&D had been working on a new District policy on utility easements at the time of this interview. In the past, utility companies routinely destroyed District lands with little liability on their part. The department was drafting a new policy that would call for much larger security deposits and stringent restoration work based on quantifying the value of destroyed trees and landscapes. The board adopted this policy in early 2002.

Mellis and his crew also were specific as to the problems currently facing the District. Some concerns are summarized below.

- ◆ One manager in Maintenance was operating with just 13 filled positions out of his 30 available positions.

STAFFING AND OPERATIONS

- ◆ The District is doing well with traditional grant resources, even though it has only one person assigned to this effort. (The Shedd Aquarium, for instance, retains 19 employees for fundraising.)
- ◆ The District could start going to private foundations, with the help of a Friends group. (Geraghty is still developing this idea, and as of June 2002 she was beginning to discuss it with board members of other similar successful foundations.)
- ◆ “The District still views computers as an expense, not a tool. The District has no IT manager, no IT plan.” The District should have the equivalent of the County’s Chief Information Officer.
- ◆ The District opened a web site in April of 2002. It also has no e-mail system (unless provided by the employees themselves).
- ◆ The District has no automated work order system. It missed the mandatory deadline for the GASB Order #34 requiring a tracking system for all facilities and repair requests.
- ◆ All items over \$10,000 must go to bid. This has been the same rule since 1984, and the threshold needs to be raised to allow more flexibility. Also, according to Mellis, “The District must take the low bidder, over and over, even if he or she is incompetent or has not completed past work on time.”
- ◆ There is no obvious long-range source for maintaining new regional District projects, such as the Centennial Trail.
- ◆ The District should spend more time planning, so that it has projects “on the shelves” and ready to go if specific funding is offered.

The promise of P&D, but its current reality as well, was perhaps best summarized by Maue, the GIS manager: “The GIS program is only partly done; we have only one person to load data for 67,000 acres. Yet when completed, this could be a policy-changing tool. It provides maps instantly for everything: hot spots, encroachments, land management, recreation. We’re just not there yet.”

Observations: Doubtless the most articulate and thoughtful interview, but this is to be expected given the nature of the interviewees’ work. We found both Havlat and Kircher, essentially the institutional memory of this department, to be quiet and hard working, as were the others. The exception would be Mellis, who perhaps because of his background in community and political organizing could be quite outspoken.

This department seems well organized and managed, despite carrying several employees who have nothing to do with planning and design.

We commend the department for pursuing grant money for the District. However, we have learned that the District will probably take a pass on 2002 funds from Illinois’s Open Space Lands Acquisition and

Development (OSLAD) program for projects such as bike trails, because it has no funds for the required 50/50 match.

Recreation

On December 19, 2001, we interviewed Superintendent of Recreation Vito Benigno. Benigno holds a Grade 23 position, and he had been with the District 3 ½ years when the interview took place.

Richard Phelan created the Recreation Department during his tenure as board president. It had been a division of the Maintenance Department. Recreation is often associated with the District's high-profile swimming pools but actually carries many other matters as well. It manages all golf courses and handles all picnic permits. These are the three main tasks of the department. However it also manages all concessions, special events, toboggan and boating areas, and youth camping and the Youth Opportunity Corps.

Benigno, his assistant, and staff handle all picnic permits at District headquarters and four outlying offices. At the end of 2000 a new picnic reservation system was started, in part to address concerns voiced earlier in the Law Enforcement interview (p. 32) and the Maintenance interview (p. 36) about huge picnics. People planning very large picnics (over 1000 persons) now come in for an interview and must describe their security and refuse-removal plans, including paying for extra District law enforcement time. They then must place a minimum of \$1000, and as much as \$2000, in a separate security-deposit account. Maintenance and Law Enforcement must now judge if the cleanup and security demands are routine; if so, the deposit is returned. In 2001 the District took in 51 large deposits but kept only four, normally for extensive turf damage. The largest picnics can be 5,000–6,000 people, according to Benigno, and generally occur at Miller Meadow.

Recreation has also operated the District's ten golf courses and four driving ranges. While the District has now entered into contracts to privatize these in 2003, Benigno gave an interesting insight into the nature of public/private competition in the for-profit world of golf. We noted how much the driving range at Golf and Algonquin Roads loses, as illustrated in the November 2001 Deloitte & Touche report. He agreed. A mere half-mile to the west a private enterprise had built an upscale "golf center." This venture failed, but the Des Plaines Park District stepped in two years ago, bought the business, and reopened it at virtually the same price as the District facility. "This place has all the District has, and more, and it's all inside with an air-conditioned clubhouse-type setting—and all for only 50¢ a bucket more." District revenues are way down as a result, but before another public agency stepped in with competition, the District was actually making money at its facility.

The last major Recreation operation is swimming pools. Only two are actually pool structures—Whelan and Cermak. Both were built in the 1930s as a substitute for an activity the District had always allowed—swimming in local lakes and rivers—but could

STAFFING AND OPERATIONS

no longer condone due to ever-increasing levels of pollution. Both pools were deteriorating after 50 years of service. Whelan Pool was completely rebuilt in 1999; Cermak is being studied for renovation right now and may, according to Benigno, have some historic significance.

The third pool, Green Lake, is more recent and actually resembles a swimming “lagoon” similar to the one the Chicago Park District built in Humboldt Park in the 1980s. It has a sandy beach and lakeside atmosphere, but the lagoon water is actually on a closed, filtered circuit. Green Lake is also currently out of service and being studied for renovation or replacement, possibly specifically for families with preteen children, according to Benigno. We note that \$3,000,000 in Illinois First funds has been allocated for this.

The District, which for decades had winked at swimming in its local rivers, went into the pool business with some ambivalence in 1932. Almost fifty years ago (1953) the District’s own Citizens Advisory Committee recommended the District get out of the pool business as soon as the current pools became obsolete. Yet the District has already rebuilt one pool and is studying the other two. Benigno notes, “It is not in the cards right now” to close any pools, but the District is currently looking at co-management of these facilities with local park districts.

When asked what he does in his position, Benigno responded that he oversees the entire department, in particular making sure employees in the above four areas—administration, picnic permits, golf courses, and swimming pools—are doing their jobs. He also serves as a liaison with the public, preparing plans, policies, and procedures.

The Recreation Department works most frequently with the Maintenance Department, which supplies all tradesmen. Recreation hires its own lifeguards and pool laborers and also has one full-time pool laborer to keep track of all pumps and filters. Don Clark, the aquatics supervisor, has been with the District 26 years.

How does Recreation work with other departments? There is close coordination with Conservation in scheduling ice fishing and tobogganing as well as issuing snowmobile permits. Planning & Development gives input for facility improvements as well as compliance with state and health-department regulations. Forestry trims the trees on the golf courses and keeps an eye on potential tree problems.

According to Benigno, other departments “look on what we do favorably, as ours is a big and very necessary operation in the District.”

Benigno believes his greatest accomplishment since becoming superintendent is in improved communication. “In the first years of the Recreation Department, we had poor communication with, and cooperation from, other departments. We are here to work with them, and they with us.” He has set up specific procedures and policies as to how

his department should work with others. "I have an open-door policy. Let's get the job done."

Benigno has also upgraded what he calls the "point of sale": the cash register. Far more transactions are followed by computer, and he has installed security cameras at all golf courses. "Slippage is minimal," he now claims.

Other accomplishments include the continued development of the District's IPM (Integrated Pest Management) program and redesigned activity forms, which go either to Conservation's print shop or to outside low bidders for production.

Last, golfers can now pick up their golf activity cards at the golf course of their choice, rather than waiting for the District to mail them.

In five years, Benigno would like to see the District "modernized in all operations—computers, finances, public relations, debit cards—let's bring the District into the modern age." For instance, it took four years to get ball washers with advertising cards installed on District courses. By the time the board had finally approved the concept and the washers went up, the vendor went bankrupt. "At least we got free ball washers."

In ten years, Benigno would like to see the District finding consistent revenue sources to repair and maintain its existing recreational facilities.

Observations: Benigno, only the second head of the District's newest department, is gregarious and enthusiastic. He seems genuinely committed to improving morale and operations and has a good sense of humor to bring this about.

The District reluctantly got into the pool business in the 1930s only because local "swimming holes" in the Chicago River, Des Plaines River, and other water bodies became too polluted. Nearly a half-century ago, the District's Citizens Advisory Committee strongly urged the District to get out of the pool business. In our opinion, nothing has changed since then.

Finance & Administration

On July 25, 2001, we interviewed Dean Viverito, the District Comptroller. Viverito was essentially "holding down the fort" since the former District CFO, Mezell Williams, abruptly resigned following the discovery of the District's massive debt problem several months earlier.

Viverito started at the District in 1973 as a golf course worker and then went to college. He returned to the District in 1984. His father was the head of the Palos Division from 1970 until 1980. At the time of the interview Viverito held a Grade 24 position. He retired from the District in February 2002, six months after this interview.

STAFFING AND OPERATIONS

Viverito had a very clear understanding of the purpose of the District, especially for someone in a profession not normally associated with conservation and outdoor activity. “We are here to restore, restock, and protect the open spaces we have.” This insight is equally remarkable given the fact that, according to Viverito, his department has little interaction with the activities of other departments.

Viverito was most proud of the accuracy of the work he did while serving as Comptroller, regardless of how higher-ups may have handled his product. He completed an automated accounting system by 1995. He had accurately maintained the District treasury. Sharon Gist Gilliam found all his efforts to be in order, as had Deloitte & Touche in its recent review. Viverito had completed the FY 2000 audit by the bonding agreement deadline, with some help from Cook County—the first time in 15 years this deadline had been met.

Viverito tightened up golf course deposits; customers now get bag tags and receipts. The 20 or so cashiers and financial managers at the golf courses now get formal training, and all people handling cash are bonded and insured. All golf courses now have safes with two locks. The collection of all fees is now centralized; cashiers now only take in the money, which is wired to the central system. Since 1995, Viverito did monthly closings, and all accounts were reconciled on a timely basis. Employees now also enjoy direct deposit of their paychecks.

Viverito still wanted to complete the inventory of the central garage and warehouse and tie this into the overall accounting system.

What should the District be doing now, but isn't? “There is not enough money. Less than 1% of real estate taxes go to the District. The District needs to acquire funding to market itself through a vigorous public-relations program, and the commissioners need to get the tax cap lifted or pass a referendum.”

In five years Viverito would like to see the District “remodeled and doing its tasks in the most efficient manner with the needed influx of additional funding.” In ten years he would like to see the District with additional money to connect its existing land holdings as envisioned by the founders, be more proactive in restoring the native landscapes on its holdings, and become more education-oriented for the general public.

Viverito closed with an observation about the commissioners: “They currently have too much to worry about and cannot focus on the District. I don't know the answer to getting them more motivated.”

Observations: This *pro-tem* financial officer not only understood the District's mission very well, he had sought to maintain high professional standards in a situation obviously fraught with “smoke and mirrors” accounting. It is hoped that the District's internal Finance and

Administration Department will be able to maintain such high standards in the face of all the recent budget fiascoes.

The General Superintendent's Assistant

We had several interviews with General Superintendent Joe Nevius, and most of his remarks have been incorporated in the first phase of this report. However, on June 25, 2001, we did have the opportunity to spend some time with Joe Bishop, administrative assistant (for fieldwork) to the general superintendent. Joe Bishop, holding a grade 23 position, has been at the District since the mid-1990s and showed a clear grasp of the "education, recreation, and pleasure" aspects of the District's mission to the public. The general superintendent's department includes the general superintendent, an executive assistant (P.J. Cullerton, who arranged all our interviews), Bishop's position, and two secretaries. Additional people in this department whom we did not interview were the board secretary, public information officer, and inter-governmental relations officer.

Bishop's work is interesting: he is the "eyes and ears of the general superintendent" in the field, solving problems for him wherever possible. As such he works with all departments whenever the need arises. What do other departments think of this? "Respect needs a bit of fear," replies Bishop, who was a major in Vietnam.

Bishop believes his major accomplishment has been to foster much better teamwork by getting the departments to work together. All watchmen's residences are up to standard rental charges, using comparisons with other local and state park systems. There are now 130 District literature racks; there were few when he began. He thinks "a start" has been made on deferred maintenance, although there is \$75 million worth yet to do. He has also helped P&D Architect Jim Havlat complete a study of the District's historic shelters built in the CCC era.

Bishop sums up work he'd like to get done but can't in the current state of affairs: "We have the men, but no money. We have no vacuum machines for storm sewers, no grader or roller for our trails, no ditch-cleaning machines. We have trucks still going with over 200,000 miles on them. We have no street-cleaning machines, what can be cleaned is done by hand."

What should the District be doing, but isn't?

- ◆ Deferred maintenance: "Other agencies are not willing to share equipment, although President Stroger does get the county highway department to help with some road-flooding problems."
- ◆ The Total Quality Management (TQM) process, begun under Phelan but abandoned by Stroger, needs to be completed, particularly its recommendations on signage and literature.
- ◆ The District needs to take better care of its historical artifacts, such as CCC shelters.

How about the future of the District five or ten years from now? It needs to get more new equipment and also preserve its historic structures. Looking at the big picture, Bishop concluded: "Urbanization is putting too much stress on our preserves. They are overused and suffering from numerous encroachments. I want the District to still be here."

Observations: Bishop struck us as a "can-do" guy, who clearly helps an overworked general superintendent get things done. He has a good grasp of the maintenance problems facing the District, such as funding and facilities management, as well as the current political climate, which has undone many of the advances made in the early 1990s. In this sense he clearly reflects what one would expect the tenor of the General Superintendent's office to be.

Off-the-record comments

We were thankful for how generous all District employees have been with their time, both in these interviews and in discussions elsewhere. We were also thankful for their frankness. Following are comments best left anonymous, but very insightful and necessary to complete the picture.

The staff and operations

- ◆ "We have the equipment and staff to do the job, but everything under the current president has gone downhill in the last eight years."
- ◆ "Janura and Dunne used to take our department's advice when we were hiring new people. A while ago we recommended internal people for a job, but a fellow who was sent to us to interview—and who was drunk at that interview—ended up being the one we were told to employ."
- ◆ "Eight years ago, people were hired and promoted in a timely fashion. The right people were hired and promoted. Unqualified people have been promoted and hired in the last eight years."
- ◆ "I've heard one secretary at headquarters tell people 'I don't have to work, I have a government job.'"
- ◆ "The worst part is that your ideas and your work go up the chain and decisions are made by the people who are least qualified to make them, who know nothing about the subject. I feel like my hands are tied from behind."
- ◆ "There is now a serious attrition of older, up-from-the-bottom people due to retirement, etc. They are being replaced with unqualified outsiders with no institutional knowledge."
- ◆ "The quality of staff is just not what it was 15 years ago. Instead of getting qualified people, we must take whomever they send us from downtown."

- ◆ “Employees are not listened to. There is no employee training; the problems at hand are overwhelming. There is no continuing education, no personnel manual.”
- ◆ “The District has a low pay scale, low salary scale—the same positions at the County pay \$10,000–20,000 more. There is no employee recognition, no thanks for employee initiative.”
- ◆ “It takes forever to fill a position. All openings have to go through the president’s office. The County and the FPD were advertising for the same professional people—the County filled its positions in three months, but it took us nine months. By then the top applicants had all moved on!”
- ◆ “Hiring any consultant takes too long.”
- ◆ “Ninety percent of District employees are trying to do the best job they can. Our hands are tied in a lot of respects.”
- ◆ From a recently retired employee: “I remember fairly recently when an administrative assistant to the General Superintendent suggested to a potential employee that if he would do some work in the upcoming election it would grease the skids for his appointment.... ‘Who’s your clout?’ or ‘Who is so-and-so’s clout?’ were always topics of quiet conversation. Those with clout got what they wanted no matter how valuable or important that was. Those without clout struggled to get the support they needed.”
- ◆ From an employee who recently resigned: “When President Stroger took office, all the senior staff were told to sign undated letters of resignation. Everyone knew about these letters and understood that these positions had now become ‘political,’ that these people served only if Stroger didn’t have somebody he wanted to put in their place.”

The board

- ◆ “A lot of commissioners don’t know what’s going on. We know our strong and weak points, but no one ever asks.”
- ◆ “By and large, the board really doesn’t understand what we do or the problems we have. There is no committee activity, no way that we can work with them.”
- ◆ “If the commissioners don’t take the time to find out about the District, we must educate them. People from Deloitte & Touche got a bus ride to see District lands, but not the commissioners.”
- ◆ “Commissioners often write letters requesting we do special stuff, and they get higher priority over our scheduled work. Commissioners need education about the District so they can deflect special-interest issues from the start.”
- ◆ “I’m getting tired of always explaining why the District does not put up basketball courts. This is a park district function. Our commissioners should know that, and nip it in the bud, but they don’t.”
- ◆ “Ideally, these folks would be Forest Preserve District commissioners only. But most of them don’t even know what’s out in the forest preserves.”

- ◆ “The board’s Revenue Enhancement Committee had no staff involvement in its work, no review of past staff recommendations, and no tie-in with the District’s own grant people.”

Observations from outside

Our report would not be complete without comments from people who actually use and work with the District. This is the constituency, and it paints a different picture from what we have described above.

Interview with a long-term District volunteer

“I think all the staff knows, as does the media and the public, that the District has many woefully incompetent staff who are accountable to no one because of the patronage system. There needs to be an awareness of the difference between most of the professional staff and the massive dregs that weigh them down. When I suggested that land restoration crews be built in part from people in the Maintenance Department, my friend in the District said the idea was not worth pursuing because there was hardly a person in Maintenance who was willing to do a day’s work.

“Here’s an example of the day-to-day reality. At Linne Woods, the District asked the North Branch Restoration volunteers to take responsibility for 20 acres. A few agreed to do what they could. The District claimed to be restoring a prairie there, but it was in the hands of Planning & Development rather than Conservation or Forestry ‘until the first phase is over.’ A terribly shoddy job was done, despite a lot of coaching from the volunteers. The topsoil used was full of weed seeds. And ash trees, which cannot withstand the fire needed to manage prairies, were planted in the middle of this area. Not only does the project seem a total failure, but also the weeds will proliferate and reproduce right next to one of the District’s best woodland and savanna areas. This is serious incompetence, but no one from any District division is willing to do anything about it.”²⁴

Interview with a volunteer at the Bartel Grasslands restoration site on the south side of the county

“I thought Forestry now knew the proper trees to plant in the proper places. Why did Forestry recently plant cypress trees, which normally grow in southern swamps, in the middle of a prairie restoration?”²⁵

Comment by an older conservationist and District supporter in the Barrington area

“The real truth is that some of the staff is very good, and have done a good job at the District for a long time. However they are hamstrung by politics, particularly Mr.

²⁴ Anonymous interview, August 8, 2002.

²⁵ Anonymous interview, July 28, 2002.

Stroger's terrible leadership. He has discouraged volunteer work, and the preserves are getting worse and worse."²⁶

Comments by a long-time activist on the north side of the county

"There is a lack of responsiveness. We cannot get the District police to even attempt to stop the widespread picking of wild leek. At one point we had to go to a commissioner to even get them to talk with us. Now, several years later, they won't even come when we call them to notify them of infractions.

"We cannot get signage. It took months for their "sign department" to produce a few unprinted signs saying NO PICKING. They gave just a few of them to us, as though they were precious pieces of gold. We finally had to produce and put up our own signs.

"One year, after taking out fifth graders to pull garlic mustard, we notified the District that there were 80 large black garbage bags filled and neatly placed along the bike path, about 1 ½ blocks from a roadway. Many calls and three weeks later, the District still hadn't picked up these bags. They then told us that we had to lug them all the way out to the curb along the roadway, even though their trucks used the bike path regularly. Great thanks for an enormous volunteer effort!"²⁷

"We constantly see all the problems with working with a big bureaucracy where it's hard to find someone to take responsibility. You always have to go to the top for the smallest thing."²⁸

Discussion

We believe these interviews—the first of their kind conducted for a public study ---are quite revealing both through what they say outright and what they suggest. At least on the supervisory level, the staff appears to be dedicated to the District and to understand its mission. A number of employees are truly career people, having given their entire working lives to the District. As has been suggested before, the staff labors under a lot of constraints: deferred maintenance problems, lack of equipment and funds, the retention of unqualified employees, and other issues noted in the interviews. They have no control over this.

Relationship between staff and the board

One aspect of the staff's life that could easily be changed is the attitude the commissioners have towards the District. Anonymous staff comments show again what we found in our review of the board's operations: that few on the board know or care much about the District and its operations—although they claim, on average, that it

²⁶ Anonymous interview, January 25, 2002

²⁷ Response to the user survey circulated by Friends of the Forest Preserves and Friends of the Parks in 2001.

²⁸ Anonymous interview, August 13, 2002.

STAFFING AND OPERATIONS

consumes 30% of their time. The commissioners are hampered themselves in learning more about the District due to the centralized control they operate under. In this sense they are in the same position as the staff: commissioners have little say in District operations because all decisions go through the president's office—just as it appears all staff decisions do as well.

In most organizations, a healthy committee structure is where staff and commissioners would meet, work together, and craft solutions. The general superintendent would be the CEO, running the company and working with committee heads and the chairman to keep the company going forward.

But committees rarely meet: as noted in our chapter on the board, everything is done behind the scenes and presented to the public as consensus. The CEO has little power. Staff gets employees who were selected downtown:

When I was hired, I got the call from the offices downtown, not from my new supervisor with whom I'd interviewed. This action right there tells a new employee who the boss really is, and it sets a terrible precedent for future working relationships.

Staff ideas are largely ignored, mainly because there are no functioning committees to address them. Even an important ad hoc group like the Revenue Enhancement Committee made little use of staff ideas.

Between departments, staff seems to beg and borrow what they need to keep the District moving. However, the TQM efforts, begun nearly a decade ago and abandoned when President Stroger took over, are still remembered by some staff as a positive effort to modernize the District. As an example, the signage recommendations from the TQM effort were never implemented. These included a recommendation to drop the practice of putting the president's name on every preserve entry sign, of which there are several thousand.

Staff is not blameless, however. Institutionally, the District makes little effort to educate its commissioners. The staff's current public information officer is considered largely ineffective. Contrast this position and its efforts with that in Lake County, where the staff publicity department regularly prepares information for the commissioners, meets with them on specific topics, and arranges bus tours for the board to see existing projects and new land purchases. There is nothing like this in Cook County.

The bottom line, as tartly put by one staff member: "The commissioners have too much influence for the knowledge they have." But both staff and commissioners are to blame for this.

Policies

A guide to all staff behavior, and the operation of an agency itself, is usually found in policies established by the organization. These policies address specific issues and can help to avoid major problems, such as the sexual harassment lawsuit recently settled against the District's Law Enforcement department.

To this end we inquired from all forest preserve districts as to what written policies and guidelines they have. We sent a simple check-off form asking about 11 general policies:

- ◆ Land Acquisition
- ◆ Land Management
- ◆ Land Use/Development
- ◆ Cultural/Historic Preservation
- ◆ Volunteers
- ◆ Special Interest Requests
- ◆ Sponsorships
- ◆ Concessions
- ◆ Public Review Process
- ◆ Personnel Manual
- ◆ Sexual Harassment

As might be expected, the smallest forest preserve district (Kane County) had only four such policies.²⁹ But the larger districts were much more thorough. Will County had policies on nine of the eleven asked about, and Lake covers all items.³⁰ DuPage County also had nine, plus five others not inquired about: investments, licenses and easements, pest control, purchasing, and a code of ethics.

What about Cook County? We don't know because our request to the general superintendent was never answered.³¹ We do know from staff interviews that even basics such as a personnel manual are absent at the District. Perhaps things still operate as an editorial opined in 1986: "Mr. Janura also doubles as a kind of oracle. As owner of the only surviving copy of the 1956 forest preserve policy manual, he alone interprets its mysteries to the world."³²

²⁹ According to Executive director John Duerr "all these issues are addressed, but only the ones checked have written materials specific to the topic." (Note to Stephen Christy, January 28, 2002.)

³⁰ Survey results from Lake, DuPage, Kane, and Will County Forest Preserve Districts; memo to Stephen Christy from Andrew Kimmel, Lake County Forest Preserve District, August 14, 2002.

³¹ Joe Nevius, memo to Stephen Christy, January 24, 2002.

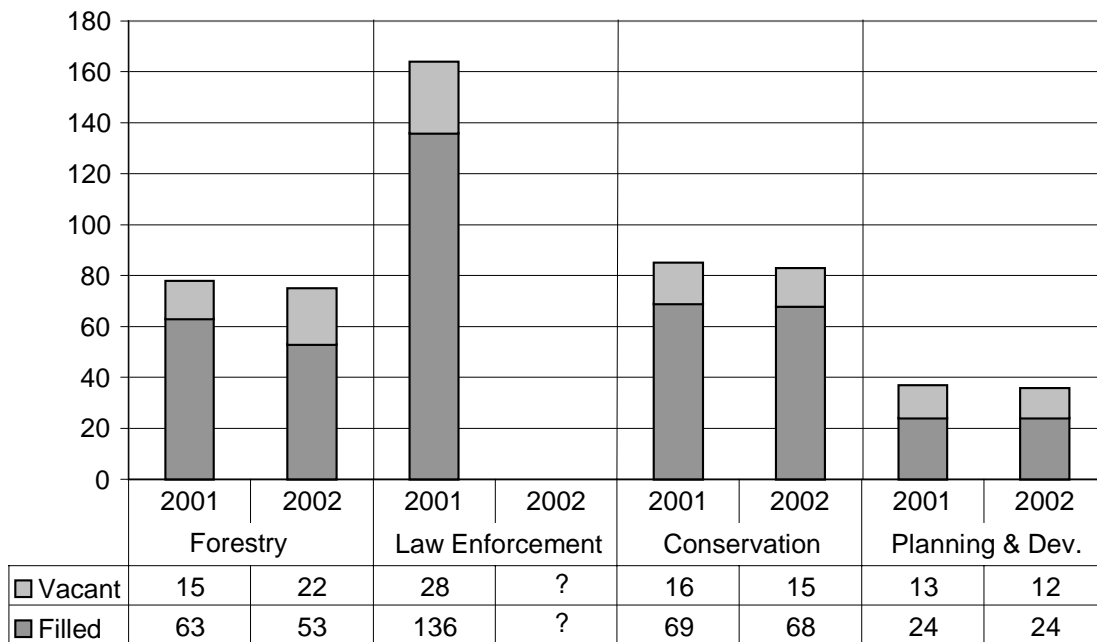
³² *Chicago Tribune*, "Mr. Janura's Patronage Fortress," editorial, October 6, 1986.

Our research did uncover what appears to be a draft of an *Information Resource Manual* [sic] dated May of 1994. Much of it appears outdated and it sports the usual wide array of crude District maps and graphics.³³

Staffing levels

Many positions are unfilled in departments for which we have information. Figure 1 summarizes the numbers.

Figure 1. Budgeted vs. actual headcount, selected departments



Looking at the departments for which we have numbers for both years, the overall vacancy rate was 22% in 2001. In 2002, this climbed to 25%.

What happened to the money budgeted for salaries and benefits for unfilled positions?

Organizational issues

A full organizational study of the District is not within the scope of this report. However, we have found some glaring issues that deserve attention.

Relationship between Conservation and Forestry

The Conservation and Forestry Departments already work together, but organizationally their efforts are split. For instance, there is regular confusion about who is in charge of what component of the District’s prescribed burn program. The much-needed work does not get done, and no one is accountable.

³³ Forest Preserve District of Cook County, *Information Resource Manual* [sic], 1994.

Both departments are severely under-funded and understaffed. They are responsible for the care of the 80% of the District's land, the core areas designated as natural landscapes, or nearly 55,000 acres. Yet they have only 7% of total District employees. As mentioned earlier, the District employs less than half the staff of outlying forest preserves to do a job two to three times the size of its suburban counterparts.

Education and public outreach

At present, almost all of the District's educational efforts fall under the Conservation Department, mainly through the nature centers. Chapter 3, "Public Outreach and Involvement," discusses the abysmal condition of the District's public outreach efforts, including a public information officer who doesn't bother to return calls from the public. The District's outreach efforts are a disaster; this is a common thread we found in our interviews with both commissioners and staff.

A new department might be the best way to encompass the education and nature-center functions of Conservation, public relations, and (if justifiable) the in-house District printing efforts. This department would teach people how to appreciate the preserves. It would go to inner-city schools and inspire children to join programs that take them to the preserves; some of these children would then start careers or avocations in science, conservation, or forestry. This department would organize conferences and clean-ups that are informative, fun, and recreational. It would run programs in the schools—especially the inner-city schools (where many people currently get little value from the District). It would create signage, trail guides, birding trails, and a newsletter. It would work to get the preserves featured positively in the newspapers and on TV.

Role for Law Enforcement

We disagree with the opinion that the entire work of this department should be turned over to the county sheriff. We believe the Law Enforcement Department is an invaluable and very much "front line" part of the District. Conservation police work is a different operation from standard urban law enforcement. There is also a need to enforce picnic permits and patrol trails. However, would it not make sense for this part of the mission to be performed by conservation police armed not with lethal weapons but radios, cell phones, and beepers—allowing them to call for backup when needed? Fewer sworn police officers and more rangers might make sense.

We share the concerns expressed by many about the sexual harassment suit and charges of false overtime, both of which have come to light since our initial interviews. An outside review of this department and its goals is advisable in our opinion. Interestingly, a recent article suggested the District might be considering reshaping its Law Enforcement Department, to give officers more training both in people skills and in the

dynamics of the natural landscape they protect.³⁴ This appears to be an excellent idea, and many park systems across the country have had good success with it.

That said, there is some room for shrinkage. We also strongly believe that officers should spend less time in vehicles and more time literally in the field. The District should assign more officers to bicycles, ATVs, and actual conservation police activities.

Hiring procedures

A glance at the back of any local dailies will show that the District generically advertises for jobs, with no specifics about the positions.³⁵ But how do you find out about the jobs? There is nothing on the new web site.

You must go to District headquarters in River Forest—and then your application takes the long ride downtown to see if the president will approve. We quote again former employee:

There was a tremendous inefficiency in hiring. You were not allowed to advertise a position. The bulletins were posted only at District headquarters and you couldn't make copies of them. It was very restrictive....There would be memos about this: "If anybody calls about the position, you are not to answer them but direct all calls to Personnel." You were instructed to send resumes back to the applicant and tell them to send them to Personnel.³⁶

Recommendations

- ◆ **Decentralize the current top-down structure.**
 - ◇ Put day-to-day authority back in the hands of the general superintendent.
 - ◇ Have all employment matters handled at a District level, not through downtown, and hire based on merit.
 - ◇ Do the same for consultant selection and retention, and drastically shorten the time it takes to do this.

- ◆ **Give staff more incentives to work hard, and make it more responsible for its actions.**
 - ◇ Increase salaries to attract well-qualified staff, and bring District salaries up to par with other County positions.
 - ◇ Establish clear performance standards for all positions and begin to evaluate staff based on these standards. Establish a mechanism to reward achievement and penalize poor performance.

³⁴ *Daily Southtown*, "Hybrid of cop, ranger may be introduced," April 24, 2002.

³⁵ See *Chicago Tribune* classified ads, June 28, 2002, among others—these are routinely issued.

³⁶ Anonymous interview, May 14, 2001.

- ◇ Develop and implement employee training, continuing education, and a personnel manual, all of which were TQM initiatives nearly a decade ago.
- ◆ **Restructure the District to improve its efficiency and bring it up-to-date with current public open space agency operating techniques.**
 - ◇ **Combine Forestry and parts of Conservation into a new Land Management Department.** We found the top staff of both these departments to be fully aware of the need for modern land management. Times have changed, and both these departments should concentrate on managing the district's natural resources in a single department focusing on land management. The department should be headed by a person with solid credentials and on-the-ground experience in the restoration and restocking that is at the heart of the District's mission.
 - ◇ **Create an Education and Outreach Department.** This department would teach people how to appreciate the preserves. It would encompass the educational functions of the nature centers and effective outreach to the citizens of Cook County. For further discussion, see Chapter 3, "Public Outreach and Involvement."
 - ◇ **Retain, prune, and redirect the Law Enforcement Department.** Focus the department on conservation policing, enforcing picnic permits, patrolling trails, and similar activities. Consider having fewer sworn officers and more rangers. Increase the portion of the officers' time spent on foot and on bicycle in the field.
 - ◇ **Refocus the Recreation Department.** We believe that the District should get out of the swimming pool business—not shut down the pools, but turn them over to local park districts, which were established to run this sort of facility. The Recreation Department should pay more attention to the kind of recreation that the District legislation envisioned: recreation based on an appreciation of nature, and compatible with it. This kind of recreation includes canoeing, hiking and daytrips, bird watching, fishing, outdoor photography, orienteering, and so on. Other kinds of recreation that can bring people who might otherwise have no interest in the out-of-doors to enjoy District lands are biking, cross-country skiing, horseback riding and picnicking.
 - ◇ **Advertise jobs in an open and efficient manner, and hire qualified people.**
 - ◇ **Normalize the relationship between the president and the General Superintendent.** Too many decisions are made "downtown." The president and board need a chief executive officer who makes the District's day-to-day decisions. General Superintendent Joe Nevius is a talented landscape architect with a long list of excellent accomplishments at the District dating from the 1960s, but he is not afforded the authority and tools to run what is essentially a major corporation in dire need of help. The District very much

STAFFING AND OPERATIONS

needs a strong CEO with authority to make day-to-day decisions to implement needed new policy direction from the board.

Chapter Three

Public Outreach and Involvement

This chapter explores the ways in which the District gets its message out to its owners—the public—and how it invites the public to participate in its work. One might consider the public to be similar to stockholders in a corporation, supporting it, expecting it to make the right decisions, and being asked by it for direction and advice.

Public relations

An aide to a current forest preserve commissioner, speaking off the record, summed up the situation: “Something is systematically wrong with the Cook County Forest Preserve District’s communication system.”³⁷

The District employs a Director of Public Information, but several telephone and written requests for an interview and a request for copies of all press releases issued over the last two years have gone unanswered. One District employee estimated that only ten to twelve press releases are produced in a year.³⁸

We have sought, over the last two years, to find evidence of press releases leading to articles in major regional daily newspapers such as the *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Daily Herald*, *Daily Southtown*, and others. There were articles about golf course privatization, an issue now acted upon. There were several positive articles in the *Daily Southtown*: “The grass menagerie” (7/11/01), praising the District’s efforts at restoring the Bartel Grasslands, and “Massive Orland land restoration now on tract” (8/9/02), praising restoration plans for 960 acres southwest of Chicago. But these were generated by the District’s partner organizations on these projects, the National Audubon Society and the Corporation for Open Lands (Corlands).

We don’t know if the other articles listed below resulted from press releases. From the headlines, however, we doubt it. Examples ran as follows:

³⁷ Anonymous interview, August 10, 2001.

³⁸ Anonymous interview, February 8, 2002.

PUBLIC OUTREACH AND INVOLVEMENT

- "One man's lonely war on litter in the woods," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 10/16/00
- "Alarm bells in the County Building," editorial, *Chicago Tribune*, 2/1/01
- "Cook County forest panel faces deficit of \$16 million," *Chicago Tribune*, 2/7/01
- "Dead wood in forest preserve's budget," *Crain's Chicago Business*, 2/15/01
- "Keeping drunks out of parks," editorial, *Pioneer Press*, 2/15/01
- "Forest preserve deficit up," *Chicago Tribune*, 2/19/01
- "Another 'oops!' from Cook County," editorial, *Chicago Tribune*, 2/20/01
- "Forest police may face budget cut," *Daily Herald*, 2/21/01
- "Timid steps for Cook County," editorial, *Chicago Tribune*, 2/23/01
- "Are forest police a luxury?," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 2/27/01
- "Forest preserve finance chief quits," *Chicago Tribune*, 2/27/01
- "Forest preserve's 'balanced budgets' concealed deficit," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 2/28/01
- "County board outraged by forest preserve finances," *Daily Southtown*, 2/28/01
- "Cook forest board may cut some of district's police officers," *Daily Herald*, 3/2/01
- "Why the Cook County mess matters," editorial, *Chicago Tribune*, 3/4/01
- "Forest district money woes prompt lower bond rating," *Chicago Tribune*, 3/14/01
- "County weighs one small step...," editorial, *Chicago Tribune*, 4/1/01
- "Cook in need of green for greens," *Daily Southtown*, 5/10/01
- "Group to study forest preserve costs, earnings," *Daily Southtown*, 6/20/01
- "County golf courses to be \$400,000 short," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 6/27/01
- "County seeks ways to whittle budget," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 7/30/01
- "Budget axe threatens toboggan slides," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 9/21/01
- "Beloved toboggan slides may slip away," *Chicago Tribune*, 10/7/01
- "Cuts aren't solutions to county deficits," editorial, *Daily Southtown*, 10/10/01
- "\$3 million awarded in harassment," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 12/13/01
- "Rescuing the forest preserves," *Chicago Tribune*, 1/7/02
- "Ten-year deficit dogs Cook forest preserves," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 1/9/02
- "County golf courses will go private—someday," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 1/9/02
- "County board members questioned by feds," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 1/25/02
- "Ghost payroll probe resurrected," *Chicago Tribune*, 1/25/02
- "Forest district deficit growing," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 2/7/02
- "Plants, bathrooms stink in preserves, group says," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 2/27/02
- "Forest preserve in the woods," editorial, *Chicago Sun-Times*, 3/2/02
- "Why golf penalizes slow play," *Chicago Tribune*, 5/21/02
- "Judge cuts settlement award 90%," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 6/4/02
- "Cook County cooks numbers on golf," letter, *Chicago Sun-Times*, 6/25/02
- "Forest cops being investigated," *Chicago Tribune*, 8/2/02
- "Forest preserve cops probed," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 8/2/02
- "Fixing Cook's forest fiasco," editorial, *Chicago Tribune*, 8/12/02
- "Forest preserve cops in for overhaul," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 8/15/02
- "Big gun to clean house at Cook's forest police," *Chicago Tribune*, 8/15/02

We did note a few positive articles. Several dealt with the reopening of the toboggan slides, an issue made somewhat moot by last winter's lack of snow. There was one letter to the editor strongly supporting General Superintendent Joe Nevius following President Stroger's remarks that "Mr. Nevius is a fine man, but we need some strength in leadership at the Forest Preserve."³⁹ We also noted two District police sergeants commending their department⁴⁰ and a proposal to give District police "a good, solid police background with training in customer service and knowledge about plants and animals."⁴¹

President Stroger himself authored two letters promising to clean up the District's financial problems.⁴² Critical letters countered these.⁴³

In June positive press appeared commending the District's establishment of a web site.⁴⁴

In contrast to the surrounding forest preserve districts, the Forest Preserve District of Cook County gets more negative press than positive. The reason for the negative is obvious. But the lack of the positive is, in part, because its publicity operation is totally inadequate. It employs a single public information officer, who is rumored to be pursuing a law degree on the side. He generally appears in the press only to lamely and inadequately defend the District against criticism—for instance, an article last year that found him "bristling" about a local alderman's complaints about District police.⁴⁵ We have never found him promoting anything positive about the District in the two years of our research.

We did not want to reach this conclusion and made a good effort to avoid it. We placed several telephone calls to the public information officer in late 2001 and early 2002 requesting an interview. These went unanswered. On June 20, 2002, we sent a written request for an interview and for copies of press releases. The public information officer responded to this letter via telephone on September 4, 2002—two and a half months later. By this time we had completed our study research—and concluded that good public relations is not a priority at the District.

Contrast this situation with the Lake County Forest Preserve District. Here a savvy media director and his staff send out a barrage of press releases, producing front-page

³⁹ *Chicago Sun-Times*, "Forest preserve's 'balanced budget' concealed deficit," Feb. 28, 2001. The letter, entitled "Forest preserve chief has done a fine job," was printed in the *Daily Herald* March 12, 2001.

⁴⁰ *Chicago Sun-Times*, "Forest preserve police a safety bargain," March 7, 2001.

⁴¹ General Superintendent Nevius as quoted in *Daily Southtown*, "Hybrid of cop, ranger may be introduced," April 24, 2002.

⁴² *Chicago Tribune*, "Stroger rebuttal," January 14, 2001, and "County questions," February 19, 2001.

⁴³ *Chicago Sun-Times*, "Doesn't grow on trees," March 11, 2001, *Chicago Sun-Times*, "County park system deserves better," December 27, 2001, and *Daily Southtown*, "Cook forest preserves need probe," June 7, 2001, among others.

⁴⁴ See, among others, *Chicago Sun-Times*, "Cook forest preserve grows own web site," June 4, 2002.

⁴⁵ *Daily Southtown*, "Talk of inadequate patrols irk forest preserve cops," August 14, 2001.

headlines the opposite of those found in Cook County. All the following are from the *Waukegan News-Sun* (the chief county newspaper) unless noted, and they represent a sampling of similar stories in other local papers:

- "County receives matching grants," *Lake Forester*, 1/9/00
- "\$85 million forest land vote on ballot," 8/12/00
- "'Yes' on forest issue," editorial, 10/6/00
- "County votes for more open space," 11/12/00
- "Grant will help buy land, aid park plans," *Chicago Tribune*, 2/5/01
- "Independent forest board?" 3/21/01
- "Basking to buy: enthralled forest board tours 467-acre purchase," 5/20/01
- "Forest board gives pooches a piece of duck farm," 8/14/01
- "Restoration trail: County beckons public into huge preserve near Grayslake," 10/18/01
- "Class on landscaping for wildfire set," 11/13/01
- "Major restoration effort underway at MacArthur Woods forest preserve," 12/21/01
- "Special programs on tap in Lake County forest preserves," 1/15/02
- "Fourth dog run opening in May," 4/24/02
- "Foresters to survey residents," 5/20/02
- "Cultural center begins family concerts," 6/17/02
- "Bigger forest tax would be spent on access projects," 8/18/02

Interestingly, Lake County keeps its citizens informed—and responds to them—in other ways too. A February 5, 2001, letter addressed to "Dear Forest Preserve Neighbor" updates those living next to a new forest preserve on the progress of proposed work. Controlled burning is regularly and clearly explained.⁴⁶ As a newspaper pointed out, when trail construction was hampering traffic on major highway, "forest preserve officials, who have received calls from commuters on the issue, have instructed the contractors to alter the daily construction schedule so that the affected lane will be opened prior to rush hour."⁴⁷

Major publications sent to all Lake County residents during this study period include an attitude and interest survey and a summary of an \$85,000,000 bond issue proposal.⁴⁸ Before the time period of this report, Lake County had issued a massive, full-color public document showing its plans for all forest preserve lands and how monies would be spent to improve them.⁴⁹

Lake County also issues a quarterly newsletter plus special updates on newly acquired lands and development projects. The newsletter, *Horizons*, is sent to approximately

⁴⁶ See, for instance, *Waukegan News-Sun*, "Controlled burns begin on forest preserve lands," October 29, 2001.

⁴⁷ *Waukegan News-Sun*, "Drive time" (column by Jim Newton), November 19, 2001.

⁴⁸ See Lake County Forest Preserve District, "Attitude and interest study: final report," August 11, 2000, and "November 7, 2000, referendum proposal," August 11, 2000.

⁴⁹ See Lake County Forest Preserve District, *It's in Our Nature: A Compendium of Plans for Preservation, Restoration and Improvement*, 1998.

50,000 households in the county. The Winter 2001 issue headlined “Land purchases, improvements to continue.”⁵⁰

Other forest preserve districts operate in a similar manner, despite their much smaller size. Will County, for instance, puts out a regular newsletter⁵¹ and in 1997 prepared a detailed review of citizen interests in Will County.⁵²

The Forest Preserve District of Cook County no longer has a newsletter.

All outlying forest preserve districts also issue an annual report, usually multi-colored and easily understood by the reader.⁵³ Cook County issues nothing of the sort.

Discussion

Marketing and publicity are everything in today’s age. Decades ago the District understood this, within the opportunities present at that time. Visit, for instance, the Illinois Railway Museum in Union. Among the many operating displays there is a collection of Chicago Transit Authority buses from the 1950s and 1960s. Period advertisements (cardboard inserts) preserved on the interior of these coaches include District pieces encouraging forest preserve access and use via the CTA. Similarly, from 1944 until 1984 the District regularly sent all schoolteachers a series of nature bulletins on such topics as “Fishing in the Forest Preserves,” “Tough Times for Coyotes,” “Jack Frost,” and “Migration of Birds.”⁵⁴ The Conservation Department continued this tradition until the early 1990s with *District Digest*, an amalgam of nature bulletins, news, and facility reports. Today the District has no such publications.⁵⁵

Sponsorships and advertising are another way of getting the word out. Lake County generates \$100,000 to \$200,000 annually in sponsorship fees.⁵⁶ Yet Cook County’s sole venture into this area was to contract for advertising space on golf ball washers—a two-year project that took so long for board approval that the contractor went bankrupt.⁵⁷

⁵⁰ See Lake County Forest Preserve District, issues of *Horizons* and “Progress Report,” 2000–2001.

⁵¹ See issues of *The Forest Preserve Citizen*, example: Volume 19, Number 1.

⁵² Management Learning Laboratories, “Comprehensive Needs Assessment,” Champaign, IL, 1997.

⁵³ For an example see Forest Preserve District of Will County, *Annual Report 2000: Bringing People and Nature Together*.

⁵⁴ See www.newton.dep.anl.gov/natbltn/natlbltn.htm for a collection of 750 of these classics.

⁵⁵ One should discount the County employee newsletter, which has a section of District activities amongst President Stroger’s self-serving promotions.

⁵⁶ Andy Kimmel, interview, November 29, 2001.

⁵⁷ Vito Benigno, interview, December 19, 2001.

Publications

Print media

All forest preserve districts issue maps and information to help the public to use their lands. Sophisticated technology, desktop publishing, and competitive, modern printing rates now make this task far easier than before. Consultants can easily standardize an agency's public image, developing a consistent message, logo, and the like.

Thus we find varying degrees of sophistication in this area among the outlying forest preserve districts. The smallest, Kane County, produces a set of one-color maps for its preserves (green printing on tan paper), plus several two-color brochures. All are designed for a letter-sized envelope. Will County issues a multi-colored county map plus information on each forest preserve, again all consistently sized and identity-colored. DuPage issues a series of color-coded maps. Lake County is perhaps the most sophisticated, with a well designed and consistent series of preserve maps, which fold to 4" square, perfect for putting in a pocket while visiting the preserve itself.

Our yearlong review of Cook County, however, found a dizzying array of publications in every size and color. Like a coin collector, we became enthused about finding new varieties at every turn.

One feature that is unique to Cook County is the use of publicly funded materials to pay for political advertising. Cook County is the only forest preserve district to print the names of its president and entire board on almost all of its publications. Every forest preserve entry sign also sports the president's name.

We question whether it is necessary for a cash-strapped agency to apply labels updating the "new" president and board—painstakingly applied over older brochures, etc., that listed previous administrations, by employees on the public payroll. Sometimes new labels were applied just if one or two new board members had been elected.

We estimate the cost for such political advertising—including the change of the president's name on every one of the thousands of District signs with each new administration—to be at least \$100,000 in public funds.

An example of an excellent publication was a bilingual piece beautifully produced in President Phelan's time and, amazingly, stating simply on the back: "The Board of Forest Preserve Commissioners," thereby making it timeless.⁵⁸ This piece was later updated, regrettably to an English-only piece. The example we found featured a

⁵⁸ *Discover Your New Backyard! / ¡Descubra Su Paiseaje Cercano!*

Stroger/board label pasted over the earlier printed material showing a slightly *different* Stroger/board.⁵⁹

Another exemplary piece, printed in June 1998, mimics Lake County's pocket-sized 4"-square materials and describes how the District controls deer, why prescribed burning is necessary, and why it's not sufficient merely "for nature to take its course."⁶⁰

The "workhorse" of District publications is surely its series of forest preserve maps, elegantly designed decades ago and, like an old Chevrolet, still running well. These 18"×20" maps are multicolored, consistent in their design, and still serviceable today—even though you have several presidents to choose from, if you refer to the back. Like the car, they could use a minor tune-up, but they are accurate and readable. Particularly impressive is the overall *Recreational Facilities Map*. All these maps are conveniently pre-folded to fit in a standard-sized business envelope for easy mailing.

Beyond this, however, any hope of modernity or consistency collapses. A "Publications Index," still listing Richard Phelan as president, allows you to order 50 different District publications (and asks you to affix a 29¢ stamp). Yet our research—by no means complete—found many more offerings out there. These ranged from a piece surely produced in the 1960s⁶¹ to numerous photocopied handouts, some clearly produced by typewriter or by hand.⁶²

There was some consistency in the size and design of the nature-center publications (though we noted two different publications available at the same time for Sand Ridge and Crabtree) and for the District bicycle route maps. All these included crude photographs and/or graphics and early computer typefaces of varying styles. A bike map for the Arie Crown Forest bicycle trail was clearly made by hand.⁶³

We found two different flyers on picnic permits, one dated August of 1995 and both bearing President Stroger's name. One, admirably, was printed in Spanish as well.

Some efforts had gone into explaining the need for land restoration, but not nearly enough. There were pamphlets on building biodiversity, warning against the collecting of plants, keeping an eye out for the Asian long-horned beetle, and a three-color "mug shot" flyer entitled *Cook County's Least Wanted*, featuring European buckthorn, garlic mustard, purple loosestrife, and multiflora rose. We also found a well-designed but poorly printed item featuring a graphic of a bicycle tire print, a horseshoe, and a footprint, and entitled *Nature and Trail Planning...A Delicate Balance*.

⁵⁹ *Discover Your New Backyard*, March 1996.

⁶⁰ *You Set Fires in the Forest Preserves?*, part of a series of four land management pieces.

⁶¹ *What Should Be Done with Young Wildlife?*, featuring a cat chasing a pheasant, with a barbed-wire fence in the background.

⁶² See undated maps for Dan Ryan Woods and Calumet Prairie Restoration, and an identification piece entitled *TREES*, employing hand-lettering guides popular in the pre-computer era.

⁶³ These are all undated publications, but have President Stroger's name on the back.

The rich and important history of the District seems to get scant recognition. A single, three-fold piece edited by Ralph Thornton, a former District employee, was all we found. Its date is unknown and, in an unusual exception, it lacks the listing of the president and board.

We also found guides and rules for fishing, snowmobiling, golfing, and skiing, as well as a promotional piece by the Sand Ridge Nature Center entitled *Butterfly Gardening in Cook County*.

Lastly, there is the *Calendar of Events*, apparently issued each month by the District and featuring activities for the next few months. These items are clearly homemade, featuring crude graphics. Of the eight panels in each piece, one is devoted to political advertising, listing the president and board members.⁶⁴

If this array of formats is not bewildering enough, consider that, by our count, it is printed on over 20 different colors of paper—and this excludes the white-only and multi-colored publications. Even District employee business cards came in four different styles and colors!

Internet

This year the District launched its own Web site—www.fpdcc.com—for the first time. We commend the District's efforts to join the modern age, since people are increasingly using the Internet to obtain information. The District's site is attractive and informative. We hope, however, that the District will add to the site's utility by posting job openings on the web (which is still not being done) and by posting an archive of transcripts from the Forest Preserve District's board and committee meetings, as has been done for several years by Cook County.

Discussion

As we noted in Chapter 2, "Staffing and Operations," the District maintains an in-house print shop in the Conservation Department. This unusual situation dates from the founding of the Conservation Department in the mid-1940s, and presumably it persists because environmental education has been and remains part of this department. The numerous nature bulletins issued in that era, all via mimeograph or spirit duplication, clearly required an in-house capability. Today this shop still produces items not only for Conservation and its education programs but for other departments as well.

Does the District need a print shop? A comprehensive, independent review of District operations might help to answer this question.

⁶⁴ See especially February 2002 issue, with Valentine hearts, a Native American, and a groundhog direct from Hanna-Barbera Studios.

Consistent printed materials are crucial to any group's efforts to present itself to the public. With the exception of the time-tested preserve and general facilities maps, the only consistency we could find was the ongoing efforts to update free political advertising—the names of the president and current board—at public expense.

Outreach

Outreach might be defined as the process of involving citizens in the mission of an organization. We note two areas where this would apply to the District:

- ◆ Citizen initiatives (volunteers, friends groups, etc.)
- ◆ Advisory groups

Citizen initiatives

Volunteers

Phase One of this report has already covered the sorry state of this initiative: the start of land-management volunteering in the 1960s, the establishment through board action of a first-class volunteer program with the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission and The Nature Conservancy in the early 1980s, and its abrupt curtailment for political reasons in the mid-1990s. Since then, this volunteer movement has been attempting to restore itself with support of some District staff. But it is seriously bogged down by staff conflict and board indifference, and it continues to decline in many areas. The volunteer program remains a stepchild of the District, if one considers that outlying forest preserve districts, given their size, acreage, and population, put at least twice the resources—in both financial and personnel terms—into this effort that Cook County does.

We have only to look at the DuPage County Forest Preserve's sixteen-page pamphlet entitled *Volunteer!*⁶⁵ Within this full-color brochure are outlined volunteer opportunities for horse care, environmental education, period farming, wildlife rehabilitation, and land management. In one publication an interested citizen can find out what's available and can learn how to get in contact with the appropriate people at that forest preserve district to begin volunteer work.

The Forest Preserve District of DuPage County offers seven different volunteer programs. The Natural Resource Management Program, one of the seven, is itself staffed by a full-time volunteer recruitment coordinator.⁶⁶

Cook County's efforts in this area have been rudimentary and often derailed by political concerns. We do note some progress, however. With leadership from Commissioners Maldonado, Quigley, Goslin, and Schumann, on September 5, 2002, the board approved

⁶⁵ DuPage County Forest Preserve District, *Volunteer!*, August 2000, printing of 5000 copies.

⁶⁶ Undated (2001?) memo, "Overview of Chicago Wilderness Stewardship Programs."

a program allowing volunteers to be certified as master stewards. Those who earn this certification will be able to supervise ecological restoration workdays on District lands. This program will permit much-needed efficiencies in staff scheduling, thus providing some economies to the District.

Regional friends groups

Nearly all outlying forest preserve districts have various citizen support groups in place. These range from policy advisory groups to groups that concentrate on a specific forest preserve.

An outstanding example of an old-time friends group is The Conservation Foundation. This organization began its life in the early 1970s as The Forest Foundation, an advocacy group for the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County. Over a decade ago this group “went public” in that it became a nonprofit corporation fully independent of the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County, but it continued its mission of helping that district under the name of The Conservation Foundation of DuPage County. In recent years it has shortened its name to The Conservation Foundation, and now it is actively helping forest preserve districts in DuPage, Kane, Kendall, and Will Counties. Its newsletters regularly discuss lands it has helped these districts preserve.⁶⁷ The group also hosts an annual dinner to highlight its forest-preserve efforts. Its featured speaker in 2001 was Christie Todd Whitman, director of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Regional friends groups contribute greatly to the support and success of forest preserve districts among citizens. Yet Cook County is apparently reluctant to embrace these efforts. Two recent examples of this lack stand out. We found an excellent pamphlet explaining the importance of conservation easements, first published in 1999 by The Conservation Fund and Corlands. According to Bill Davis, the Foundation’s director of land preservation, “There are thousands of these pamphlets out there. We have reprinted it twice. It’s the kind of thing that will sit on a landowner’s desk for years, and then suddenly we’ll get the call one day: ‘I’m ready to talk about saving my property.’”

On the back is that important line, “For more information, call....” Listed below are The Conservation Foundation, Corlands, and every forest preserve in the region (plus the McHenry County Conservation District)—but no sign of Cook County.⁶⁸ Why? According to Davis, “We asked them, but they showed no interest.”⁶⁹

Another publication we found is Nature Chicago, a calendar of outdoor events produced by the Chicago Department of the Environment and the Chicago Park District. A recent issue covered events at the Chicago Botanic Garden, North Park Village Nature Center, Park District, Illinois Natural History Survey, Morton Arboretum, Openlands

⁶⁷ See *The Conservation Foundation Newsletter*, Vol. XI, No. 34 (“More Land Preserved in Will County”) and Vol. XII, No. 1 (“2000 a Good Year for Open Space Protection”), among others.

⁶⁸ *Conservation Easements—A Legacy of Land*, undated publication circa. 2001.

⁶⁹ Bill Davis, telephone interview, July 28, 2002.

Project, Garfield Park Conservatory Alliance, Field Museum, and other groups. Again, there was no sign of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County. This full-color brochure sees wide distribution in and around Chicago. The District received no positive outreach from it.⁷⁰

The District's director of grant development has been exploring ways to establish a private-sector support group for the District, such as The Conservation Foundation or Central Park Conservancy. While this is a worthy initiative and deserves board review, few people may be willing to provide financial support to the District until it gets its fiscal house in order.

Specific friends groups

All forest preserve districts are replete with special interest support groups, each intent on improving conditions for bicycling, snowmobiling, birding, and the like. These groups do an excellent job in promoting the interests of their constituency and also help to control the "rogue" elements within such groups—that small percentage of users who ignore the rules. A good example would be the District's work with local bicycle groups to bring some order to renegade mountain-bike use at Deer Grove Forest Preserve.

A trend among forest preserve advocacy groups is "friends" organized to help a specific forest preserve. Lake County's Friends of Ryerson Woods, founded in the mid-1970s, is the oldest such group. Cook County has at least three organized groups that work to support the preserves generally in specific localities. One is the Friends of Busse Woods, founded by Chuck Thompson in 1997. Busse Woods is the District's most heavily used forest preserve, receiving over 2.5 million visits each year. That's a lot of people, and with them come all the attendant problems.

Thompson started his friends group with two people and now counts 150 members and volunteers. Friends of Busse Woods has "adopted" two miles of shoreline, removing "thousands of garbage bags" of trash over the years.⁷¹ Thompson states his group has been able to get the Busse Woods toilets to remain open in the winter, the trash barrels painted, and dozens of wooden picnic tables saved from a watery grave in the lakes.

In 1998 Thompson began perhaps his most important and successful crusade: the banning of glass containers on District lands. He was featured in a Sun-Times column about this effort⁷² and succeeded in getting the District to pass this ban in 2001.

Thompson and his followers have been tenacious in their efforts to help Busse Woods, publishing detailed "report cards" from time to time.⁷³ Although it took his group nine

⁷⁰ Chicago Dept. of Environment/Chicago Park District, *Nature Chicago*, 2002.

⁷¹ Chuck Thompson, phone conversation with Stephen Packard, Sept. 17, 2002.

⁷² *Chicago Sun-Times*, "One man's lonely war on litter in the woods," (Mark Brown column), Oct. 16, 2000.

⁷³ See Friends of Busse Woods, *Busse Woods News: Overview of 1999*, undated, circa 2000, and *How to Reduce the Amount of Litter in Busse Woods and Busse Woods Lake*, May 15, 2001.

months to get an appointment with President Stroger to review their concerns, Thompson felt this effort was successful in improving the maintenance efforts and getting rid of a “do-nothing” supervisor. Still, he sees much to be done:

- ◆ Alcohol consumption is still a big problem, currently allowed anywhere more than 50 feet from parking lots. The Chicago Park District and about half of the outlying forest preserve districts allow no alcohol at all.
- ◆ There are still no requirements for cleaning up after dogs and no leash law enforcement.
- ◆ There are no Spanish-language signs despite a high level of Latino visitors.
- ◆ There are no charcoal pits.
- ◆ There are no facilities for recycling—a common practice in all other forest preserve districts.⁷⁴

The Friends of the Forest Preserves is a countywide organization founded in 1999. It supports a wide variety of volunteer initiatives on habitat, trails, wildlife, and other issues. The Friends of the Forest Preserves frequently testifies at board meetings and has, with Friends of the Parks, jointly published a comprehensive two-phase study of the District, of which this document is Phase Two.

Two local groups are associated with Friends of the Forest Preserves—the Friends of Northbrook Forest Preserves and the Friends of the Morton Grove Forest Preserves. Both sponsor events, including clean-ups and restoration workdays, and contribute watchdog and advocacy efforts. Their efforts are well covered in the local press. The Morton Grove group has organized a successful campaign to protect the local preserves from commercial poaching of plants (wild leeks, greens, etc.) for sale to restaurants and markets. The District provided a few signs. (The Friends of Morton Grove Forest Preserves made most of the needed signs themselves and posted the signs.) Forest preserve police apprehended a number of poachers following tips from the Friends.

Additional such friends groups, attentive to particular forest preserves around the Cook County, could help the District in its mission and should be encouraged. A model for these efforts is the highly successful Park Advisory Councils started by the Friends of the Parks in the 1980s to keep local eyes on parks in Chicago. In addition, Friends of the Parks, through their volunteer program, has sponsored Earth Day and clean-up days in forest preserves in Cook County.

Advisory groups

The District was once a leader in this area. In 1927, a mere fourteen years after its founding, the District established a Citizens Advisory Council to help guide its future work. This group immediately produced, in 1929, the “Recommended Plans for the Forest Preserves of Cook County,” a document that still influences District policy today.

⁷⁴ Chuck Thompson, interviews, June 20, 2001, and following days.

They followed this with a number of policy-setting recommendations in the 1940s and, in 1953, a completely revised and updated policy document for the District's future aims.

Unfortunately, in later years, the Citizens Advisory Council has done little, becoming instead under General Superintendent Arthur Janura and President George Dunne (circa 1965–1990) little more than a rubber stamp for District decisions. In the early 1990s Dunne's successor, Richard Phelan, attempted to reinvigorate that group, appointing a number of new faces such as Al Pyott, then head of the Illinois chapter of The Nature Conservancy. Great hopes came to little: by 1998 this committee had become a rubber stamp for President Stroger's sale of land to Rosemont, thanks in part to Janura. The Citizens Advisory Council has not met since it approved the sale of land to Rosemont four years ago.

Contrast this bungled effort to involve leading citizens in District matters with how several other forest preserve districts manage their affairs. Lake County has assembled the Partnership Council, made up of various interest groups, which meets to help that forest preserve set its course on key policy issues. This committee also has been active in helping that agency with its many successful land-purchase referenda.

The Forest Preserve District of Cook County has one other advisory group: the President's Community Advisory Council, assembled by the board in 1997 to address the then-contentious issue of land restoration and management. This group reviews and makes recommendations about land-management plans and policies.

Discussion

A lot of talent and resources are out there that the District seems unable or unwilling to use. The success of other outlying forest preserve districts in having a greater "open door" policy towards citizen involvement—from a group concerned with trash pick-up to a group concerned with major policy issues—suggests the District would benefit greatly from such increased input.

Recommendations

The District's efforts in the area of public outreach and involvement are mismanaged and, in many areas, virtually non-existent. We recommend the following:

- ◆ **Stop using public funds for political advertising.** By our unofficial observation, President Stroger's name is today's equivalent of the ubiquitous Burma-Shave signs of a half-century go—seen on every major road. This practice automatically dates all the District's entry signs and all publications, requiring costly alterations or reprinting later on. No other forest preserve district in the region plays host to such free political advertising.

- ◆ **Start advertising, either alone or with other groups.** Remember those District ads seen in antique buses at the railroad museum? Today's buses sport ads by the Chicago Park District. Why not the Forest Preserve District of Cook County too? In many cases, ads are free and only production costs are incurred. The District should also showcase events in publications offering regional outdoor activities, such as *Nature/Chicago*.

While we're at it, why not include Metra train and CTA/Pace bus routes on all District maps? While our user survey found the vast majority of District visitors arrive by car, public transportation that the public should know more about serves many forest preserves. These could easily be added to existing maps, and perhaps the publication of the maps could be sponsored by some business.

- ◆ **Completely revamp and create graphic standards for all District publications.** This would be a job for an outside professional. Sorting out the extraordinary hodgepodge of District printed materials is far beyond the scope of District staff.
- ◆ **Create an Education and Outreach Department.** This recommendation goes back to Chapter 2, "Staffing and Operations." Education and outreach are the two chief ways an agency like the District involves its citizens in its mission. One good model, the Lake County Forest Preserve District, runs an efficient department keeping every citizen informed, including the issuance of dozens of positive press releases per year.

The possibilities for education providing outreach are limitless. Options include:

- ◇ Providing "biodiversity buses" that visit local schools, similar to the bookmobiles of an earlier era
 - ◇ Expanding the excellent Mighty Acorns program that brings school children to preserves to learn and help with habitat restoration
 - ◇ Conducting joint education projects with the Chicago Park District—focused on the District's excellent natural areas and wildlife habitat.
- ◆ **Educate the commissioners.** Understanding and selling a "product" starts at home. Many commissioners lack information about the District and its operations. It is true that some of them show little interest in the District, but the District could do a much better job of engaging them. For instance, other forest preserve districts routinely take their commissioners on bus tours of new projects and properties proposed for acquisition. We saw no evidence of this in Cook County.

The board itself is also to blame in this regard. At a recent political presentation, two candidates for the board summed up the District's situation succinctly: "This

board has never taken risks, has never tried anything." "This is 1955 in terms of innovation at the District."⁷⁵

- ◆ **Make far better use of advocacy groups.** The Chicago Park District once eyed Park Advisory Councils, founded to help citizens achieve better involvement with their local Chicago parks, with suspicion. Now the Park District actively welcomes their participation. The Forest Preserve District of Cook County should do the same with local support groups, using the Friends of Busse Woods and the Friends of the Forest Preserves' local groups as models.

- ◆ **Once the District's fiscal house is in order, establish an independent non-profit support group to help the District raise funds and do land deals.** Something like the Conservation Foundation would be of great help to the District in acting as an impartial third-party group to develop corporate sponsorships, significant gifts, and endowments. We believe, however, that a foundation to solicit private funds for the District would have little success until public trust in the District's finances has been restored.

⁷⁵ Larry Sufferdin and Mike Quigley, respectively, comments in presentation to Chicago Chapter, NOW, July 16, 2002.

Chapter Four

Analysis of 2002 Budget

The total 2002 budget for the Forest Preserve District of Cook County is \$148,687,178. Since 1995, the District's tax levy increased by \$15.4 million, from \$47.9 million to \$63.4 million. This represents a 32% increase in the tax levy in seven years.

Total 2002 revenue

The 2002 budget identifies revenue from five sources:

1. Property tax levy
2. Personal Property Replacement Tax (PPRT)
3. Miscellaneous income (from non-tax sources)
4. Expired construction and development funds
5. Restricted funds

Table 1. Budget summary for 2002

Fund	Tax Levy	PPRT Tax	Misc. Income	Expired C&D	Restricted Funds	Total Appropriation
Corporate	29,000,000	4,375,025	10,812,095	507,000		44,694,120
Const. & Develop.	4,065,000					4,065,000
Bond & interest	4,152,500					4,145,500
Employee Annuity & Benefit	3,525,809	392,191				3,918,000
Real Estate Acquisition					18,892,038	18,892,038
Zoo	13,890,221	820,000	33,941,942		300,000	48,952,163
Botanic Garden	8,728,357	350,000	14,935,000			24,013,357
Total	63,361,887	5,937,216	59,689,037	507,000	19,192,038	148,687,178

The total 2002 budget of \$148.7 million includes, in gross revenue from all sources, among others:

- ◆ Property taxes
- ◆ Non-tax revenue from golf courses
- ◆ Admission and funds privately raised by the Brookfield Zoological Society and the Chicago Horticultural Society
- ◆ Interest on investments

The Brookfield Zoo and Chicago Botanic Garden are two line items on the FPD budget. The two institutions together receive \$23.8 million in property tax dollars in 2002. In addition, the two institutions project that they will raise an additional \$48.8 million collectively in admission fees and private funds for the Brookfield Zoo and the Botanic Garden (shown under “Miscellaneous Income” in Table 1 on p. 73). The total operating costs of the Brookfield Zoo and the Chicago Botanic Garden, including the use of tax dollars and privately raised funds, are \$72.9 million.

Distribution of property-tax dollars

An analysis of the property tax levy and PPRT indicates that *only about half* of the property tax dollars collected by the Forest Preserve District of Cook County are spent on the forest preserves themselves. Of the total of \$69.2 million collected from property taxes, the budget allocates \$37.2 million (or 53%) to the 68,000 acres of forest preserves.

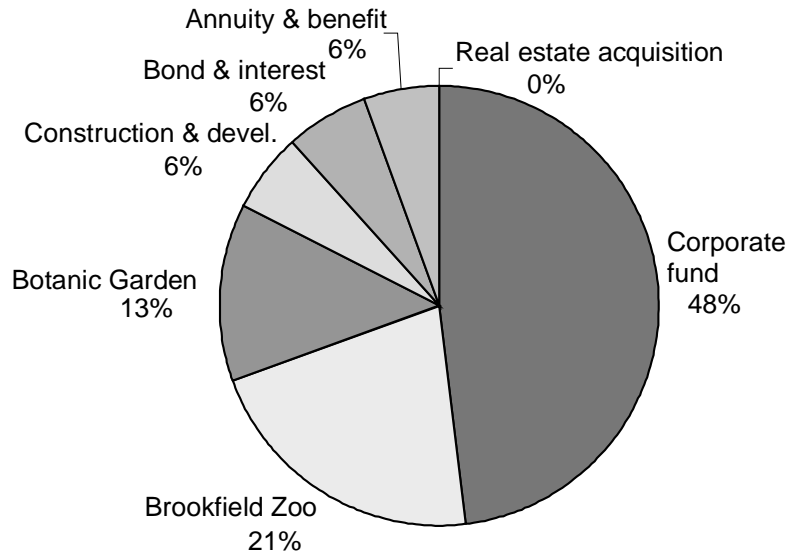
The Zoo and Botanic Garden are allocated \$23.6 million (34% of property tax dollars) for the two institutions combined.

The remaining \$7.5 million are allocated to debt service and retirement fund. None of the \$18.9 million allocated for real estate acquisition in the 2002 budget comes from property taxes.

Table 2. Budget allocations from property taxes, 2002

Fund	Amount	Percent
Corporate	33.3 million	48%
Brookfield Zoo	14.7 million	21%
Chicago Botanic Garden	9.1 million	13%
Construction & development	4.1 million	6%
Bond and Interest	4.1 million	6%
Employee annuity & benefit	3.9 million	6%
Real estate acquisition	0	0%
Total projected from property taxes	69.2 million	100%

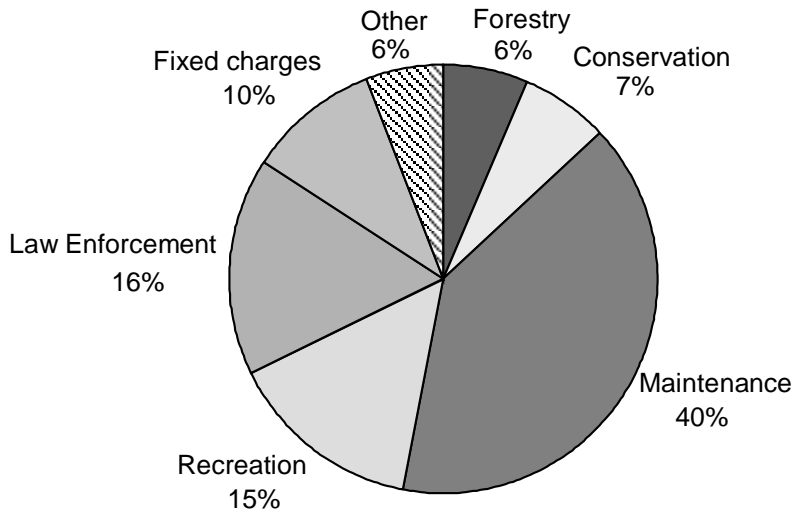
Figure 2. Portions of 2002 total budget derived from tax revenues (\$69.2 million)



Distribution of 2002 appropriations: corporate fund

Figure 3 below and Table 4 (p. 79) show how the corporate fund is distributed among departments in the Forest Preserve District.

Figure 3. Breakdown of corporate fund (\$44.7 million) by department



The 2002 forest preserve budget document includes not only the mission of the District itself but also the mission of each department. Each departmental mission statement explains the work of that department. The department whose mission is most directly related to the mission of the District is the Department of Forestry, whose mission is “to preserve, protect, and restore vegetation of the urban forest and to maintain woodlands,

savannas, prairies, and recreational areas throughout the forest preserves—promoting suitable and safe public use in a balanced natural ecosystem.”⁷⁶

Although focused on the core mission to preserve, protect, and restore natural habitats District’s 68,000 acres, the Forestry Department is allocated only *\$2.8 million*, or *6%* of the 2002 corporate-fund budget for the critical purpose of maintaining the natural lands.

Out of ten departments, five departments exceed Forestry in appropriations.

The Department of Conservation, whose main mission is “to educate and inform the public about the natural environment and stand as a leader in conservation programs,” is allocated \$3 million, or 7% of the 2002 corporate-fund budget. Much of that spending is devoted toward the education mission of the District.

The Department of Recreation, with a mission to “provide diverse and affordable recreational opportunities to Cook County residents while remaining respectful of the natural environment,” receives \$6.5 million, or 15% of the corporate-fund budget. Recreation areas are defined as golf, picnicking, swimming, and winter sports facilities, including five toboggan slides. The Recreation Department is *not* responsible for promoting natural-area recreational activities such as hiking, canoeing, birding, cross-country skiing, fishing, nature walks, or other recreational activities that relate to the forests or to the original mission of the Forest Preserve District. (A limited number of these activities are currently under the purview of the Department of Conservation.)

More dollars were allocated to the operation of golf in the Department of Recreation than to the maintenance of the forest preserves’ 55,000 acres of natural lands. The direct costs of the golf division in the Department of Recreation total \$3,984,859 for ten golf courses and three driving ranges.⁷⁷ The Deloitte & Touche report found that operation of the ten golf courses produced a net loss in 2000 of \$1,541,364 to the Forest Preserve District.⁷⁸ In addition, the Deloitte & Touche report found a total tax subsidy of \$4.16 for every round of golf played at the District’s golf courses in 2000. The report itemized all costs associated with the golf operation (direct and indirect costs) totaling \$8,456,361. (This compares to the paltry \$2.8 million allocated to manage and maintain the trees of the District’s picnic groves, its trails and water bodies, as well as the entire 55,000 acres of the District’s natural lands.)

The highest percentage of the District’s corporate-fund budget (40%, or \$17.9 million) is earmarked for the Department of General Maintenance. The work of this department is “to repair, service, and maintain the recreational areas, buildings, structures, supporting

⁷⁶ Forest Preserve District of Cook County, 2002 budget, p. 18.

⁷⁷ Forest Preserve District of Cook County, 2002 budget, p. 38.

⁷⁸ Deloitte & Touche, *Cost of Services Study for the Forest Preserve District of Cook County*, November 1, 2001, p. 16.

infrastructure of the built environment, motor fleet, and other capital facilities throughout the forest preserve."⁷⁹

The Law Enforcement Department received the second largest appropriation in 2002 or \$7.3 million, or 16% of the District's budget. *More dollars are spent for law enforcement than to manage and restore the forest preserves themselves.*

Comparison with prior years' budgets

Especially in recent years there has been a shift in resources away from the purposes established by Illinois State Statute—the acquisition and care of natural lands for recreation and education. During this time there has been an increase of resources redirected to unrelated recreational activities, general maintenance, and law enforcement.

Changes in the total budget (all funds) since 1980

Since 1980 the total District budget jumped 270% from \$40.1 million to \$148.7 million, as shown in Table 3 and Figure 4 (p. 78). However, while the total budget jumped 270%, the tax levy increased 139% since 1980. As a comparison, the Chicago Park District's overall budget increased 123%, with the property tax increase totaling 118% since 1980. Property taxes rose 16% more for the Forest Preserve District during the same time period.

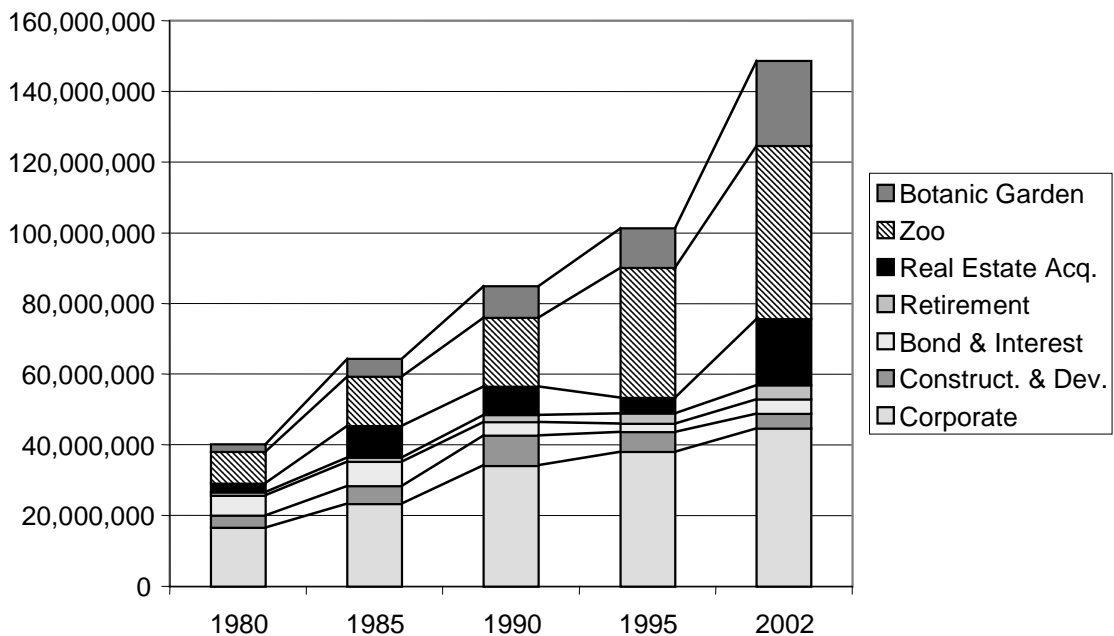
The most significant increase in property tax dollars from 1980 to 2002 went to the Chicago Botanic Garden with a 431% increase in tax support, from \$1.6 million to \$8.7 million. The Brookfield Zoo received a 155% increase in operating funds from taxpayers since 1980, from \$5.4 million to \$13.9 million. (The Chicago Botanic Garden, located at the northern boundary of Cook County on Lake Cook Road, is at the border of Cook and Lake Counties. A significant number of visitors are from Lake and other counties, yet only Cook County taxpayers subsidize the Chicago Botanic Garden. Similarly, the Brookfield Zoo is located at the west border of Cook County, and many visitors are from counties that do not pay taxes to support the Brookfield Zoo. In both cases, access from the city is difficult especially if one does not own a car).

⁷⁹ Forest Preserve District of Cook County, 2002 budget, p. 28.

Table 3. Budgets by fund (from all sources, both tax and non-tax), 1980–2002⁸⁰

Fund	1980	1985	1990	1995	2002
Corporate	16,575,425	23,280,878	34,226,447	38,072,720	44,694,120
Construct. & Develop.	3,495,664	5,132,506	8,523,205	5,662,000	4,065,000
Bond & Interest	5,700,600	6,843,250	3,773,075	2,218,100	4,152,500
Empl. Annuity & Benefit	884,000	1,174,000	1,928,000	2,969,000	3,918,000
Real Estate Acquisition	2,566,411	8,969,682	8,013,881	4,461,140	18,892,038
Zoo	8,896,281	13,875,085	19,619,954	36,707,922	48,952,163
Botanic Garden	2,034,988	5,001,346	8,691,621	11,178,560	24,013,357
Total budget	40,153,370	64,276,749	84,776,184	101,269,442	148,687,178
Funds from tax levy	26,110,343	38,669,898	44,075,128	47,961,105	63,361,884

Figure 4. Budgets by fund (from all sources, both tax and non-tax), 1980–2002.



⁸⁰ In both the table and the figure, numbers include *all* revenues. In particular, for the Zoo and Botanic Garden, they include admission fees, privately raised funds, and tax support.

Budgeting changes in the corporate fund since 1980

Since 1980 the trend has been to spend more dollars on non-core forest preserve recreation (golf, swimming pools and toboggans) than on the core mission of the Forest Preserve District, the management and restoration of the natural lands themselves. The allocations to the Forestry Department dropped from 10% of the corporate fund in 1980 to only 6% budgeted in 2002. In contrast, allocations for the Recreation Department increased from 11% in 1980 to 15% in 2002.

Table 4. Budgets by department (from corporate fund), 1980–2002

Department	1980	1985	1990	1995	2002
General Off.	349,775	457,232	612,646	760,867	1,038,720
Finance/ Admin.	404,361	532,665	720,505	941,794	1,366,730
Forestry	1,592,684	2,150,640	2,588,397	2,491,638	2,828,951
Conservation	807,347	1,103,219	1,640,549	2,386,379	3,027,158
Gen. Maint.	7,098,687	9,751,603	13,205,792	13,198,326	17,903,903
Recreation: golf, winter sports ^a	1,426,745	2,571,698	3,396,824	4,982,232	6,513,942
Recreation: swimming pools ^a	364,311	491,280	609,514		
Law Enforce.	2,580,402	3,339,115	4,735,155	5,793,660	7,320,991
Legal					206,870
Fixed charges	1,951,110	2,844,320	6,717,065	7,517,824	4,486,855
Totals	16,575,422	23,280,878 ^b	34,226,447	38,072,719	44,694,120

^a The budget format changed in 1995, combining golf, winter sports, and swimming pools into one department, the Recreation Department.

^b The numbers in the column for 1985 add up to \$23,241,772, or about \$40,000 less than the total given here. All numbers in the table come from the Forest Preserve District of Cook County. We do not know where the error occurred.

Discussion

Accounting practices

The 2002 budget lacks detailed information needed for useful analysis. Since the budget does not state *the actual dollars spent* in 2001, it is impossible to determine the relationship between the proposed 2002 budget and the prior year's expenditures. Similarly, neither the 2002 budget document nor the audit report for 2001 includes longer-term data useful for comparisons, such as a five-year comparison of income and expenses.

The 2002 budget does not provide complete and realistic expenditures for each department's operations. Fixed charges clearly related to a specific department should be charged to the department for which they are spent. For example, worker's

compensation, unemployment, and Medicare should be assigned, as are salaries on which they are based, to the various departments to show the departments' true operating costs. There are also the questions of why the pension fund has had such a dramatic increase since 1995 and what happens to funds budgeted for positions that remain vacant (see p. 52).

The Civic Federation has recommended for years that the District improve its notification to the public about its proposed budget and has pointed out that the District's budget did not show the cost of its programs. To date, nothing has changed. In short, the District has summarily ignored repeated requests for clarity, timeliness, and transparency in its budget from civic groups and from its own auditors.

Forest Preserve District's response in the 2002 budget to its deficit

Earlier this year, when the 2002 budget was finally released to the public, we reviewed it carefully to see how the District was going to cut its personnel and programs in the face of its \$10 million deficit. We did find a number of cuts, but we also discovered a new position in the Conservation Department for a storeroom supervisor to be paid \$47,000 a year. Where is this storeroom? we wondered. Who is the supervisor, and what does this have to do with conservation?

We posed this question (among others) at the public hearings devoted to the budget. Sharon Gist Gilliam, chairman of the Chicago Housing Authority Board of Commissioners and former budget director for the city of Chicago who had been enlisted as a consultant to help prepare the budget in the wake of the Chief Financial Officer's abrupt departure, told us that she had discovered a number of positions in the District that were, in her words, "floating in space." We still do not know why Conservation was chosen as the most appropriate location for the storeroom supervisor.

The management letters submitted by the independent auditors in previous years outlined repeated shortcomings in accounting practices. Recommendations for changes were presented in the yearly audits. The recommendations included numerous repeated warnings in the management letters, with no apparent changes in the budget presentation. Furthermore, the delay in the completion of the 2001 audit, in view of the District's financial crisis, is almost incomprehensible.⁸¹

A report by Clark Burrus⁸² and one from the Board's Revenue Enhancement Committee⁸³ contained detailed recommendations for cost savings and efficiencies as

⁸¹ Over eight months after the end of 2001, the District released the auditors' comments about the District's 2001 financial statement. Five of the auditors' eight comments were "repeat findings" raised in earlier audits of the District's annual statements that had not been satisfied. Many of the comments concerned inadequacy of financial controls and accounting for the District's assets and operations.

⁸² Clark Burrus, *Financial Status and Management Analysis*, March, 2001.

⁸³ Forest Preserve District of Cook County, Revenue Enhancement Committee, Memorandum: "Concluding Findings: Action Steps to Reinvent FPD Governance," December 14, 2001.

well as new sources of revenue. Few of these recommendations were implemented in the 2002 budget.

The well-documented financial and operational problems of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County require changes in both policy and system to stem the loss of dollars and to improve the health of the forest preserves themselves.

Chicago Botanic Garden and Brookfield Zoo

Cook County has two high-profile operations within the Forest Preserve District: the Chicago Botanic Garden and the Brookfield Zoo. These outstanding regional assets are in fact privately run but, through agreements with the District, and its substantial support, operate on District lands. So well known and highly respected are these operations that, in recent years, the commissioners and president often point proudly to them as District success stories—since most of the rest of the District’s affairs have been in turmoil.

But does the tail wag the dog? It is not the intent of this report to explore the in-depth operations of the Brookfield Zoo and Chicago Botanic Garden in relation to the District. However we do note that the two operations have a total of nearly 3,000,000 visitors per year,⁸⁴ or about 7% of the estimated total of 40,000,000 District visits per year. They occupy some 600 acres, about 1% of District land. Yet nearly 40% of the District’s annual property tax levy raised from Cook County goes to support these two operations—in fact, the Board appropriates about the same amount of money for the operation of the entire 68,000 acres of forest preserves as it gives to the Zoo and Botanic Garden.⁸⁵

Furthermore we note that the District is also responsible for the maintenance of the facilities at these institutions. While former President Phelan addressed this problem with bond issues, the tax cap now prevents this. The Brookfield Zoo, for instance, conservatively estimates backlogged repairs at about \$25,000,000. A Brookfield Zoo board member privately suggests the actual number to be closer to \$40,000,000.⁸⁶ This includes restoration and enhancement of existing exhibits and public space, improvements to parking, pathways, barriers, and other outdoor facilities, infrastructure improvements, and structural repairs to exhibits and public buildings.⁸⁷ This \$25,000,000 would have been addressed in SB 1171, which proposed lifting the tax cap for the District and several other park districts to allow the District to address its deferred maintenance work for the Zoo and Botanic Garden. The Illinois House passed SB 1171, but the Senate has not acted on it.

⁸⁴ Forest Preserve District of Cook County, *2002 District Executive Budget Recommendations*. Chicago Botanic Garden had “nearly 900,000 visitors” (p. 70), and the Brookfield Zoo “2,000,000 or more” (p. 81). See also Brookfield Zoo, *Caring* (the 2001 annual report).

⁸⁵ Dean Viverito, interview, July 25, 2001; confirmed by figures in District’s 2002 budget.

⁸⁶ Anonymous interview, July 7, 2002.

⁸⁷ Mena Boulanger, Vice President for Development at the Brookfield Zoo, fax; figures compiled May 15, 2001.

A similar situation faces the City of Chicago and its world-class museums. Chicago residents are taxed by the Chicago Park District to support these museums, which are used by people from other counties who pay no taxes for their support. The Botanic Garden, for instance, sits on the Lake-Cook County line and is used extensively by Lake County residents, who pay nothing in taxes to support it.

In light of the District's needs for restoring its recreational facilities and thousands of acres of natural lands, this issue deserves future attention.

Recommendations

- ◆ **Reallocate funds, appropriating more to Forestry and Conservation.** The Forest Preserve District should rededicate itself to its core mission—protecting, preserving, and managing its natural lands. Cost reductions can be accomplished by improved efficiencies, increased use of seasonal employees, the elimination of certain recreation programs, and the transfer of other functions to other governmental bodies, as recommended in the Burrus report.⁸⁸
- ◆ **The District should immediately take steps to control financial losses and initiate systems to improve financial controls.**
- ◆ **In the 2003 budget, include columns for the 2002 appropriation, 2002 projected actual expenditures, and the proposed 2003 budget.**
- ◆ **Enable the public to participate in budget decisions.** The District should take immediate steps to improve the process for public review of 2003 budget by making the budget more user-friendly and available at an earlier date. Furthermore, the public hearings should be scheduled with far more public notice to encourage interested citizens to comment.
- ◆ **Transfer the operation and maintenance of three swimming pools to nearby park districts or other public agencies.** As discussed in Chapter 2 (pp. 41–42, 43), the original justification for the District's swimming-pool operations disappeared long ago. Today, the District cannot maintain or operate these facilities as efficiently as an agency dedicated to such tasks.
- ◆ **Include balance sheets with the budget.** The Forest Preserve District budget does not include a fund balance or a balance sheet. However, prior budgets (1980, 1985, 1990) did include balance sheets. Appropriate budgeting requires that the budget include an opening fund balance from the previous year (or deficit). In recent years, when the budgets did not include a balance sheet, it was later determined that the Forest Preserve District was actually operating with a

⁸⁸ Clark Burrus, *Financial Status and Management Analysis*, March, 2001.

deficit. The District was borrowing from the land-acquisition fund to finance operations. The Board of Commissioners was caught by surprise in 2001 when an operating deficit of \$20 million was discovered. And, in both 2001 and 2002, multi-million dollar grants from Cook County to the Forest Preserve District of Cook County were required to maintain everyday operations.

- ◆ **Look for a multi-county tax base to support the Brookfield Zoo and the Chicago Botanic Garden.** These are fine institutions that provide public education and conservation programs. The two institutions generate 2 million visitors to the Zoo and 900,000 to the Botanic Garden. (This compares to an estimated 40,000,000 visitors to the forest preserves themselves.) However, while the two institutions are located in the borders of Cook County, they serve a multi-county population. The Zoo and Botanic Garden should not receive property-tax subsidies solely from Cook County. The County, the Zoo and the Botanic Garden should actively pursue funding from a broader, multi-county tax base for these valued institutions.

Afterword

Friends of the Forest Preserves and Friends of the Parks spent almost two years studying the Forest Preserve District of Cook County: its history, policies, personnel, management, and governing board. We reviewed nearly 100 years of documents and interviewed dozens of people, including virtually the entire Board of Commissioners. Our user survey reached several hundred additional people.

We have worked hard to look for the positive aspects of the District and reported them whenever found. But we found so few. The District's staff and board have some qualified, eager people willing to do the best job possible. But again, we found few.

This project was not a pleasant task. The Forest Preserve District of Cook County was a national role model when it began nearly ninety years ago. The people who founded it had themselves spent nearly twenty years getting the politics in place to create it. Its lofty ambitions—to preserve and nurture the native Illinois landscape as a place for people to renew and recreate—set a new standard and vision not just for the Midwest but also for the entire nation.

Today—and we would like to dress up this phrase, but we can't—the Forest Preserve District of Cook County is a mess. The study found that the Forest Preserve District of Cook County has become a centralized bureaucracy with all decision-making, from jobs to public policy, in the hands of the president. It appears that the president's primary interest in the District is as a source of jobs for friends. With all policy and jobs decisions centralized in the board president, the District is essentially paralyzed. Land has not been acquired in a timely fashion. Restoration of the preserves has been placed on a six-year moratorium that is only partially lifted. The budget format has hidden a deficit from the board and the public for several years.

In addition, we found the worst alignment of stars possible at the District: a disinterested and controlling board president and a general superintendent who, while having a long record of service at the District as an outstanding landscape architect, is unable or unwilling to stand up to the corrosive forces of gross political mismanagement. Behind this lurks a board also largely unwilling or unable to accept the responsibilities the public elected them to take: to understand and guide the District.

This is a system where the president—the leader of a sixteen-member board of directors and a staff of over 800 people—never responded to our requests for a leadership interview about his care of the District. We sent a letter detailing our final request for

AFTERWORD

this interview after we had talked with virtually the entire board, and we pointed this out to the president—again to no avail.

This is a system where the person in charge of publicity takes three months to answer a request for an interview about how the District presents itself to the public. This is a system where departments operate at 80% of budgeted capacity, with positions budgeted each year that are never filled, or positions filled by people who have nothing to do with that department's mission. This is a system where frustrated volunteers will, in desperation, themselves pay to get things done on District lands.

This is a system that pays scant attention to its central mission: the care of tens of thousands of acres of natural lands, the legacy of a century of work and tax money. Instead, this is a system that would apparently rather waste millions of dollars running recreational facilities more suited to other agencies' care.

This is a system of vast and pervasive inefficiency. Our study did not have the time to look in depth at the operations of other regional park systems across the United States, but the few items we came across suggest that the waste of talent, time, and treasure at the District is extraordinary. We believe a future study of major metropolitan park systems will show the District to be squandering its resources at an alarming rate by comparison.

The behavior of the outlying forest preserve districts in the Chicago region is the opposite side of the coin. Even the smallest forest preserve district has a responsive and involved board of commissioners, a dedicated staff, and welcomes citizen involvement of all sorts. The Forest Preserve District of Cook County has none of this.

At present, the Forest Preserve District of Cook County is sick and dysfunctional. Current management has neglected the natural lands, the staff, and the mission. If the Forest Preserve District of Cook County were a private corporation, the stockholders would have ousted management a long time ago and demanded clear objectives and a plan for a turnaround. The Forest Preserve District of Cook County is a corporation operating in the dark, but not in the black.